

Settlement Houses and Neighborhood Houses: Placemaking of a Social Infrastructure in Milwaukee

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The idea of social infrastructures for cities of the United States were introduced to settlement houses which started as philanthropic organizations working for the betterment of early 20th-century European immigrants. Later, the changing immigration and migration pattern in U.S. cities since the first Great Migration made many of these settlement houses transform into neighborhood houses. During the time of the second Great Migration, neighborhood houses came up as the new social organizations for African-American migrants from the south. In today's context of Milwaukee, neighborhood houses have been majorly state-funded community organizations to create social agencies in the marginalized neighborhoods. Since the late 20th century, they are also the state's primary support organizations for social sustenance among relocated international refugee families and communities in Southside Milwaukee. This paper explores the spatial significance of settlement houses and neighborhood houses in shaping the immigrant and migrant communities of Milwaukee over one hundred years. The research unfolds the placemaking processes of these social infrastructures in two ways. On the first approach, the paper analyzes these organizations' spatial mapping in order to understand how they have been serving the communities regardless of their demographics. On the second approach, the paper discusses how the transformation process from settlement houses to neighborhood houses changed the broader discourse on spatial politics and agency of social organizations in urban Milwaukee. Finally, the research claims that the neighborhood houses and settlement houses are to be strongly considered as part of the social architecture category.

Back in early 20th century Milwaukee, there were three major settlement houses to provide educational, recreational, health and social service programs for new immigrants. These houses also acted as social spaces for cultural assimilation of these immigrants. The transformation of organizational activities from settlement houses to neighborhood houses shifted their objectives from assimilation and Americanization towards community development and outreach. The neighborhood houses in Milwaukee adopted more open policies for social reformation in comparison to the settlement houses, and majorly reflected on building communities and providing support networks in racially segregated and blighted neighborhoods. The settlement houses were neighborhood-based, charity-run, ethnic social organizations working for the European immigrants to assimilate in

the American socio-cultural landscape. On the other hand, neighborhood houses work as state-funded social organizations for the community development of impoverished neighborhoods and refugee communities in Milwaukee. This paper points to these differences of organizational principles in order to inspect how their spatiality has been informed along with this transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Settlement houses and neighborhood houses are considered by researchers as successful social organizations mitigating social disparities among urban people of the U.S. These organizations worked for their communities in two different time periods of U.S. urban history, and their major serving population were the urban immigrant and migrant population who were in dire need of access to resources for a better living. These organizations are part of the larger urban social infrastructures, as they bring people together for social interaction and betterment of living. My research seeks to understand the impact of social infrastructures and their placemaking by studying the settlement houses and neighborhood houses in the context of Milwaukee. The broader question that I am trying to address in this paper is, how do social infrastructures serve in terms of their spatiality? How does the change of social institutions follow the cities' power play of spatial politics yet continue to provide social justice for community development?

The history of philanthropic social institutions in urban America records the inception of settlement houses in New York and Chicago back in the 1880's. Both of these cities were major destinations for the new immigrants coming from Europe, and through settlement houses, they gained access to resources that helped them to escape economic and social poverty. Settlement Houses helped to assimilate and ease the cultural transition of immigrants into the regular American way of living by teaching them middle-class American socio-cultural values and skillsets. Eventually, the need for these social institutions started to decrease after the First World War when immigration rules became restricted. At that time period, the first Great Migration Wave also brought a large population of Southern African-American migrants to the Northern urban centers. Both of these major events eventually led the majority of these settlement houses to be transformed into neighborhood houses. Neighborhood houses focused more broadly on providing services and activities designed to identify and reinforce the strengths of



Figure 1: the Jewish Settlement House, Milwaukee WI. 1935, Jewish Museum Milwaukee Archives. Figure 2: Hull House, Chicago, IL. 1914, UIC Library Archives



Figure 2: Hull House, Chicago, IL. 1914, UIC Library Archives.

individuals, families, and communities. Thereby, the transformation from settlement houses to neighborhood houses shifted their working principles from cultural assimilation and Americanization towards community development and preservation of ethnic origin. Milwaukee, one of the most racially segregated urban landscapes in the U.S., has always been in need of social infrastructures that work towards achieving social equity by providing access to resources to its impoverished neighborhoods. In that standpoint, the present neighborhood houses in Milwaukee are consciously working towards designing strong social spaces for making people comfortable to socialize within their space environment. These organizational spaces are also encouraging people to act in the desired range of social behaviors while being more conscious of the rights and duties of an urban citizen. Based on this discussion, I portray settlement houses and neighborhood houses as ‘spaces for care’ because of their spatial significance in shaping the urban culture of American cities and their communities. I also demonstrate these organizational institutions as ‘social architecture’ because they share histories of cultivating social spaces in order to optimize human interactions and to socially integrate people to the urbanity.

ORGANIZATIONAL PLACEMAKING FOR URBAN IMMIGRANTS AND MIGRANTS:

Cities require places for their people’s needs to be satisfied in unplanned and spontaneous ways- public places where all inhabitants can shape their relationships with others and with their environment. Sociologist Henry Lefebvre, in his concept of “The Right to the City”, talks about “social” and “anthropological” needs for urban communities that include play, creativity, sport, learning, gathering, and experiencing.¹ This is particularly a requirement in the age of neo-liberalism where an increasing number of urban populations lack economic decision-making power and are disenfranchised and without a voice.² In the case of immigrants and migrants, they arrive at a new city and get entangled in the daily struggles

for re-orientation and lack of access to resources. Urban planner Li contends that immigrants, often poor, ill-educated, and lacking English language skills, were expected to climb the economic ladder and merge into American society.³ Each immigrant group is expected to undergo a ‘race relations cycle’ of “contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation” to the host society and the cycle is seen as “progressive and irreversible”⁴. On this note, several scholars think that settlement houses in early 20th-century urban America formed a strong partial foundation for generalist social work practices within communities in at least three ways:

“First, the settlement house approach addressed the problems of people in an environmental context instead of focusing on individual pathology. Settlements focused on social issues and improving living conditions, especially for those who were poor or less fortunate than most. Second, an environmental focus led naturally to an emphasis on advocacy and social reform. The macro-social environment required a change in order to meet people’s needs. Third, settlement houses emphasized the empowerment of people, Families and neighborhoods were seen as potential vehicles for positive change.” (Fabricant & Fisher, 2008; Smith, 1995).⁵

On the other hand, historian Trolander defined the new-age neighborhood houses as “institutions that serve as a cross-roads, a place where different groups of people can come together, exchange ideas, and reach consensus”⁶. According to Social researcher Fritz,

“successful neighborhood centers, sometimes called community centers, organize community residents to meet new needs and demands: provision of daycare for working parents, preschool programs, home support for older adults, family counseling, substance abuse education and counseling, health services, recreational activities for children and teens, food pantries, temporary shelter, vocational assessment

*and employment counseling, and meeting locations for various local organizations from the Boy scouts to Alcoholics anonymous”.*⁷

The founding concept of neighborhood houses took shape at a time when the social structure of U.S. cities was changing rapidly, and therefore, neighborhood house organizations adopted more open policies for social reformation in comparison to the settlement houses. The organizing pattern of neighborhood houses majorly reflected on their activities to be suited to serving communities which were no longer bound by any specific ethnicity or religious point of view. During the time of the American civil rights movement, the Johnson Administration’s War on Poverty launched a vast array of social welfare programs run by government social workers who contracted work to the neighborhood centers or remaining settlements. Since the 1980’s, nation-wide neighborhood houses have adopted open policies for refugee resettlement and integration as the surge of refugee immigrants from all over the world have risen in American cities. Fritz suggests that in case of Milwaukee, settlement houses and neighborhood houses were not only centers for social reformation but also focal points for political action as urban leaders in Milwaukee often responded to the immediate needs and concerns of Milwaukee’s most underrepresented communities.⁸ Based on these discussions, I claim the further importance of neighborhood houses and settlement houses as being part of the urban social architecture as they were able to create platforms for communities to raise their voices against urban inequity and marginality.

SETTLEMENT HOUSES: PLACE FOR CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

The history of immigrant settlements in Milwaukee started back in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the early 20th century, Milwaukee was a bustling city in the Midwest with major industrial growth. Hence, the city attracted a large number of European immigrants from Germany, Poland, Italy, Russia, and so on. The settlement house movement in Milwaukee started in the early 20th century which was strongly inspired by Chicago’s ‘Hull House’, established by female philanthropist Jane Addams in 1889. This was one of the prominent settlement houses in the U.S. urban history. From the exterior façade pictures of Hull House and the Jewish Settlement House in Milwaukee, it is evident that both these settlement houses were examples of traditional vernacular architecture in terms of their building style. Spacemaking of these buildings also fulfilled the criteria for vernacular architecture by being major places for immigrant socialization within their respective neighborhoods.

The settlement houses in Milwaukee were located within the city’s physical geography of ethnic neighborhood enclaves. These neighborhoods were also marked as urban areas with

poverty, shanty settlements, broken streets and pavement, lack of access to health and educational facilities and other maladies. These organizations were established and run by individual philanthropists and social workers and reflected majorly on the moral principles of charity giving. There were three major settlement houses in Milwaukee, and they were the Neighborhood Settlement, the Jewish Settlement House, and Wisconsin University Settlement. In this discussion, I take the Jewish Settlement House as a case study to demonstrate the organization’s placemaking through social activities. The Jewish Settlement house was established in 1896 by female philanthropist Mrs. Simon ‘Lizzie’ Kander, and a group of Jewish women. Inspired by Jewish principles of social charity, Jewish Settlement House was the most acclaimed settlement movement in the city. This settlement served primarily the newcomer Russian Jews in the 1880’s. By 1922, the place served about 3000 families, most of their children between the age of 10 and 18.⁹ Lack of education was a major factor with these immigrants, thereby the Settlement arranged evening schools for both men and women. The organization also arranged further diverse activities for serving their communities, by providing libraries, sewing classes, clubs for boys and girls, Sabbath schools, gymnasiums, health camps and so on. The majority of these activities were equally attended by Jewish men, women, and children in the same space, thereby they got to know one another and mingle socially. Creation of these all-gender spaces through social activities also helped the population that they served to break out of their traditional mentalities and prepared them to participate equally in other urban public spaces.

The Settlement took another interesting approach for culturally assimilating their immigrant populations by purposefully creating gendered spaces. Lizzie Kander and her supporters arranged cooking courses for Jewish women to teach them American style kosher cooking. This played a major role in the organization’s objective as they believed that if the women of these immigrant families were culturally educated and assimilated, then their entire family would become so. These cooking courses provided the organizer’s opportunity to culturally educate these young women by providing instructions of American social values and standards of living inside the system of home and family. These cooking classes also arranged these immigrant women’s meeting space for socialization during the daytime when the males in the households were working outside.

The transformation of settlement houses to neighborhood houses after the 1920 immigration halt resulted in a number of changes in their organizing principles. Firstly, leadership tenets of the settlement houses focused on the aspects of female philanthropy, and this shifted to black male leadership during the rise of the neighborhood house movements. Secondly, settlement worker’s involvement in the institutionalized social work system also diminished the moral voluntary



Figure 3: All-gender space activities in auditorium space, the Jewish Settlement House. Undated, Beit Hatfutsot Databases. Figure 4: Creation of gendered space by cooking courses attended by Jewish women. 1907, Jewish Museum Milwaukee Archives.

involvement of men and women for the purpose of social reformation. The change in the organizational structure between the two social systems made a large difference: settlement houses used to be run by the community residents, and neighborhood houses started to be run by professionals who stayed outside the neighborhoods. Thirdly, the settlement houses were located in the ethnic working-class neighborhoods as they were organizations run by volunteers and philanthropists from those communities, whereas neighborhood houses became more professionalized social institutions. Finally, the adoption of charity funding systems in the settlement houses became obsolete for the neighborhood houses, as they were primarily state-funded organizations working for the low-income neighborhoods. However, in spite of the differences in these organization's working principles and communities, their placemaking strongly promoted physical, social and moral welfare to their served people as part of the city's larger social infrastructure system.

NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES: INSTITUTIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

During the post-World War II industrial boom, a major surge of Southern African-Americans came to the northern cities in search of a better living. Their arrival constructed a new narrative for these cities' socio-cultural landscape, and hence, gave rise to neighborhood houses as social institutions working for community outreach and development. Later in the 1970's and 80's, a number of these neighborhood houses also became the state's support organizations for resuming social sustenance among the relocated immigrant refugee communities in Milwaukee. These broader goals of neighborhood houses resulted in more diversified ways of placemaking in comparison to the earlier settlement houses. Social charity and advocacy programs became more integrated to the working policies of the neighborhood house organizations, and the majority of these houses focused on serving the young populations.

Milwaukee's inner-city neighborhoods with the oldest housing stocks share the histories of accommodating the newest immigrant and migrant communities in the city. These city areas were once the poor working-class neighborhoods for European immigrants who moved towards Southside Milwaukee once the migrant African-Americans started to live in these areas. After this post-war second great migration wave, the African-American population in Milwaukee rose around 60,000, and a majority of these people were uneducated, poor and not accustomed to Midwest urban cultures.¹⁰ They were racially segregated in the city's redlined areas which made the neighborhood houses adopt more open policies for social reformation. In fact, the current seventeen neighborhood houses are all located around these historically low-income neighborhoods in North Milwaukee. Interestingly, the absence of a neighborhood house around the working-class Latino and refugee communities in present Southside Milwaukee also indicates to the larger spatial politics of social infrastructures in this city. These populations are also in dire need of access to resources, and hence must travel from far to avail these opportunities at neighborhood houses located in North Milwaukee. Neighborhood houses have eventually turned into corporatized community organizations financed by the state and their corporate entities. Therefore, the physical locations of these neighborhood houses strategically follow to be close to their donors located in the Milwaukee downtown business areas, but do not follow the other unprivileged communities in Southside Milwaukee. My claim here is that the complex integration of organizational activities offered by the present neighborhood houses offer larger support to its people that they serve, but at the same time, their process lacks the integration of individual-level network support as found in the settlement houses.

One of these neighborhood houses, Neighborhood House of Milwaukee (NHMKE est. in 1945), is located on the junction point in between North and Southside Milwaukee. NHMKE

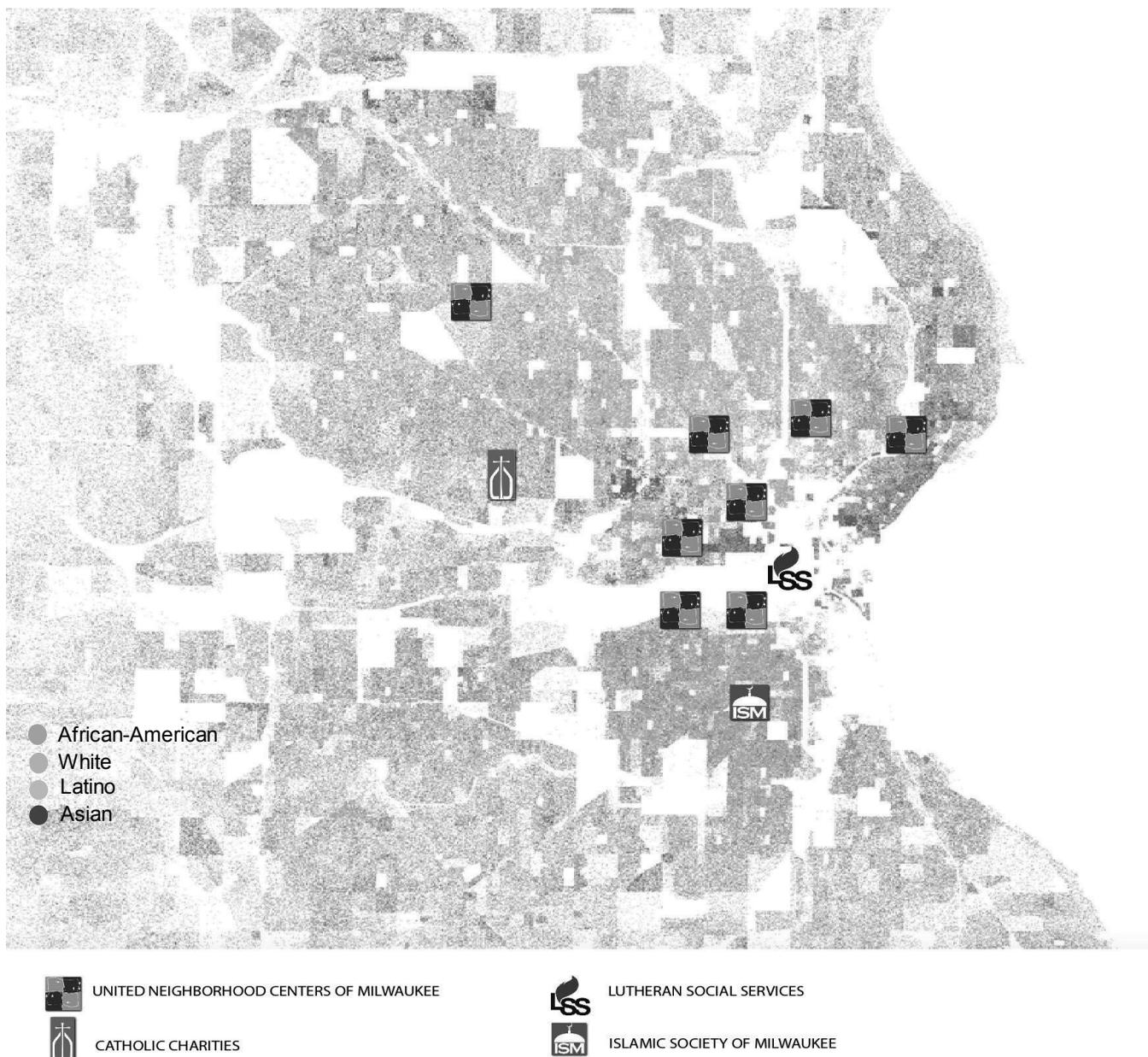


Figure 5: Racial Dot Map of Milwaukee with the Location of Neighborhood Houses. 2013, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia; and Google Map (NH locations).

has been serving its surrounding neighborhoods and also the city's refugee communities. At present, the Neighborhood House has four branches which are primarily financed by the state, local universities and business organizations. The organization serves majority of young people identities of the immigrant population that they served by organizing place-making of different activities while also providing access to resources to be socio-culturally assimilated.

CONCLUSION

The institutional journey from settlement houses to neighborhood houses in Milwaukee indicates their roles as part of the city's social infrastructure system by serving Milwaukee's complete racial landscape - from the European immigrants to the African-American migrants, and to the immigrant refugee communities. These organizations served their respective communities by creating social spaces for cultural integration and assimilation which also fulfills the requirement for being part of the 'social architecture' category. Ironically, these organizations never seem to be the architect community's



Figure 6: English language class in International Learning Center (ILC) Milwaukee, WI. Undated, NHMKE website. Figure 7: Young people participating in NHMKE urban gardening program. Undated, NHMKE website

point of interest while they discuss the inclusive placemaking of American cities in the present and the past. My research discussed in this paper indicates that these organizations and their placemaking have the agency to serve with activities for all populations, especially for the young people in the city's impoverished neighborhoods who are in most need. This placemaking also embraces all people regardless of their ethnic identities and treats them equally. The spatial politics and agency of these institutions has changed throughout their histories of over one hundred years, but Milwaukee's urban history of placemaking should mark these as the places from where the immigrants and migrants in the city started building their trust towards a new living.

ENDNOTES

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