

“When I think of Reston, I think of community.”

- a phrase I heard countless times while talking to Reston citizens, visitors, reading pamphlets, and browsing Reston's websites. The concept of community is one of the most enduring and essential aspects of Reston's character. It is the reason people choose to move here rather than elsewhere in Fairfax County. It is what makes them proud to call themselves Restonians.

Since critics of suburban sprawl brought attention to the absence of a rich social life in the average American's day, and New Urbanists promised a transformation of the American landscape through community-building, “community” has become a loaded and powerful word in the rhetoric of desirable towns, and places. Once written about by scholars outside of the urban planning profession such as Jane Jacobs¹, the concept of community in the built environment has moved into the mainstream and has become a commonly-heard trope used by the general public to characterize desirable places to live, work, and raise children. It is also an immensely powerful term used by housing developers to market their developments.

But what does “community” actually mean? How does one tell the difference between a place that does not possess this elusive quality and a place that does? In the world of cities and towns, perhaps community refers to a sense of ownership that citizens have towards the place and to each other. They may feel responsible for the well-being of the people and places around them; they have a direct interest in the streets, sidewalks, houses, stores around where they live.

The Community as Imagined

Benedict Anderson explains, in *Imagined Communities*², that an essential aspect of communal identification is its imagined quality. Using the modern nation as an example,

Benedict maintains that although all members of the nation do not and cannot know each other to any personal degree, they nevertheless feel “a deep, horizontal comradeship” with each other based upon their nationality. This nationality is an imagined fact - a shared illusion - that creates deep and resilient ties between people who identify with the same nationality.

“Imagined” may be a true way to describe the elusive quality that a strong community possesses. Yet, despite being “imagined,” identification with a group based on national citizenship - or, perhaps, hometown, place of work, neighborhood block - can guide social behavior to a great degree. The presence of community is often directly correlated to economically successful, safe, lively, dynamic and generally desirable places to live and work. The sense of belonging to a community encourages positive social behavior and public responsibility. The question then perhaps becomes how one can engender it; how does one encourage people sharing a place to feel ties that connect them to others and to take responsibility for the place and for each other? How can a neighborhood be more than just a collection of residential cubes that families retire to at night? How can sidewalks be more than just empty paths from one place to another?

Creating Community

The idea that certain architectural or planning elements can single-handedly create community in a group of people who have no ties to each other beyond the fact of sharing a place of residence or work is mistaken. The built environment is not instrumental in creating community; individuals possess initiative in realizing or rejecting the creation of community. However, it is undoubtable that the built environment can either facilitate or frustrate the process of community-building.

Such has been the criticism towards sprawl and the dissatisfaction it has created in many who desire public places where they can talk idly to their neighbors, or walk from place to place and spontaneously be part of a world outside of their own homes. Jane Jacobs explains that it is in public places - in city streets, and not in the sterile, automobile-centered roads of suburbs - that people and their children learn what it means to "take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other"¹.

"The simple social intercourse created when people rub shoulders in public is one of the most essential kinds of social 'glue' in society."

The concept of community "as a feeling of civic engagement and inclusion"³ is not easily defined. As such, a stringent or even specific definition has not been offered by housing developers, and planners who market a range of vastly different homes under the guise of this popular idea. However, the popularization of "community" has been an important first step away from the exclusivity that made sprawl possible, and towards valuing high-density, people-friendly environments which are socially and culturally rich. Despite being an elusive term, it is still a worthwhile concept to strive for, as long as we do not mistake the jargon of mainstream housing developers for true, idiosyncratic communities that emerge organically through public participation and investment; and which cannot be constructed overnight, no matter how much money and resources are made available.

¹ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961.

² Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. New York: Random House, 1983.

³ Bartling, Hugh E. "Disney's Celebration, The Promise of New Urbanism and the Portents of Homogeneity." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 18.1 (2002).

