The Fremantle house party: superficiality and chaotic space in community creation

Stephen Glackin
School of Social Sciences and Humanities/School of Media, Culture, Communication
Murdoch University
broomehilde@hotmail.com

Abstract:
Recent publications have documented the reduction in community engagement and loss of social capital in modern societies, however many of these have assumed that both community and society are static and univocal. This paper essentially argues against this by providing an overview of a local phenomenon that encourages community participation, whilst allowing for individual perspectives on both identity and perspectives of the locale. The Fremantle house party will be presented as an open and relatively chaotic site, which encourages interaction and promotes networking, while simultaneously maintaining individual autonomy. Theoretically, the party will be viewed as one of the grass-roots events favoured by Richard Florida’s creative class, as opposed to the static and not locally derived communal activities of Robert Putnam. As such the party will be presented as a contemporary resource for community engagement, and as an undervalued public space in an urban environment that exists in a highly individuated society.

This paper examines the Fremantle house party and its contribution to the area in terms of community creation and community maintenance. The party will be shown to be a contemporary public space where, instead of all participants engaging in one, predetermined and community-imposed persona, they are actively negotiating a social position between diverse and disparate identities. The result of this set of social interactions is the development and maintenance of a community. In this case then, the party will be viewed as a site congruent with many contemporary theorists views of an open and fluid society, and to an extent stand in opposition to arguments that propose the death of community and mass social breakdown.

The house party is a regular, though not formally organised event, occurring most weekends in Fremantle, Western Australia. The local perception of a party is that the owners/renters of a property will have cleared out at least one space in their home for socialising, will probably provide music in the form of a DJ and some turntables, will
have an ‘open-door’ policy, will not take offence to drunkenness or overtly drug-induced states, will not be opposed to the party continuing until dawn, and be open to having their house filled, at least in part, by strangers. The venue, theme and the general social makeup of the party changes each week as it moves from house to house (though there are a number of regular partygoers that show up at all parties). There is little in the way of a formal communication protocol for hearing about these events, but most informants stated that they were either personally invited by the hosts, heard about it at a party the previous week, or were mobile phone messaged with the party information on the night.

The inferences herein are based on a year of participant observation between June 2004 and June 2005 in Fremantle, Western Australia. In the course of this year I befriended a small local group of regular partygoers and attended some twenty parties, both with this group and on my own. Most of these events included meeting for pre-party drinks, travelling to the party, and meeting with the group afterwards, either directly or the next day for a debriefing session. Information was gathered primarily through taking field notes on the physical layout of the event, descriptions of socialising patterns, and the content and speed of change of conversation topics. Additional, and more personal, data was obtained through informal interviews with roughly forty partygoers, before, during and after events. Further information regarding the history of the party was gathered through recorded informal interviews and e-mail conversations from longstanding community members (who either grew up or have lived in Fremantle for at least twenty years and were over forty years old). Finally, three formal recorded interviews were held with party organisers.

In 2000 Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) was published and became a bestseller. Through numerous statistical devices, this now famous text documented the reduced number of voters, volunteers, and attendance at large social events, and in doing so brought attention to the reduction in America’s social capital: social capital can be loosely defined as the collective value of all social networks. This apparent decrease in social cohesion caught the attention of the American public resulting in a regained interest in social capital, and its incorporation into academic and bureaucratic language. The theory gained so much popularity that Putnam has been required to give multiple presidential addresses, as well as working with many other heads of state. Simultaneously,
numerous agencies, such as the World Bank (Grootaert, 1998), have given it considerable attention.

Two years later Richard Florida released *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). Apart from introducing the concept of the creative class - a new class of worker engaged in the manufacturing of ideas - to the world, the book pointed out the importance of dynamic, open and inclusive environments to economic and social activity. This creative class favours a general move away from large ‘big-ticket’ events in favour of smaller, grass roots events and a preference for living in environments that essentially have low social capital, or rather less strong social capital - what Putnam refers to as bonding capital (2000: 23). The argument being that in areas where there is high social capital, there are both a higher number, and more rigorous restrictions placed on individuals, as all must adhere to the relatively strong dictates of the community.

The effect of this societal control is to create an overtly restricting and limiting environment that can both exclude and hamper the creative person (Florida, 2002: 178). What is preferable then is akin to Mark Granovetter’s “weak ties” (1973), these are loose and impersonal, though highly functional, connections that are invaluable in a modern environment. So in this instance ‘superficial’ can be read as instances where levels of social contact is quite high, but the depth of this contact, or the bonds of personal reciprocity that one would expect in a close-knit community, do not exist - a model that is essentially opposite to Putnam’s.

This dynamic and superficial society is quite reminiscent of many other theorists studying contemporary society. Zigmunt Bauman discusses at length the liquid nature of late modernity, where rather than individuals having one prescribed identity, they are free to elect and construct their own array of both personae (2004:13) and reference groups (2001: 108). Gerard Delaney similarly discusses late modernity, where instead of community being a static and long term structure, it is described as a loose, ephemeral collection of individuals, which constantly shifts due to group practices (2003: 31-45). This theme of individuation, reflexivity, social dynamism and to a certain extent social breakdown, or at least a grand social shift away from grand social narratives, is recurring the work of Richard Sennett (1974), Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck (2002), Manuel Castells (1996) and Anthony Giddens (1991).

It is Florida’s representation then, as opposed to Putnam’s, which more seems to more closely resemble the social reality of late modernity, where a model of society that is
open and diverse is both more functional and contemporarily valid than a closed and restrictive one. So instead of societies being described as one set of ideas that encompass everyone in the community, as having reasonably solid boundaries, of being a legitimising and supportive, or of being static, they can now be seen as more fluid objects. According to the above theorists, the modern individual is trading depth of contact - and therefore the restrictions that go with this form of contact- for something more superficial but with greater freedom. To borrow Emile Durkheim’s terminology, communities are becoming more organic (Durkheim, 1960: 226), but as opposed to his organic being related to the ties of commonality through a shared financial market, this new organicity is one of opposites (Malbon, 1999, 157), a dense and multi-dimensional network of innumerate connections, constantly negotiating a continually changing commonality (Delaney, 2003: 34) - in a way more chaotic then organic.

The above remodelling of society towards a more dynamic state reflects on Putnam’s work in two major ways. Firstly, it is possible that this organicity has always been the case, and that the idea of ‘community’ was simply yet another overly simplistic construct, derived either out of a romanticised village life, or out of a desire to simplify reality into yet another scientistic discourse: to create an ideal type. In which case, Putnam’s argument is based on the myth that there was actually a ‘community’ to lose in the first place.

The second viewpoint accepts Putnam’s argument as valid, but instead of seeing community as dying, it can simply be seen to be shifting. The tight community bonds that Putnam shows to be deteriorating are not really a cause for alarm. It is simply the changing of ‘community’ from a static and modernist object, to a more fluid and post-modern object.

An example of this late modern community can be seen in Fremantle, Western Australia, where through the workings of urban decay, immigration, cheap rents, gentrification and a large numbers of bohemians and counter-culturalists, there is a very diverse population. Though there are divisions of ethnicity and class in the older generations, this does not seem to be the case in the younger or middle aged. One reason appears to be the space provided for public meeting and public negotiation of local norms. The local galleries, café’s, pubs, and council organised public events appear to contribute to a general use of public (and semi-public) space, and ultimately
to the vast and chaotic networks of communication that go with it. One example of
this public use of space that continually came up in interviews, with both older and
younger locals, was the house party.

I found anecdotal evidence of the house party existing from the mid 1960’s, which
was mainly an “after the pub” affair. However, large house parties appear to have
started in the early to mid 1970’s, some of which held two to three hundred people
and are still talked about.

The house party itself is a fairly regular weekend event that is staged in various
residences in and around Fremantle. It generally consists of anywhere between forty
and three hundred people drinking, talking and dancing until somewhere between 2am
and dawn. Spatially, the party consists of one or more areas for socialising and, more
likely then not, a DJ and dancing area. For the larger parties it is usual for the entire
house, except bedrooms, to be open to all, resulting in multiple zones with varying
types of interaction and ambience. Lounge rooms may be full of dancers, hallways
filled with small groups engaged in very transient and dynamic conversation and back
gardens packed people in deeper conversation with channels of people moving
between them, dividing conversers into small groups.

There is usually an ‘open door’ policy, leading to the majority of the guests being
unknown to each other or to the hosts. There will however be many faces that one
recognises from previous parties or from around town, as well as some party regulars
that inevitably appear throughout the night. During the research period I ran a formal
questionnaire based on education levels, cultural background and occupation. The
results of which did show a high level of students (40%), but also showed a wide
range of occupations, ethnicities, subcultural affiliations, age and education levels,
more so then could reasonably be expected in other social gatherings, such as at a
mainstream pub, gig or cultural event.

There is no set calendar for parties, or no set place where they will occur. Instead,
prospective host, rather spontaneously, decide to stage an event, which, according to
replies from organisers, is usually a housewarming, birthday, house leaving, or just
the desire to have a party. Though parties are generally planned up to three weeks
ahead, most people will usually hear about it the weekend before, or on the night, as
they contact friends looking for something to do.
Commonly, people come to a party after another event, such as a music gig or a small gathering of close friends. It is at these events, particularly small private gatherings that more intimate, or at least more personal, conversations occur. A similar occurrence happens after the party, where many small groups break off and go elsewhere for more intimate conversations or comedown and chill-out drinks. It is in this space, or possibly at later meetings in coffee shops, pubs and future pre-party drinks sessions that the friendships from parties are consolidated.

Conversations at the party itself are generally superficial. While there may be friends and acquaintances that one knows reasonably well, these are swallowed in the volume of relative strangers at the event, and it is here that one really sees the number of personal networks each individual is involved in. For example, while speaking to one person, it is common for either speaker to be interrupted by someone who has overheard the conversation. While that interruption is ongoing, it may itself be interrupted, at which point a fourth or fifth party may approach any of the conversers. But yet it is these superficial comments that ‘break the ice’ for many future friendships, or at the very least future party or ‘around town’ conversations.

Some key points then. Firstly, the party is one of those rare spaces that is not business related space and not public, in the sense of governed open space. As opposed to Sennet’s public space (1994: 314), and Zukin’s commercial space (1995: 28), it doesn’t have to sell anything to succeed, and it doesn’t come under the control of a public administrator. In other words, beyond local sensibilities - and given the liminality of the event even these can be stretched - there is little management of the site. It is, in terms of the ‘normal’ use of public space, a relatively chaotic site.

Secondly, the primary reason for going to one of these events is to socialise. The party is first and foremost a place to meet people and a space to perform your social self. It is not a space to be alone in public, such as the modern city, or to exclusively talk to ones friends, such as at a pub (Sennett, 1974: 85).

The final point is the lack of depth of these events. Generally the party has been, and will continue to be, a superficial environment. It may lead to friendships or relationships, but principally exists as a site for gregarious and seemingly irrelevant socialising (which is reasonably logical when one considers the probability of intimately knowing a hundred or so people after one night). This superficiality has
been negatively commented on by a proportion of interviewed partygoers, but at the same time, roughly half of respondents confessed to feeling some sense of community, not so much a deep connection to individuals at the event, but more an overall feeling of empathy and well being in the group, a sense of freedom in the collective. Similar to raves as described by Ben Malbon (1999), and Michael Maffesoli’s “Tribus” (1996, 3), where communal activity is an expression of local ambience, is instantaneous created and also instantly dissolved after the event. The exception here is that the party is a continuously recurring and very local event. This is the paradox of the party, it is shifting, it is chaotic, it is full of strangers but at the same time, to a large number of participants, it feels very comfortable and to an extent communal. Not a community of commonality but a community of difference, not dissimilar to the above mentioned liquid community.

So the party can be viewed as a relatively chaotic, open and superficial space allowing non-commercial and financially unprofitable social activity to occur. It at once allows the locals some say over their own entertainment, provides a nexus for locals to meet, whilst maintaining a degree of separation and aloofness from each other. In terms of modern conceptions of community, it provides the public space where the norms or sensibilities of the locale can be negotiated and simultaneously provides the space where people can engage in a community whilst maintain their autonomy. It is similar to modern web-log and Internet chat sites, but expressed physically and forcing personal negotiating of local norms. In this way the party is almost the perfect space for allowing both individuality and the maintenance of the larger group to occur. As in Simmel’s city, one is free to create any personality, and also change that personality accordingly (1973). This, among other things, is power of the party. The superficial, primarily social and chaotic nature of the space plays a large part in the creation of Fremantle’s community. Parties are a space for diverse groups to meet, a space for negotiation, albeit a superficial one, of local norms or at the least the differences between people.

If the attenuated and liquid model of modern society is valid, if public space is shifting and there is greater distance between people, parties are something like the back fences and parks of yesterday: a nexus where local gossip can be discussed, a chance for locals to get together and create a commonality. As Florida suggests, it is events like the above that people are more attracted to, grass roots entertainment that
allows for local norms to be represented, is representative of the attending group, allows for audience participation and, most importantly, allows for individual autonomy and freedom (Florida, 2002: 217). Furthermore the party provides the space for the open negotiation of this community.

Putnam’s reduction in social capital, may have been statistically correct, but it did not account for grand shifts in society and contemporary shard communal space as proposed by Sennett, Bauman and Castells. In contrast to his theories on reduced social capital through a reduction in participation, what is actually occurring, according to Florida, is a preference for more fluid events and lifestyles. So instead of there being a reduction in social capital, there is in reality a divergence. While social bonds in formal institutions may be loosing strength, they are gaining connections in more fluid environments.

In conclusion, the above has attempted to show, by way of exposing a chaotic and superficial environment, the methods and spaces necessary for contemporary community creation. This rests on the fractured and fluid vision of modernity, and the necessity of open communities as subscribed to by Richard Florida.

Though essentially arguing against Putnam’s theories on social decay in favour of a shift to less formal social mechanisms, there is one of his points that remain valid—“The good communities did not become civic because they were rich, they became rich because they were civic” (Putnam, 1993: 3). As can be seen in any popular area, parties similar to the above described, are a way of life. Behind the majority of popular cultural sites there will exist an informal infrastructure of events that drive creative forces, network the inhabitants and create a non-commercial and local norm. The effect of these networks contributes to the construction of a sense of place, outside of that created by property developer). Locally, the party appears to be a key site of modern community interaction. It is open, diverse and local, allowing the individuated self their personal space, but also providing a space for the nexus of these individuals, a space to gather, to talk and to perform their locality. And while not exactly an agora, it is in many ways its contemporary.
References