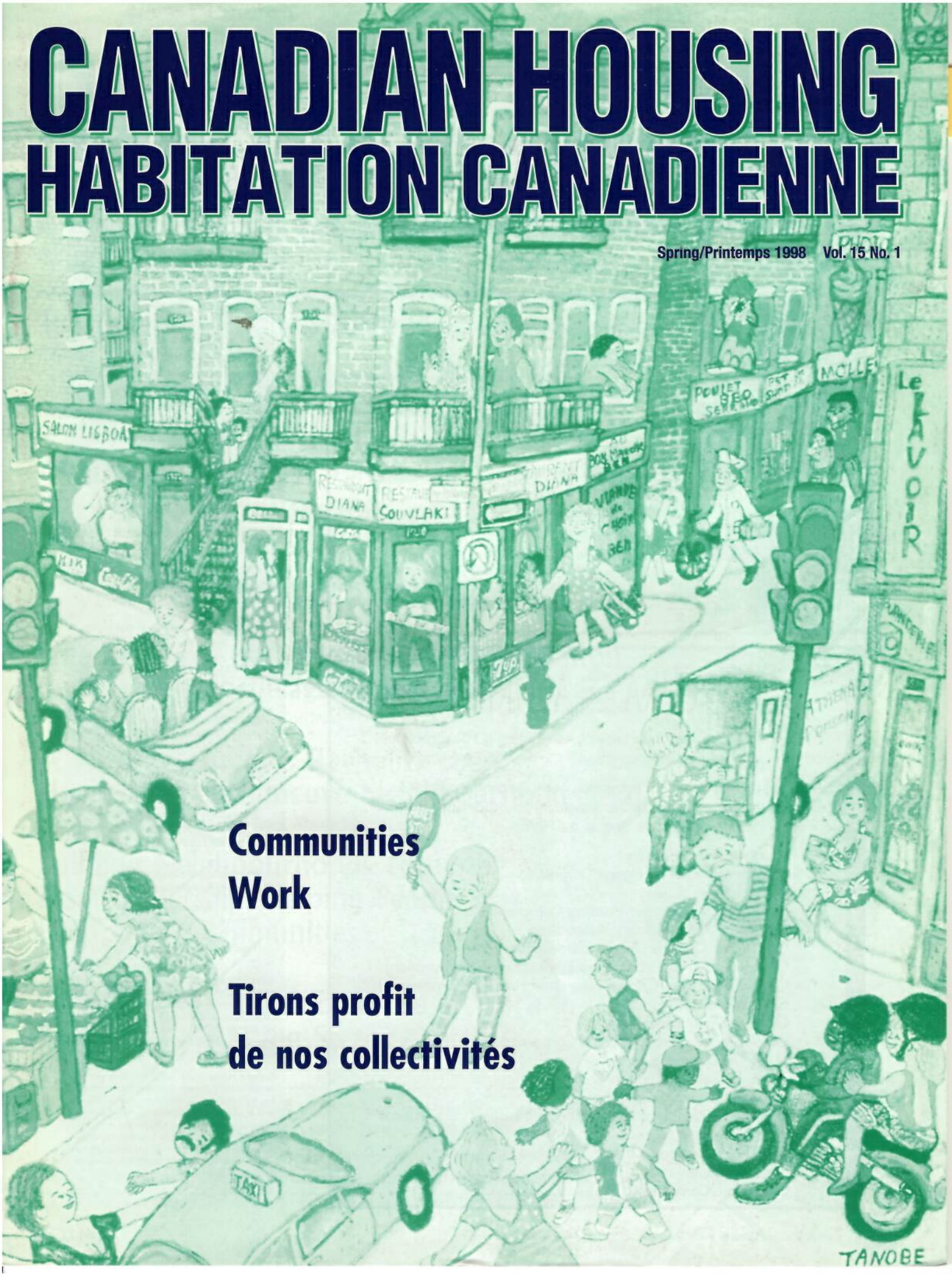
CANADIAN HOUSING
HABITATION CANADIENNE

Spring/Printemps 1998 Vol. 15 No. 1



Communities Work

Tirons profit de nos collectivités

TURNING COMMUNITIES AROUND

John L. McKnight

The following article is an adapted excerpt from the book, ***Building Communities From the Inside Out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets****, by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. While the authors speak from an American perspective, we believe the concepts are equally valid in Canada.*

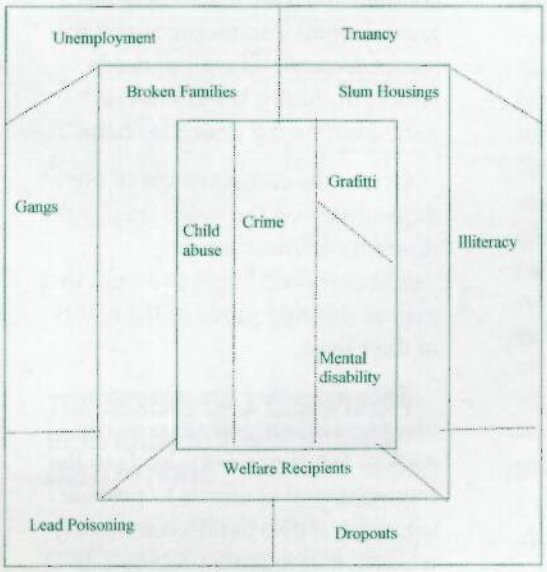
THE PROBLEM: DEVASTATED COMMUNITIES

Today, most American cities are deeply troubled places. At the root of the problems are the massive economic shifts that have marked the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs have disappeared from the central city and its neighbourhoods. While many downtown areas have experienced a "renaissance," the jobs created there are different from those that once sustained neighbourhoods. These new jobs are either highly professionalized, requiring elaborate education and credentials for entry, or they are dead-end low-paying service jobs. These shifts in the economy, particularly the disappearance of decent jobs from low-income neighbourhoods, have removed the bottom rung from the fabled American "ladder of opportunity." For many people in older city neighbourhoods, new approaches to rebuilding their lives and communities are a necessity.

TWO SOLUTIONS, TWO PATHS

In response to this desperate situation, well-intentioned people are seeking solutions by taking one of two divergent paths. The first, which begins by focusing on a community's needs, deficiencies and problems, is still the most travelled, and commands the vast majority of our financial and human resources. Those who

Community Needs Map



take the second path insist on beginning with a clear commitment to discovering a community's capacities and assets. This is the direction this guide recommends.

THE TRADITIONAL PATH — A NEEDS-DRIVEN DEAD END

For most Americans, the names "South Bronx," or "South Central Los Angeles," or even the term "public housing" call forth a rush of negative images: crime and violence, joblessness and welfare dependency, gangs and drugs and homelessness, vacant and abandoned land and buildings. They are images of needy, problematic and deficient neighbourhoods populated by needy, problematic and deficient people.

These images, which can be seen as a mental "map" of the neighbourhood, often convey part of the truth about a troubled community. But they are not regarded as part of the truth; they are regarded as the whole truth.

Once accepted as the whole truth, this "needs" map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and nonprofit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services to answer their problems. As a result, many lower income urban neighbourhoods are now environments of service where behaviours are affected because residents come to see themselves as clients whose needs can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers. Consumers of services focus vast amounts of creativity and intelligence on the survival-motivated challenge of outwitting the "system," or on finding ways — in the informal or even illegal economy — to bypass the system entirely.

There is nothing natural or inevitable about the process that leads to the creation of client neighbourhoods. Local neighbourhood residents have little power to affect the pervasive nature of the deficiency model, mainly because a number of our most influential institutions have a stake in maintaining that focus. Much of the social science research produced by universities is designed to collect and analyze data about problems. Much of the funding directed to lower income communities by foundations and the United Way and government human service agencies is based on data collected in "need surveys." The needs map often appears to be the only neighbourhood guide used by the mass media, whose appetite for the violent and the spectacularly problematic story seems insatiable. All of these major institutions combine to create a wall between lower income communities and the rest of society — a wall of needs which, ironically, is built not on hatred but on the desire to "help."

One of the consequences of our dependency on the needs map is that residents of lower income neighbourhoods begin to accept that map as the only guide to the reality of their lives.

There are other consequences: viewing a community as a nearly endless list of problems leads to the fragmentation of efforts to provide solutions. It also denies community wisdom that regards problems as intertwined, as symptoms of the breakdown of a community's own problem-solving capacities.

Making resources available on the basis of the needs map can have negative effects on local leadership. If, for example, one measure of effective leadership is the ability to attract resources, then local leaders are being forced to concentrate on the problems and deficiencies of their neighbours and their community while ignoring their capacities and strengths.

Providing resources on the basis of the needs map underlines the perception that only outside experts can help. Therefore, the relationships that count most for local residents are no longer those inside the community. The most important relationships become those that involve the expert, the social worker, the health provider, the funder. Once again, the glue that binds communities is weakened.

Reliance on the needs map ensures the deepening of the cycle of dependence: problems must always be worse than last year, or more intractable than other communities, if funding is to be renewed.

At best, reliance on the needs maps as the sole policy guide will ensure a maintenance and survival strategy targeted at isolated individual clients, not a development plan that can involve the energies of an entire community.

Because the needs-based strategy can guarantee only survival, and can never lead to serious change or community development, this orientation must be regarded as one of the major causes of the sense of hopelessness that pervades discussions about the future of low income neighbourhoods. From the street corner to the White House, if maintenance and survival are the

best we can provide, what sense can it make to invest in the future?

THE ALTERNATIVE PATH: CAPACITY-FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT

The alternative path leads toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of lower income people and their neighbourhoods.

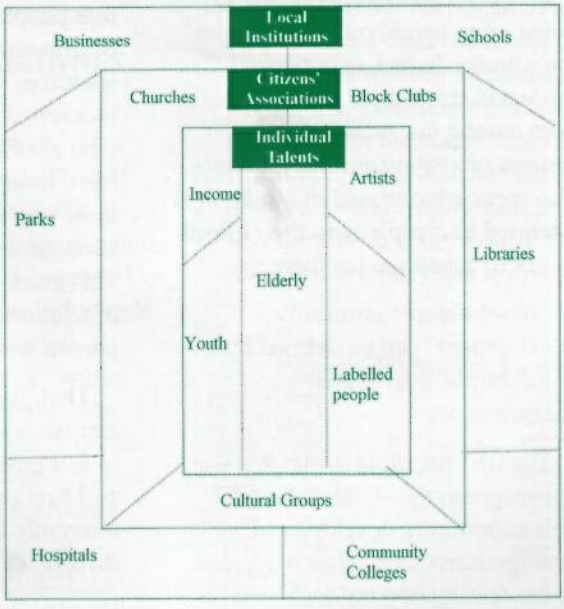
All historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. This explains why communities are never built from the top down, or from the outside in.

Another reason for emphasizing the development of the internal assets of local urban neighbourhoods is that the prospect for outside help is bleak. Even in areas designated as Enterprise Zones, the odds are long that large-scale, job-providing industrial or service corporations will be locating in these neighbourhoods. Nor is it likely, in the light of continuing budget constraints, that new federal money will be forthcoming. Development must start from within the community. There is no other choice.

Creative neighbourhood leaders are discovering that effective community development efforts are based upon a "map" of the community's assets, capacities and abilities. The key to neighbourhood regeneration is to locate all the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes.

This entire process begins with the construction of a new map. Once this guide to capacities has replaced the old one containing only needs and deficiencies, the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production.

Community Assets Map



THE ASSETS OF A COMMUNITY: INDIVIDUALS, ASSOCIATIONS, INSTITUTIONS

A thorough map of each community's unique assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community's residents. Household by household, building by building, block by block, the capacity mapmakers will discover a vast array of individual talents and productive skills. This basic truth about the "giftedness" of every individual is particularly important to apply to persons who often find themselves marginalized. It is essential to recognize the capacities, for example, of those who have been labelled mentally disabled, or of those who are marginalized because they are too old, or too young, or too poor. In a community whose assets are being fully recognized, these people will be involved — not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process.

In addition to mapping the gifts and skills of individuals, and of households and families, the committed community builder will compile an inventory of citizens' associations. These groups, less formal and less dependent upon paid staff than formal institutions, are the vehicles through which citizens assemble to solve problems, or to share common interests and activities. Though some parts of associational life may have dwindled in very low income neighbourhoods, most communities continue to harbour significant numbers of associations with religious, cultural, athletic, recreational or other purposes. Community builders soon recognize that these groups are indispensable and that many of them can be stretched beyond their original purposes to become full contributors to the development process.

Then, there are the formal institutions: private businesses; public institutions such as schools,

libraries, parks, police and fire stations; non-profit institutions such as hospitals and social service agencies — these organizations make up the most visible and formal part of a community's fabric. Enlisting them in the process of community development is essential to the success of the process. For community builders, mapping the institutional assets of the community will often be much simpler than making an inventory involving individuals and associations. But establishing within each institution a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some aspects of the institution's relationships with its local neighbourhood, can prove much more difficult. Nevertheless, a community that has located and mobilized its entire base of assets will clearly feature heavily involved and invested local institutions.

Individuals, associations and institutions — these three major categories contain within them much of the asset base of every community. They will also provide the framework for organizing the guide, *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, which explores methods for recognizing, mapping, and mobilizing these clusters of local strengths.

The guide will also highlight other aspects of a community's assets, including its physical characteristics — the land, buildings and infrastructure upon which the community rests. And because so much of a community's well-being depends upon the strength of the local economy, one section of the guide will explore ways in which individuals, associations and local institutions can contribute economically.

AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PATH: ASSET-BASED, INTERNALLY FOCUSED, RELATIONSHIP DRIVEN

This guide is designed to help communities recognize their assets and mobilize them for development purposes. As we begin, two major qualifications should be stated as strongly as possible.

First, focusing on the assets of lower income communities does not imply that these communities do not need additional resources from the outside. We simply suggest that outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully involved at all levels.

Second, the discussion of asset-based community development is intended to affirm, and to build upon the remarkable work already going on in neighbourhoods across the country. In fact, experienced leaders in these three areas have been among our most valuable sources of inspiration and guidance. The approach outlined in our book is intended to complement their efforts — not to substitute for them.

"Asset-based community development" can be defined by three simple, interrelated characteristics:

The first principle is that it is — not surprisingly — "asset-based." This community development strategy starts with what is present in the community, not with what is absent or problematic.

Because this process is asset-based, it is by necessity "internally focused." That is, the development strategy concentrates upon the agenda building and problem-solving capacities of local residents, associations and institutions.

If a community development process is to be asset-based and internally focused, then it will also be "relationship driven." One of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild relationships between and among local residents, associations and institutions.

The strong ties which form the basis for community-based problem solving have been under attack. The forces driving people apart are many and frequently cited: increasing mobility rates, the separation of work and residence, mass media, segregation by race and age and, from the point of view of lower income communities, increasing dependence upon outside, professionalized helpers.

Because of these factors, the idea that people can count on their neighbours and neighbourhood resources for support and strength has weakened. For community builders who are focused on assets, rebuilding these local relationships offers the most promising route toward successful community development. This guide will stress the importance of relationship building for every person and group in the community.

That, then, is the skeleton of the simple development process sketched in this guide — it is a community-building path which is asset-based, internally focused and relationship driven.

Kretzmann, John P. and John L. McKnight, 1993, ***Building Communities From the Inside Out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets****, Evanston, Illinois: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. This book is available from ACTA Publications. Phone (773) 271-1030.*