

The Role of Community Associations in Urban Life: The Glebe as Example

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“The main goals of the [Glebe Community Association] are to inform the community on events and issues that may be of concern to them and to voice these concerns.”

- theglebeonline

Initially, community associations were created to unite communities and give residents a voice and role in democracy. The movement began in the United States, Canada and Britain in the late nineteenth century. Since then, the popularity of these associations has grown and with it, their power. (Smith) Today, many express concerns that community associations have lost track of their mandates and have in turn become an antagonizing force in urban living, dictating and enforcing the *community's standards* on its inhabitants and unloading many of its troubles onto neighbouring communities. As an architect, it is valuable to understand the functions and influence of such associations.

Historically, local church and educational institutions often initiated the formation of associations. In 1929, the Pettits Farm Association of Dagenham, East London stated the purpose of these associations as consisting of:

*The encouragement of and provision for social contact.
The development of groups with an educational purpose.
Efforts to coordinate and extend local services.
Represent the neighbourhood to the authorities.*

For these reasons, community associations have been closely linked to and seen as contributing to the rise of worker unions, settlement movements for mixed class communities, the women's movement and, of course, democracy. (Smith)

In the early twentieth century, Mary Parker Follet wrote extensively about *social*

functioning and educating youth in citizenship. All communities require training in group mentality before they can ever hope to achieve anything. Therefore, including collective goal oriented assignments, debate teams, school politics, etc. in the school curriculum became intrinsic to the conditioning of youths to accept their responsibility and role in the community. Emphasis was to be placed, therefore, on the notion that there is no need for individual competition, that one should strive to contribute their equal part for the benefit of the group and that one needs to be ready to sacrifice individual interests for the general good. (Follet)

This societal structuring is ambiguous in that it may contribute to the betterment of the community but may easily be corrupted or misconstrued to the point of becoming oppressive. Giving up individual rights and needs is risky territory. Follet acknowledge this potential and stated, “we need education not regulation.” (Follet) If everyone is given access to a forum in which they can state their individual needs and that they are familiar with the workings of group mentality, the collective can react in a responsible manner and the individual should be able to accept its decision. Ideally.

The Glebe Community Association can serve as an interesting example of the workings of a real association, subject to the less than ideal, selfless, or sacrificing qualities to be found in real members. Since my recent move to the Glebe, I have personally experienced many of the strengths and weaknesses of one of Canada’s most prominent and notorious community associations and the effects it has on its residents.

First, a description of the success of the Glebe:

In many significant ways, the Glebe/Dows Lake area resembles a village, a village oriented towards its commercial centre - or main (Bank) street. Virtually all residents in the community live within three quarters of a mile of that main street - a feature that, along with the availability of a complete range of essential personal, retail and commercial services, accounts for the extraordinary sense of community and our residents walk more than do those of the suburbs. The safety, comfort and security of our sidewalks and intersections, and the careful and appropriate behaviour of motor vehicle drivers, are vitally important to the continued well-being and well-functioning of our village.

Furthermore, the association has succeeded in organizing and encouraging social contact that has contributed significantly to the tight-knit feel. For example, the Great Glebe Garage Sale and the community center that hosts several activities. Most of all, its coordinated and continued efforts have assured the community a strong voice and the ability to affect change within the city. It would be fair to claim that the Glebe has achieved the model mandate set out by the Pettits Farm Association in 1929.

The prestige and appeal of the Glebe in the public's eye is often weighted with a certain negative notoriety for its self-centred, closed-mindedness. There are two reasons for this, in my opinion – the macro and the micro. First, the association forgets that it is not only part of the Glebe, but also part of Ottawa. Therefore, it needs to concern itself with the betterment of the city as a whole and not just its portion of it. Second, it forgets that the community consists of individuals at different points in their lives, with different needs and different priorities. Arranging the community for the needs of the archetypal resident risks spending efforts on appeasing no actual resident at all. The Glebe Traffic Plan 2002, illustrates both of these issues.

The Association states a recognition of its accountability to act responsibly to the needs of the entire city:

Our plan will focus improvements on streets so as to ensure that solutions do not simply shift the problem elsewhere.

-Glebe Traffic Plan 2002, p.4

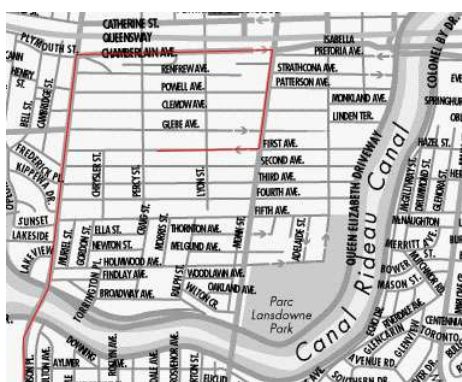
Despite this statement of intent, the proposals of the Plan do everything but ensure a solution that will not act negatively on the other communities of Ottawa. Reducing the speed on Bronson to 40kph and restricting access to residential streets to prevent the cross-through traffic from Bronson to Bank, ignore the fact that traffic will continue to need North/South arteries and connections between them. No proposals are made as to where the traffic will be directed if it is blocked or discouraged within the Glebe.

From the scale of the City, now to the individual residents of the Glebe:

While entry and egress by Glebe residents will necessarily be affected by the measures set out in the plan, measures shall distribute such effects as equitably as possible consistent with the overall objective of restricting traffic flow through the community.

-Glebe Traffic Plan 2002, p.1

Some of the measures affect residents considerably, creating significant detours to access their homes during peak hours. Daily routines are notably inconvenienced in order to maintain the *quality of life*, the definition of which does not apply to everyone in the Glebe. Nor is there any listing of evidence that such measures have any affect on the defined *quality of life*.



For example, the detour to reach my apartment from Carleton during peak hours with the implementation of the plan.

These detours not only inconvenience the residents by wasting time, by keeping them on the road longer, there are energy and pollution concerns. Moreover, by prohibiting traffic from entering the majority of the streets, the traffic is being concentrated and congested on the non-'protected' streets, penalizing the residents along these streets. *

Given that the Glebe Community Association was originally founded in the 1970s in response to traffic issues, it is not surprising that one of its main focuses continues to be traffic issues. The conflict comes from the *quality of life* having been established when the Glebe was suburban living. Since the decentralization of the city and the continuing urban sprawl, the Glebe has since become part of the throughfare to the city core.

The Glebe is a pleasant place to live. The *quality of life* is above average and it is

clear why the Ottawa Citizen recently rated the Glebe as the most walkable neighbourhood in the City, including input from Professor Kariouk among other architects and urban designers. (Chen) However, it has failed to accept and come to terms with the changing dynamics of the city and its residents and to respond to those changes in a responsible manner. This is reflected in Glebe Association's Mission Statement protective rather than proactive tone. Rather than being a vehicle for voicing concerns, perhaps the focus should be to voice visions.* The Glebe is part of the city and it is the residents that comprise the community. It is the Associations obligation to attend to, reconcile and nurture these various levels of urban living.

Sources:

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*addition made with feedback from Instructor Bruce Firestone