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Reconstituting Community Bonds : The School Social Center Movement in the Progressive Era

Yutaka Sasaki

One of the problems which urban social reformers in the Progressive era regarded as most threatening to the social order was the collapse of "community," especially in urban areas which was growing at a rapid pace around the turn of the twentieth century. According to them, unlike the nineteenth century small community whose main traits were the sense of belonging feeling of intimacy, the similarity of experience and the participation in public affairs, the twentieth century cities were characterized by physical mobility, lack of communal restraints, and social anonymity. With an acute sense of crisis, the urban reformers in the Progressive era saw the urban environment as the hotbed for a variety of social evils, including juvenile delinquency, political corruption, ethnic segregation and even class antagonism. These urban reformers believed that their most urgent task was to restore intimate face-to-face communication and a sense of community in a rapidly changing society experiencing the problems of urbanization and industrialization.

The "school social center" movement was one of the social reform movements adopted and supported by various urban reformers, including settlement workers, playground advocates and educators, as a practical means to restore "community" on a neighborhood level. The concrete idea of this movement consisted in the extensive use, after regular school hours, of public school buildings to provide room for neighborhood activities, ranging from civic and social to cultural and recreational ones. The advocates of the movement tried to make the centers set up at public school buildings in each school district an ideal neighborhood institution, in order to restore and develop the sense of "community" in an emerging urban-industrial society.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the kind of community (or neighborhood) which the advocates of the school social center movement tried to realize by using public school building as a locus for neighborhood organizations. In so doing, I will attempt to place these ideas and activities in the context of these men's notions of democracy, recreation and the family.