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Multidimensional community and the Las Vegas experience

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Abstract Sense of community is an important part of life for city dwellers. I present an analysis of community as experienced by local residents in Las Vegas, Nevada. This city is representative of many social patterns in other cities but—with its transient, 24-hour, constantly changing cultural context—is an exaggerated case for community in urban/suburban life. I identify three “spheres” of community based on qualitative data gathered through a long-term study in the city. Neighborhood community is one based on proximity, a community of affinity connotes a group with common interest, and a citywide community is grounded in a coherent sense of overall place-based identity. I interpret this multilayered and sometimes simultaneous functioning of community through the perspectives of scale and place. Such an analysis of a unique city like Las Vegas illuminates the indelible connection between a sense of place and the various levels of community. Furthermore it can help urban scholars, planners, and human geographers to better grapple with the ubiquitous concept of community, the human landscape in cities, and the production and impact of multidimensional sociospatial relations therein.

Keywords Community · Sense of place · Qualitative methodology · Urban identity · Citywide community

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Introduction

American urban scholars have suggested that the post-World War II urban evolution discourages a traditional sense of community in the city (Jacobs 1961; Johnston 1984; Rowe 1991; Kunstler 1994; Martin 2003; Pendola and Gen 2007). Further, the breakdown of community belonging is inherently wrapped up in the dilemmas of the postmodern metropolis. Still a desire to belong remains, even in the city (Cox and Mair 1988). As I have investigated sense of place and identity in Las Vegas, Nevada, I found such a desire among local residents (Rowley 2012). Indeed, analysis of interviews with local residents and observation of people and landscape yields a number of community types, each with a different spatial and functional character: *neighborhood community* is one based on proximity, a *community of affinity* connotes a group with common interest, and a *citywide community* is grounded in a coherent sense of overall place-based identity. My purpose here is to interpret these multiple manifestations of community through the sociospatial perspectives of place and scale to gain a better understanding of community, its functioning in a growing metropolis, and its interaction with a unique sense of place.

Community, like culture (Mitchell 1995), is an idea, a social construct that we frequently treat as concrete and given. We often understand the word's meaning in everyday conversation, and we expect the same from interlocutors. But “community” and its

contextual usage is fraught with diversity of meaning. Williams acknowledged many such meanings and summarized: “Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or ... salternative set of relationships.” It is a relatively small group of people, at a middle scale in size between the individual and the larger society (1976, 66). Tuan likened community to a family, and implied its geographically bounded nature: “A community usually evokes something small, made up of people living in close physical proximity, as in a neighborhood, village, or town” (2002, 311). Johnston, has employed more explicitly spatial terminology, defining it as “a social network of interacting individuals, usually concentrated into a defined territory” (2000, 101). “Sense of community,” often used interchangeably with “community,” connotes a feeling of belonging to a community group. McMillan and Chavis defined it this way: “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (1986, 9).

Whereas commonalities exist between conceptions of community, the term’s multiplicity of meaning is further reflected in the fact that scholars must define what they mean when they speak of the concept (McClenahan 1946; Everitt 1976; Young 1986, Cox and Mair 1988, Rose 1990; Miller 1992; Smith 1992; Davies and Herbert 1993; Silk 1999; Kurtz 2001; Watts 2004). I adhere to an interpretation of community as a social construction often, but not necessarily, bound to space, where a membership of interacting individuals revolves around a commonly held purpose and group identity. Such was the conception of the word in my interviews and so I settle on this definition to provide coherence to my usage of the word hereafter, and to conform to perceptions of community present in my interactions with Las Vegas.

The multiple perspectives on community

In addition to multiple definitions, scholars of community have identified various spatial manifestations of the community phenomenon. Some have studied what persists (or does not) in the form of traditional, neighborhood-based communities. Herbert and Thomas (1990) surveyed a number of lenses through

which what they term “local community” is approached by scholars, including Herbert’s earlier work (Herbert and Raine 1976) to understand the imagined communities of neighborhood residents in Cardiff, Wales. More recently, Nasar and Julian (1995) developed and tested a Likert-based scale to rate and describe neighborly senses of community in both single- and multi-family environments in Columbus, Ohio. And, Martin (2003) surveyed the evidence for and against a neighborhood-based sense of community and noted its existence in several Athens, Georgia, neighborhoods.

Others have recognized a diminishing sense of neighborly community in favor of communities of interest. McClenahan has discussed how, in the postwar era of changing mobility and economic opportunity, came an increase in “communalities.” These groups of people who have common interests meet occasionally and do so at a location typically unconnected to their residence, thus engendering communities based more on affinity and less on place (1946, 267). This early view has been reinforced, theoretically and empirically, by a number of researchers. Everitt (1976), for example, identified two types of urban community: those with or without propinquity. He used mobility data (trips to work, to see friends, and visit social sites) and cognitive mapping to identify how husbands and wives from varying socioeconomic backgrounds experienced propinquitous and nonpropinquitous communities in West Los Angeles. In her discussion about the role of the self-determined individual within community structures Friedman (1989) argues that many urban relationships are based on choice rather than proximity to neighbors and argues that such voluntary communities help to establish self identity. And, Romig found that residents of three Phoenix master-planned communities often found a sense of community in “smaller groups of generally like-minded people” such as churches or sports clubs, rather than directly through neighborhood proximity (2010, 1077).

Another group of scholars suggest community functioning at multiple levels or scales (Herbert and Raine 1976; Chavis and Wandersman 1990). Romig (2010), in fact, accounted for such scaling in his work. In Smith’s treatise on the production of geographic scale, he identified examples of community functioning a various levels, noting, “communities are socially

defined and can take very different spatial forms” (1992, 70). Furthermore, Silk (1999) has suggested that more geographers embrace a scalar approach to community studies. He wrote of the “spatial fluidity and openness of community,” the “variations in the territorial scale and spatiality of community,” and “the related fact that most people belong to more than one community” (9). Dwyer implied such a scaling when she described how “‘local’ and ‘globalised’ imaginations of community ... suggest possibilities for reimagining British Muslim identities” and how other socio-spatial contexts influence such reimagining (1999, 53). Few scholars of community, however, make explicit use of scale in their work. Cox and Mair (1988), as one exception, invoke scale and a sense of community identity in their examination of 1980s economic restructuring in the United States. They noted diminished conflict between businesses within localities in favor of increased cooperation in order to preserve that city’s identity. Watts also has argued that community in the Nigerian oil state is produced (or destroyed) through oil capital in different ways at a variety of spatial scales (the nation, the region, and locality) within the country. He explained: “communities...can be produced simultaneously at different spatial levels...and may work with and against one another in complex and contradictory ways” (2004, 198).

Complicating the notion of community spatiality even further, Young has asserted that traditional, face-to-face community denies difference and is often the basis for racism, chauvinism, and sexism. She instead recommended that the “unoppressive city” and its communities should be composed of “the ‘being-together’ of strangers” where difference is accepted. This “politics of difference” is a more tolerant society developed upon a foundational understanding of difference (1986, 21). Yet another type of community with unique spatial implications has attracted the attention of scholars from several disciplines. Social media has given birth to virtual communities that transcend space and place, which can also lead to the creation of “overlapped” virtual and face-to-face community interactions (Walmsley 2000; Longan 2005; Haythornthwaite 2007).

Given the many spatial layers of community, a multidimensional framework is helpful to interrogate this social phenomenon. Jessop et al. criticized research that too often only employs a one-dimensional (e.g., place, scale, network, or territory) spatial

framework to understand sociospatial phenomena. They, instead, recommended “reflexive investigations of the interconnections among [multiple] spatial dimensions of social relations” (2008, 393). I use empirical research to describe the appearance, structure, and functioning of communities in Las Vegas and then interpret the multi-faceted and disjointed spatial nature of such communities through the sociospatial perspectives of place and scale.

From one view, the experiential nature of community formation and identity makes place an crucial interrogative perspective. Place, after all, is constructed out of human experience in a space. As Tuan put it, “when space feels thoroughly familiar to us [through experience], it has become place” (Tuan 1977, 73). Community is no different. Whether it be in a neighborhood, a “communality,” a citywide sense of belonging, or a “being-together” in a politics of difference, the experiential interactions of people in a space engender connections in a place-based community. The obvious connection between place and community is further supported by the fact that the terms are often conflated (Agnew 1989; Miller 1992). It follows too a “sense of community” is tied to the idea of “sense of place,” or the feeling of identity that comes from a shared experience in place. Jackson has defined sense of place as “a lively awareness of the familiar environment, a ritual repetition, a sense of fellowship based on a shared experience” (1994, 159). Of course, depending on the areal extent of shared connections, a community place may be a small, bounded territory, a meeting space for those people who share a common interest, or, in the most unbounded sense, an open and global sense of place (Massey 1991; Larsen and Johnson 2012); place is, after all, “a ... variable expression of geographical experience” (Relph 1976, 4). Thus, communities can exist as a category of social practice (Moore 2008) that functions according to scale (Smith 1992; Howitt 1998; Marston 2000; Paasi 2004). In other words, each community may draw its members from different areas of different sizes. The three tiers of community in Las Vegas—and presumably other manifestations of community elsewhere—at once reflect both place and scale spatialities. In fact, Las Vegas’s own unique sense of place, I argue, is a catalyst in the construction of multiple spheres of community at varying scales.

In presenting the following analysis, I hope to illustrate how such a multidimensional perspective

can enrich our understanding of community and its spatial complexities. Doing so can further illuminate the interaction between place and community in everyday life. My work will also contribute to the relatively small subsection of community scholarship that directly explores the nature of scale in communities. Finally, by pairing community with the perspectives of place and scale, I hope to show how scale theory commonly analyzed within political and economic structures (Smith and Dennis 1987; Swyngedouw 1989; Cox and Mair 1991; Smith 1992; Swyngedouw 2004; Moore 2008) can contribute to our understanding of other sociospatial concerns, place primary among them (Paasi 2004).

In what follows, I provide background on Las Vegas and my methodological approach to research there. I then present a narrative summary of my findings regarding the various manifestations of community experienced by Las Vegans based on my field research. Next, I interpret such manifestations through the lens of scale and place as described above. I present the description and interpretation of community in separate sections to show how my empirical findings can, as a whole, be illuminated through multiple spatial perspectives. Finally, I will discuss some implications of this work for urban practitioners and scholars.

Deciphering community in Las Vegas

The experience of Las Vegas can be an effective case for understanding how cities function (Venturi et al. 1977; Thomson 1999). This city is, however, an exaggerated case (Gottdiener et al. 1999; Rothman 2002; Rowley 2012). Many elements of life in this desert city, including community, are indeed influenced by the backdrop of forty million tourists, the glitz of the Strip, and an image of Sin City. At the same time, Las Vegas reflects many traits of recent American, and particularly Sunbelt urbanization. Las Vegas is a young city even by Western US standards. Inhabited by a handful of Native Americans, Mormons, and ranchers in 1900, its official beginnings are traced to a railroad land auction in 1905. Its population exploded from around 10,000 in 1950 to 250,000 in 1970, one million in the mid 1990s, and two million today (Paher 1971; Rothman 2002; Rowley 2013). Like much of the Sunbelt, this growing population is

made up of transplants from other parts of the country. According to 2012 Census data, only 22.5 % of Las Vegans were born in their state of residence, compared to the national measure of 58.7 % (USCB 2012). The local population itself is highly mobile; official state and national records show that for every two people who move to Las Vegas in a given year, 1.2 will leave (Jeff Hardcastle, personal communication; IRS 2008). And, many locals who stay, often transition from one residence to a newer one alongside suburban expansion (Rowley 2013). In addition, the local economy, which relies more on leisure and hospitality revenue than any other US City (LVCVA 2010), represents the post-industrial, service-oriented trajectory representative of much of twenty-first-century America. In short, the experience of Las Vegas is dichotomous in its personality. On one hand, it mimics broader American suburban patterns, including trends toward walled-in yards in tract home neighborhoods, rapidly growing populations, suburban sprawl, and a transient population. On the other, Las Vegas represents a unique version of that pattern, with a large number of residents who keep alternative work and life schedules in constant contact with gambling and other entertainment activities particular to this city (Rowley 2013). Such duality in this local sense of place influences the experience of community.

Broadly speaking, I am interested in understanding the insider (local) experience in this city that is most often imagined as an outsider (tourist) town. I do so using qualitative, mixed-methods including interviews, participant observation, content analysis of local newspapers, and my extended experience living in the city (Rowley 2013). I collected newspaper clippings for the period between 2005 and 2011, completed the majority of interviews there between 2005 and 2008, and continue to make occasional field excursions and analyze local discourse. I have completed over 100 semi-structured interviews with residents, each meeting averaging around one hour in length.¹ I selected initial interviewees from prior acquaintances (from my time living in Las Vegas in the 1980s and 1990s), civic leaders, clergy, schoolteachers, and new acquaintances made as I attended events or participated in everyday activities during the

¹ Aside from a handful of public figures, interviewee names here are pseudonyms. This research was performed with approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

research period. Then, using referrals and a multiple-snowball technique I gained a broad set of vivid perspectives from residents with various backgrounds living throughout the urban area. I also kept record of 75 additional, informal conversations. My participation in local community included attendance at formal events such as tours of the local arts district, shows and lectures at the Las Vegas Art Museum, the Best of Las Vegas Awards Show, a Las Vegas Philharmonic performance, and the Metropolitan Police Department's Citizens Police Academy. In addition, I participated in the everyday events of taking walks, visiting the neighborhood swimming pools or parks, and attending local sports clubs and events. Each of these activities presented opportunities to observe community and to engage in conversations with local residents.

While collecting interviews and observations, I noted that certain topics came up multiple times. Based on an overview of interview transcripts I more formally extrapolated broad themes from such recurrences. These are what I considered points of connection and commonality related to the sense of place for Las Vegas residents. Using these themes, I then systematically analyzed the content of interview transcripts and newspaper clippings, color coding quotes, perspectives, and stories related to each of the themes. The importance of and varied experience with community, I found, was one such theme and a consistent topic in conversations with locals² and in other observations in the city. Additionally, the other themes identified in the broader research project provide some explanation as to why the particular community structure in Las Vegas exists.

Communities in Las Vegas

I organize the community experience of local residents into three basic types, or "spheres": (1) a *neighborhood community* is a traditional social grouping in the immediate surroundings of one's home, largely based on proximity; (2) a *community of affinity* is a social group based on a shared and common interest among

members living throughout the urban area; (3) and a *citywide community* is a coherent and binding sense of commonality and place-based identity encompassing an entire metropolitan area. Each type exists largely independent of one another and, as such, members are likely to be simultaneously a part of multiple communities. Interviewees did not identify by name such community types, nor did they necessarily identify their membership within one or more types of communities. This categorization is based, instead, on the work of other Las Vegas scholars (Gottdiener et al. 1999; Rothman 2002; Schumacher 2004) and a reflexive analysis of the references made to different social groupings in stories, experiences, and perceptions regarding local community collected during fieldwork.

Neighborhood community

The neighborhood community is typically a small chunk of the city, perhaps one-to-three residential blocks, where residents interact through activities (barbecues and block parties), common schools for children, mutually beneficial acts of service or assistance (lending tools, bringing in the trashcans, or gathering the mail when a neighbor is away), and cohesive camaraderie. As noted above, this type of community is a common site of inquiry for scholars. Such a community is generally hard to find in Las Vegas, but does exist in some older, established neighborhoods and in other locations where proactive neighbors instigate community-building activities. The same can be said for other sprawling American cities (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

Interviewees mentioned a number of reasons when they identified a lack of neighborhood community in Las Vegas. The growing and transient nature of the local population was one commonly stated reason. Growth statistics attest to the city's phenomenal growth (Fig. 1). Even though population expansion tapered with the onset of the so-called Great Recession, Las Vegas remained the nation's fastest growing large city between 2000 and 2010 (Mackun et al. 2011). Not surprisingly, amid the mortgage and foreclosure crisis transience has been amplified further, contributing to an even greater sense of discommunity in many neighborhoods as indicated in several recent segments on local public radio (KNPR 2010a, b, 2011).

² I use the term "local" as a general reference to residents of Las Vegas. Such reference, when used as a noun, may seem somewhat pejorative, but it is standard form within the Las Vegas vernacular.

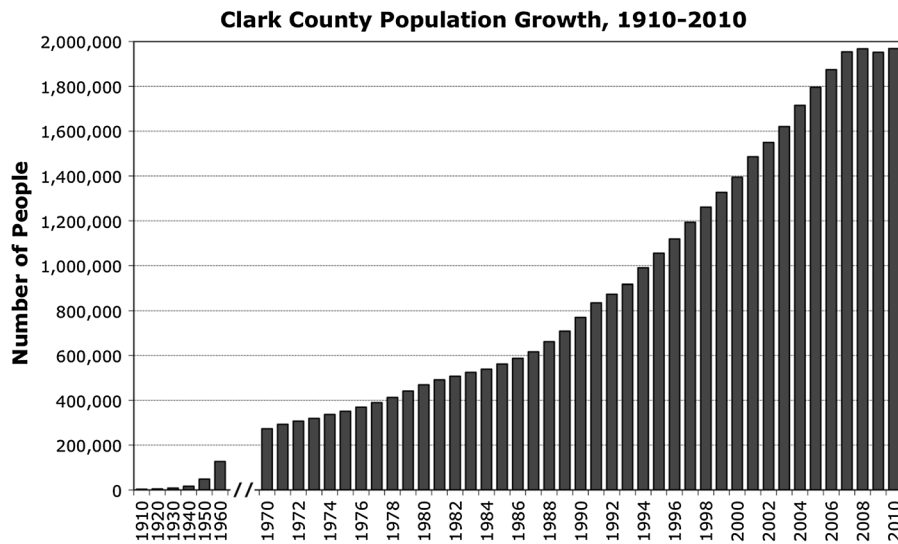


Fig. 1 Population growth in Clark County since 1910

Las Vegans often complain that theirs is an unfriendly place where you can't get to know your neighbors. The comments of Tracy Snow, a 4-year resident from Kansas, are typical: "I don't know anyone on my street, except for one guy. The only reason I know him is he is the crazy guy on the street. I couldn't tell you if people lived there for 1 month or for 2 years. I guess I don't pay attention to that anymore. I don't expect to form any relationship with them anyway. Maybe I'm turning into a Las Vegan!"

One reason for such complaints is the fact that so many Las Vegans are transplants. Casual conversations in the city often begin with the question, "Where are you from?" or "What brought you to Las Vegas?" Local author and newspaper columnist Geoff Schumacher commented on the city's lack of rootedness: "Las Vegas is still a congregation of capitalists and consumers in a geographic location, most of them holding tight to the belief that *home* is somewhere else" (2004, 260).

More than seventy-five interviews reaffirmed the perceptions of Snow and Schumacher. One was Carlin, a casino dealer raising his son in a western Las Vegas Valley neighborhood, who gave a specific growth-related inhibitor of community. Community suffers, he said, because school boundaries are changing so rapidly. Many locals experience such changes. My family lived in the same Las Vegas home between 1987 and 1997 near Rainbow Boulevard and

Flamingo Road, but my older brothers attended one high school, I attended a second, and my younger brother a third. If my family still lived in that home today, they would be zoned for a newly built high school located nearby. Such flux undoubtedly affects involvement in PTAs, sports teams, and performance groups that traditionally promote ties within a neighborhood.

The city's transient character came up often in conversation. Mavie Roberts explained how neighbors in her subdivision move in and out all that time and that she only knows one other neighbor who has been there since she moved there in 1999. American Orthodox Priest Father Kent Sharp noted: "It is a very unfriendly city, and I've lived in New York and New Jersey. People there are much more friendly. I have neighbors who, after 6 years, still haven't talked to me. I think a lot of it is the huge turnover." He has experienced similar turnover in his parish too.

The city's 24-hour culture is another major contributor to a lack of neighborhood community. Ten interviewees specifically mentioned the impact of a three-shift economy. Renae Shaw's experience is representative. Shaw came to Las Vegas in 1981, and still misses her hometown of Peoria, Illinois: "I like the life of sitting on the porch, rocking, drinking tea.... There's nothing like that here.... Maybe if I was in a community with a normal nine-to-five workday, where people sat on the porch, I would

have that, but ...” JR Henson elaborated on that impact: “We’re not the nine-to-five community. A third of the population is working every hour of the day ... and on weekends. And if you want the tips, that is when you have to be around—on the weekends.” JR’s last comment brings up an intriguing quirk in the workforce that is quintessentially Las Vegas. Locals, many of whom are involved in the entertainment business, are often asked the questions: “When is your Friday?” or “When is your Monday?” Their reply might be something like, “My Friday is on Wednesday and Saturday is my Monday.” Given such schedules, it is no surprise that so many interviewees identified a lack of traditional, neighborhood community.

An elevated sense of distrust is another cited reason for a lack of community in Las Vegas. Pastor Ian Sears’ neighboring experience in the year and a half he has been in the city highlights the distrust felt by many locals: “People are unwilling to get to know their neighbors.... My neighbors never have made an attempt to get to know us. The only one is the guy directly across from us and we talk, but at arm’s length. Don’t want to get too close!” Indicative of such distrust, Gambler’s Book Shop owner Howard Schwartz said that one thing he would tell an outsider about living in Las Vegas was, “Be cautious. Build up trust very slowly with people. Control your environment.... Don’t give out loans and don’t take loans. And, pay cash whenever you can.”

Gambling and the Sin City atmosphere in Las Vegas undoubtedly reinforce the element of distrust. Annie Abreu, whose father came to work in the city’s budding casino industry in 1953, related distrust and lack of neighborliness to what attracted many early Las Vegas transplants: “A lot of people that came here were not from the lifestyle that would get to know their neighbors. They didn’t do that. They came from places where what they did wasn’t legal, and so they kept to themselves. They were quiet people. And they stayed that way when they came here.” Peter Nickel, a nondenominational pastor, spoke to this point: “I think a lot of times, people come here and want to be left alone. They are on the run, so to speak.”

A desire for seclusion and privacy is manifest in neighborhood cultural landscapes throughout the city. Gated and guarded communities are found in every corner (Fig. 2). Rothman explained: “Gated communities are symptomatic of a society in which the connections of proximity have frayed, but in Las

Vegas in particular they seem a reflection of the community’s preoccupation with the self.... To some, gates announced their prosperity; to others, they promised that you would be left alone” (Rothman 2002, 278). Jane Jacobs’s criticism of enclosed “projects” resonates with Rothman’s words and applies here: “In case anyone mistakes what the fence means, the signs on the project street also say ‘Keep Out. No Trespassing.’ It is uncanny to see a city neighborhood ... walled off like this” (1961, 48).

“Preoccupation with the self” is also exemplified in the existence of a garage for virtually every house in Las Vegas (Fig. 3). Massachusetts transplant Adam Morelli said the “garage factor” is one reason neighborhoods lack a sense of community: “I live on a cul-de-sac in a larger subdivision. Everything is a tract home. They all have a garage and a remote, so you drive into the garage and close it and you don’t see your neighbors. Back East most of the houses don’t have a garage and even when they do, people don’t park in them. They just park out front. So you see your neighbors.... People [here] seem to keep to themselves. Maybe they do it for protection. Maybe they like their privacy.

Jake Glennon had a similar experience with the “garage factor,” but placed another measure of blame for lack of community on the block walls that surround nearly every backyard in the valley, another symbol of seclusion and privacy in Las Vegas (Fig. 4). He said: “I had no idea who anyone was. Everyone has a block wall around their house. To talk to them, you’d have to climb over the wall. But, that’s the way the town was built. It does make it hard to build community.” John Okamoto, like many Las Vegas, appreciates this landscape of seclusion. He was surprised on a visit to Iowa that he could see all the way through an adjacent backyard to the next street. “The first thing that they do here is build a wall,” he said. “I kind of like it though. I like to have my privacy.”

The 24-hour schedule, the walls, the garages, and the attitudes expressed are indicative of a breakdown of traditional community for some Las Vegas. But, some neighborhood community *does* exist in today’s Las Vegas. As I listened to dozens of locals tell me about an absence of community I saw both community and discommunity in the neighborhood where I lived. This middle-class neighborhood is similar to most in the Las Vegas metropolitan area, with limited access, high cinderblock walls around backyards, and a garage



Fig. 2 The entrance to a gated community near Tropicana Avenue and Pecos Road. Neighborhoods like this one are common in the Las Vegas Valley. (Photo by Rexine Rowley, December 2008)



Fig. 3 A view of the Las Vegas garage landscape. This photograph was taken through the exterior fencing of one walled-in neighborhood near Desert Inn Road and McCleod Drive (Photo by author, February 2007)

for every home. At the same time, I observed everyday interactions here that typified a flourishing, idealistic community. Friendly conversations with people from all over the complex were common on walks with the dog, trips with my children to the park, outings to the

neighborhood swimming pools, or just encounters in the front yard. Neighbors told me of their mutually beneficial concern for one another's property and well-being, even though actual interactions may still be relatively rare because of one neighbor's work



Fig. 4 Walls enclosing the backyards in this Henderson neighborhood at the base of Black Mountain. Such a scene is typical of those found in all corners of the city (Photo by author, May 2007)

schedule or private lifestyle. In addition, I observed neighbors who watched over homes of other families who were away.

I was not alone in my impressions of community involvement in my neighborhood. Matt, who I met in my front yard as he walked his dog, compared his favorable experience with neighborliness here to his previous home in the valley: “This neighborhood is a hidden gem.” Louise Fishman decried the lack of community in her current suburban home, but changed her tone as she explained that my neighborhood (where her late father had lived) is different. She remembered the many hands that reached out to help as her father struggled with the illness that eventually took his life: “My dad would not have lived as long as he did if it wouldn’t have been for those people in that neighborhood.”

Neighborhoods like mine are rare from what I heard in interviews. Fishman thought that age explained part of the community warmth felt there. Constructed in the early 1970s, the neighborhood is “old” compared to others in the city. It is also centrally located, approximately five miles from the Strip and just over six miles from downtown. Many of its residents have been here for decades.

A number of interviewees related positive community experiences in other, similar neighborhoods. In fact, nearly every interviewee who spoke about a

positive sense of community within a particular neighborhood was speaking of an “older,” well-established area. Tom McAllister, for example, moved recently from a home in The Lakes, a suburb near the western edge of the valley, where he said he didn’t get to know neighbors. He now lives in a 45-year-old neighborhood (again, old by Las Vegas standards) two miles from downtown. “Now,” he said, “for some reason, in that little pocket of 144 houses, there’s a real community feel.” Chris Giunchigliani felt similarly about her historic neighborhood near the city center: “I feel more comfortable there. I don’t like the cookie-cutter houses and the gated communities. We have our neighborhood association and get together for block parties. There’s a sense of community. You don’t find that in gated communities.” Such findings are in line with local surveys in which respondents indicated a stronger attachment to older neighborhoods near the city’s core (Futrell et al. 2010).

Simply put, most Las Vegas neighborhoods are not recognizable places of community, but exceptions occur, most often in older communities and probably because residents there have become relatively attached and entrenched. In other words, time and shared experience are crucial in building community at the scale of a neighborhood, and since Las Vegas (and other cities like it) have many new neighborhoods

in the sprawling suburban expanse, requisite time has yet to play its role. In essence, locals in longer-standing neighborhoods appear to have removed the element of transience, arguably the most prominent cause of discommunity in the city. If that statement is true, then we might expect a greater potential for community within neighborhoods, new or old, where residents become attached and entrenched. Although Trish Allison hasn't found community in her Summerlin neighborhood, her sister's experience speaks to what is possible, even in a relatively new neighborhood: "My sister lives a couple miles away ... and they have block parties all the time. The difference there is they all bought their houses at the same time 10 years ago. They're all the same age and have raised their kids there. They have the parties, but they also have the gossip and the trouble getting along. They have more of a sense of community." Such is the success in building neighborhood community spoken of by Jane Jacobs, wherein "increments or displacements [of transience] have to be gradual.... Underlying any float of population must be a continuity of people who have forged neighborhood networks. These networks are a city's irreplaceable social capital" (1961, 138). As more people in the city put down roots and the city matures, perhaps the behavior Trish observed in her sister's community will grow to reflect what residents of some of the older neighborhoods are experiencing today.

Communities of affinity

Communities of affinity are based in a common, shared interest and draw members from wide areas within a city. The focus of such communities is on activities at various community "centers" or "meeting places" often separate from residential areas. Known by different names, such communities have been studied by scholars for decades (McClenahan 1946; Everitt 1976; Friedman 1989). Whereas the meeting place is key to how they function, communities of affinity are, in a sense, geographically unbounded since members may come from any part of the city, or even from without a metropolitan area's traditional boundaries. As such, communities of affinity typically will not be as tightly knit as the idealistic neighborhood community (e.g., members in a quilting club may live too far away to easily take in one another's trash bins or collect the vacation mail), but they still afford

the positive social opportunities to members that make community desirable. Finally, due to their nature as an interest-based group, membership will likely consist of people who consider themselves part of other communities of affinity and possibly their own neighborhood community.

In Las Vegas, communities of affinity are more common than neighborhood communities. When locals cannot or do not find neighborliness proximal to their home, they seem to turn to interest groups for a sense of belonging. I observed this phenomenon in various groups and organizations with which I interacted while living in Las Vegas. At a municipal recreation center, various connections and relationships formed between parents while their children participated in classes for preschoolers. Group identification also emerged within a class of around thirty members at Metropolitan Police Department's Citizen's Police Academy, and at the local Jewish Community Center's bi-monthly "field trips" to the city's downtown arts district. In each of these situations, group members came from various parts of the city and shared little in common with the other people in the group, other than an interest in the purpose of that group. Even with such barriers to what we might think of as idealistic community, I still observed genuine acceptance and camaraderie between participants in each group.

Rothman, in his analysis of Las Vegas culture, pointed to community vibrance, not in neighborhoods, but in organizations and clubs based on interest (2002). Similarly, several contributing authors in Simich and Wright's (2005) ethnology, *The Peoples of Las Vegas*, found that ethnicity-based activities and organizations helped to foster an attachment to cultural roots and a sense of community (Titus and Wright 2005). I also noted several instances in local newspapers where special-interest groups were highlighted for their community-building potential; from churches to small bars to gay and lesbian social clubs (Benston 2006; Padgett 2006; Przybys 2007a, b; Trask 2008). In addition, around two dozen interviewees mentioned how they observed or experienced a sense of community in such groups as Rotary, private schools, country clubs, philanthropy groups, business ventures, coworker relationships, biker clubs, or churches. Many of the locals who experienced community in such a way were the same people who decried a lack of community in the neighborhood.

In one interview, Patricia Joseph explained that community has never been a problem for her, and that she doesn't *want* a neighborhood-based community. In fact, she proactively avoids it: "I'm not neighborly. I know my neighbors, you know, 'Hi, how are you?' but I'm not friends with them." Instead she prefers to socialize in her synagogue, at her swing-dancing club, or through volunteer work. She continued: "I choose what I want to be heavily involved in."

In a city where nearly everyone is from somewhere else, Las Vegas locals also tend to build community in interest groups made up of people from their hometowns. Such a phenomenon is similar to the ethnicity-based communities, but it also plays out on the basis of geography. The city's National Football League bars are a good example. Each year, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* publishes a list of what bars purchase the NFL game satellite package and what hometown teams each bar claims as its own (i.e., they will show the games only for that team when they are playing) (Przybys 2006, 2007a). In some cases, sports bars go beyond NFL allegiances. The Tap House, for example, became a home away from home for Ohioans. The bar's Dodd Martin explained that its "menu and status as the city's first to cater to expatriate Ohioans—primarily fans of the Cleveland Browns, Indians and Cavaliers and the Ohio State Buckeyes—have created a group of regulars who now live throughout the valley" (Przybys 2007a). Rothman wrote about the phenomenon: "These bars serve as community centers of a sort, gathering points for lost transients, people who identify strongly with where they come from.... It's another of the ways to build community, to find not only common interests but sometimes common roots among people searching to belong in a new and still strange place" (2002, 307).

Religious groups are a typical community of affinity in the city (Littlejohn 1999; Rothman 2002; Rowley 2012). These often include not only worship, but other activities such as camping, service, and social gatherings. Elizabeth Sanchez has felt alone since leaving her tight-knit family in Texas. After explaining how much she missed being back home, she said that: "Church has been my salvation—spiritually, mentally, socially." Many of the clergy I interviewed mentioned how the church or synagogue or mosque is a source of community for congregants. Pastor Elijah Randolph of a local African Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, explained: "People

come here to meet their neighbors." He said that several members of his congregation have lived next to someone for years and don't know it until they meet that person at church. They subsequently get to know one another and become friends. He continued: "The church creates family and extended family."

Again, Las Vegas is not alone in this manifestation of community. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Gregory Rodriguez, for example, wrote about how the national economic slump may bring more people together in places like coffeeshops and bars all over the country, locations where affinity-based community ties can be fostered (2008). Similarly, Zelinsky has noted such a pattern in his commentary about individualistic American culture: "The rootlessness of the private person, lacking any secure base in family, clan, neighborhood, or any other system of mutual dependence, impels him to turn to a series of churches, political causes, lodges, clubs, jobs, and other shallow, transient associations" (1973, 44).

The formation of communities of affinity, as a group of individuals from different neighborhoods choosing to congregate with like-minded people, represents a social organization that transcends or, in another sense, ignores boundaries often associated with a concept like community (i.e., the neighborhood). The same individual choice to join such a group, then, can also be the impetus for generating a neighborhood community. In other words, individual proactive community builders have the potential to break down barriers ever-present at the scale of the neighborhood. Often this community genesis in a place like Las Vegas may begin with boundless communities of affinity, allowing members to "jump scales" (Smith 1992) from their community-lacking neighborhoods. At the same time, jumping in the other direction, proactive residents may be the ones that simultaneously engender a longed-for neighborhood community. After all, even traditional neighborhood communities in contemporary urban environments can be "communities of choice" (Friedman 1989). Such was the attitude of around twenty interviewees, whose offered sentiments like, "If you want community, you're going to find it," or "If a community is not cohesive, it is because I'm not providing the cohesion myself." The thoughts of longtime local Misty Carlton underscore such possibilities: "People come here and think it's a cold place. I've heard it so many times.... If you have a lot of people [in your neighborhood]

working on the Strip, which is just fine, then they will have a different shift.... But, if you click with that person [on a different shift than you], then you will figure out when you both have a day off or invite that person to come over when they get off work at 2:00 a.m.”

A citywide community

Beyond “traditional” neighborhoods and communities of affinity, I suggest the notion of the entire city as a third sphere of community. This is based on a coherent and mutually understood place-based identity present in the city. Such an idea may seem somewhat misplaced, especially since community is typically defined as a small and tightly knit group of people. How can you have cohesion in a group that might include millions of people? Some urban scholars, however, have suggested that sense of community exists and should be studied at the citywide scale (Jacobs 1961; Davidson and Cotter 1986; Davies and Herbert 1993). Further, a citywide community may be seen as an urban-scale equivalent to a national “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

To understand better how a citywide sense of community might work, we can follow the pattern that seems to occur when moving from the neighborhood to the affinity group and eventually to the entire city. When the geographic space of the community increases, the level of intimacy in everyday community relations presumably decreases (Miller 1992; Silk 1999; Smith 1999). It makes sense, then, that community relationships at the citywide realm will be even more tenuous even as the importance of community-based identity formation (in any sphere) remains (Friedman 1989).

In defining it at a citywide extent, it is helpful to break “community” down to its most elemental meaning: its root word “common.” In other words, we need to identify what a resident on one side of a city might have in common with a resident on the other. We might ask: “If two residents from one city were to meet by chance somewhere else, what connection would they share?”

In addressing such a question, I point to two potential mechanisms for developing a citywide sense of community. First is the powerful role often assumed by sports teams in representing citywide identity. Jackson hinted to such an effect when he compared

sports arenas to the agoras or forums of ancient times: “The sports arena ... is where we demonstrate our local loyalties” (1984, 20). Other scholars also have noted the community-building aspects of sporting events (Anderson and Stone 1981; Bale 1988; Heere and James 2007; Warner et al. 2012). Anybody who visits Boston will notice how many people proudly display the red and blue colors of the baseball Red Sox. From businessmen and women in formal attire with a cap to the casual dresser with both jacket and cap, the team pride seems to be everywhere, a part of the core identity of the city. And, when that resident leaves the city, it is most likely that their common tie to a sports team will be an instant connection drawing them together in new, even displaced community relationship with other Bostonians based on their city of origin. The fact that Las Vegans from all over the country meet at their NFL team’s bar is a testament to the power of team (and hometown) loyalty.

A symbolic landscape (Meinig 1979) may assume a similar iconic role in other cities. Disneyland in Southern California, the Space Needle in Seattle, Central Park or the Empire State Building or entire skyline of New York City, the Arch in St. Louis, the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, are a handful of possible examples of symbols that both insiders and outsiders think of when they picture a particular city (Anderson and Stone 1981). Even though a conversation between two expatriates from Washington, DC, may not revolve around the Washington Monument, they both will have a common understanding of what it is like to live in that community whose character as a government-driven seat of American history is emblemized by the landscape of the National Mall.

What about Las Vegas? One local survey found consistent evidence that Las Vegans felt a stronger sense of belonging to the city than they did to particular neighborhoods (Futrell et al. 2010). I asked several locals about such a sense of belonging and the most typical response was like that of Shawn Newman. She sees affinity groups as a positive force, but said that for the “average joe” or the “masses,” Las Vegas doesn’t have much of an overall sense of community. She looked to the obvious features that might foster such a sense in another city: “There’s no sports team.... There’s no zoo, no waterpark. Nothing that you can say to your neighbor, ‘Let’s take the kids and go.’ There’s not a lot of things that bring people

together.” But, dismissively, Shawn also said the following, which I believe is the key to this particular city’s overall community and identity: “We have the shows, but they are on the Strip ... how many times can you see a Cirque du Soleil show? ... I guess you could take pride in the Strip. But, gaming is about yourself; it’s not a team sport.”

Indeed, the Strip landscape seems to be what creates a citywide sense of community in Las Vegas. Many interviewees asserted their pride in the “Vegas image” even as they dismissed it as “that other place.” Even if one does not gamble, attend the shows, or work at a casino, it is difficult to disassociate from that world when you live in Las Vegas. Indeed, the local experience in this city is inseparable from the Strip—be it through the ever-present nature of gambling in local life, the economic opportunity that brought many residents to the city, the transience that employment and activity in the gambling industry promotes, or the mere presence of the skyline of hotels and casinos in everyday viewsheds (Rowley 2013). Such elements of the city’s personality are where most locals will likely find commonality should they meet in other places. Las Vegans know what it is like to live in Las Vegas and that knowledge ties them together with a bond of commonality that gives way to community. The “Vegas image,” then, is symbolically the Red Sox, the Disneyland, the Central Park for Las Vegans.

Multiple dimensions of community

The foregoing description illustrates the many faces of community belonging in Las Vegas. Neighborhood community is difficult to find in the new subdivisions so common in fast-growing Las Vegas, but is possible in older established areas or where neighbors proactively seek it. Communities of affinity are common in Las Vegas, each catering to locals who come from all over the world but still share common interests. Finally, a citywide community, while tenuous in its hold, is based on the symbolic landscape—the Strip, gambling, and neon—that binds all Las Vegans based on a shared experience in the city. I now turn to some broader implications of such community patterns as interpreted through the combined lenses of place and scale.

The differing spatial scopes of community types described above suggest a hierarchically scaled,

nested set of relationships, a quality implied in other studies of urban community (Herbert and Raine 1976; Chavis and Wandersman 1990; Dwyer 1999; Silk 1999; Romig 2010). Smith has defined “scale as the geographical resolution of contradictory social processes of competition and cooperation” (1992, 64). Such an explanation has obvious connections to community, which Smith notes is produced at various levels—the neighborhood, the work place, recreational sites, etc.—each having indistinct, but hierarchically informed boundaries.

Membership in communities in Las Vegas, however, do not follow a nested pattern. Instead, communities here take on a scaled relationship since each contains members (with their individual characteristics) from a different areal extent within the Las Vegas metropolitan area. Such a perspective follows Passi’s (2004) suggestion regarding scale’s dynamic similarity to “region” and Moore’s (2008, 213) recommendation to employ scale as an analytical focus, a social “category of practice” through which we may understand the events and circumstances that lead to their genesis. A resident in Las Vegas, for example, might find the ubiquitous landscape of garages, walled yards and even their own work schedule as barriers to community in the neighborhood space, but may find a midweek book-club at a regional library branch an enabling environment for a community of affinity. The existence of simultaneous community membership in Las Vegas, furthermore, underscores the porous nature of community boundaries and extends Smith’s (1992) notion of “jumping scales” from mere movement between scales to an explicit (albeit sometimes only occasional) simultaneous sociospatial relationship. Such a relationship reinforces the notion explored within the scale literature that scalar geographies are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Cox and Mair 1988), and that some community memberships have more explicit simultaneous characteristics (Cox and Mair 1991; Massey 1991; Swyngedouw 2004; Rardon et al. 2008).

Given community’s varying spatial nature, and the shared identity formed among members therein, place is another critical perspective to employ in its study (Paasi 2004). At the most basic level, the connection between members’ commonly held experience that builds community—at whatever level—is reflective of place construction and consistent with the phenomenological view of place (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977).

Citywide community, more specifically, has obvious links to a sense of place and the feelings of attachment to and a commonly held understanding of a locale's character (Feld and Basso 1996; Entrikin 1997; de Wit 2003). In fact, the idea of a citywide sense of community is a theoretical extension and scalar (in its literal, cartographic sense) contraction of Massey's global sense of place (1991). In addition to a symbolic landscape or sports team, local folklore (Ryden 1993), physical landscape (Wyckoff 1995; de Wit 2001), an influential history (Schnell 2003), or local newspapers (Buchanan 2009) can engender and evoke a sense of place and a commonality between its residents. And that sense of place, reciprocally, may engender community as people are drawn together through a shared attachment to it.

Interestingly, citywide community may not be recognizable until seen from the outside. Communities of affinity certainly point to the unbounded nature of some groups, but contrary to the moniker I have given it, so does the citywide sense of community. Citywide community symbols represent a geographically defined metropolitan area. But, identification of membership in this group—the recognition that someone belongs to a group where the city and its symbols are the glue—often happens only when someone leaves their city. One Las Vegan, for example, told me: “After living here for so long [30 years], I think that Las Vegas is normal. It's not until I go somewhere else that I realize that it is not.” Other interviewees noted feeling a stronger sense of pride in being from Las Vegas when people elsewhere recognized their shared home place as unique. Such experiences are not unlike the situation described by Tuan: “Long residence enables us to know a place intimately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience” (1977, 18). When we are in our place, it seems, we don't often recognize that commonality because it is an implicit part of our everyday lives. Yet, when we leave, we realize its uniqueness and latch on to it in developing our sense of belonging to our (former) city. In this sense, the citywide community is not bound by the city at all, and the bond that its members feel goes beyond the horizon of the city's taken-for-granted borders. In fact, it is perhaps more commonly manifest outside of that boundary, thus transcending the territorial requirement often equated with community or sense of place (Larsen and Johnson 2012).

Looking beyond the direct connections between place and community, we also can see how the unique personality of Las Vegas influences the structure and functioning of the various communities in the city. To be sure, Las Vegas communities, as noted earlier, are similar in many ways to other American cities, especially those in the Southwest where interest often trumps proximity in community formation (Hecht 1978; Wyckoff 1989; McHugh and Mings 1991; Romig 2010). At the same time, community in this city, like so many other characteristics of life here, is an exaggerated case of sociospatial processes at play in other cities. In short, the Las Vegas experience points to the power that a unique sense of place holds on community.

The Las Vegas personality (from the perspective of its residents) is encapsulated in the complex relationship between locals and the tourism, gambling, and adult entertainment image known throughout the world and symbolized by the Strip (Rowley 2013). Even though most Las Vegans I interviewed tried to draw separation between their life and “that Las Vegas,” the connection to and ambivalent acceptance of Sin City's influence is undeniable. The nature of growth in the city, for one, is based on the economic engine of the tourist corridor. The transient nature of the population, the refrain that everyone is from somewhere else, and the fact that so many neighborhoods (and their inhabitants) are new each reflects the power of that economic force. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of the city's three-shift culture would be minuscule if not for so many jobs in the leisure industry. Finally, the individuality, desire for seclusion and privacy, and distrust so evident in the comments of my interviewees mimic the personality of the gambler at a blackjack table; her only concern is for herself and the positive outcome she seeks. As with cultural elements in places all over the world, the traits of a group that successfully establishes itself likely will impact the culture that develops in that place (Zelinsky 1973). In Las Vegas, the gambling culture largely filled this role, so it is not surprising that we see elements of its lifestyle bleeding into the persona of the city today.

Each of these characteristics in the Las Vegas personality has, in one way or another, influenced the city's community structure. The 24-7 and private culture of people in the gambling and tourism industries yields traits of seclusion and individualism,

distrust and selfishness, thus destabilizing community at the neighborhood level. Where such a community does exist, time is a required element, but with so many new neighborhoods built in recent decades of booming growth, that time may not have passed yet. Even in situations where proactive individuals seek to build neighborhood community amid such barriers, the influence of the three-shift town is again felt. Recall Misty Carlton's words: "if you click with that person [on a different shift than you], then you will figure out when you both have a day off or invite that person to come over when they get off work at 2:00 a.m."

The Vegas image is influential in the construction and composition of communities of affinity. In one sense, such groups are a reaction to the discommunity at the neighborhood level. Since such groups are of a looser knit than neighborhood communities and carry with them some element of anonymity, members may feel less of an obligation to contribute in meaningful ways. Similarly, if someone moves away after living this transient city for a time, the impact of leaving an affinity community may be minimal compared to someone departing a deeply entrenched neighborhood. As further evidence of the impact of transience, I found that newcomers to Las Vegas who seek out a church soon after they arrive and often don't care whether or not their new place of worship is of the same denomination as their former church; they are merely seeking for a quick connection to community (Rowley 2012).

I have already spoken in detail about the connection between the city's sense of place and a citywide community and how it connects locals from all parts of the city in a loose but recognizable sense of belonging. Interestingly, the elements of the city's personality that disrupt community at the neighborhood sphere are the same that make it possible in communities of affinity and a citywide community. In fact, considering the multiplicity of connections between communities in Las Vegas and the city's sense of place-based identity, I argue that place actually gives way to the production of its various scaled communities. In other words, the local's interaction with the Las Vegas personality influences his or her choices as to what communities they construct at which scale. Such interaction further underscores the importance of using multiple perspectives in analyzing complex sociospatial phenomena such as community.

Conclusion

The spheres of community (both in number and their implicit or explicit spatial bounds) described here represent the various manifestations of community observed in my research, but they are not meant to be a global template for how community functions in urban areas. Even though Las Vegas espouses urban and suburban characteristics found in cities throughout North America it is still one case, and a unique one at that. Still, some broad lessons can be extracted from the community experience in Las Vegas. Policy makers and planners are often interested in identifying ways to foster and promote community within their localities. Scholars too, may explore the intricacies of community in other places. In Salt Lake City, for example, they might ask: "What kind of communities develop in this city at neighborhood or citywide scales as a function of a local sense of place that is on one hand deeply rooted in a Latter-day Saint culture but on the other quickly growing in its non-LDS population?" In a very different case, a researcher working in Chicago might study how the city's diverse ethnic population and constantly changing ethnic neighborhoods contribute to various senses of community.

In addition, this work may point to further work about the various roles of everyday community in places. A number of topics could be particularly fruitful in such research. The simultaneity of community membership is one such arena. That one can be a member of many communities at once may seem obvious (Miller 1992; Silk 1999), but the circumstances of membership within and across multiple sites of community interaction is an intriguing frontier in need of exploration. Furthermore, my presentation of a citywide sense of community is loosely conclusive at best, even though I observed its clear and distinct presence in Las Vegas. This is another area in need of further research.

This work provides an illustrative example of how community—constructed, experienced, and often taken for granted in everyday life—is a complicated sociospatial phenomenon that begs interpretation through a number of spatial lenses and theories. I have presented such an interpretation through two such lenses, but other spatialities should be considered to deepen our understanding of community—in this, or any other location. Future work exploring community or any other sociospatial phenomena needs the

same treatment, and interpretive lenses should be selected based on the spatial and cultural context of the location under study.

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