CLOSE TO HOME:
THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT OF HOMEWORK

Today with both the majority of men and women working outside the home, the suburban residential development is a no-(wo)man's land during the weekday. Children are at school, parents at work, and grandparents live somewhere else. Some writers suggest that as residences become workplaces, the neighborhood itself might undergo change (Nilles, 1985). More specifically they speculate that neighborhoods will become vital places, with people using more neighborhood services and facilities. Law enforcement agencies are hopeful that visibility of homeworkers in the neighborhood during the day will deter potential criminals and lead to more neighborhood surveillance of strangers. More local shops, more people on the streets and in the shops, people recognizing each other—all these conjure images of a tighter-woven community than the residential developments of today.

The notion of community is central to the idea of residential and societal development but the actual definition of the concept remains elusive. In 1955 George Hillery analyzed the social science literature to date and found 94 different meanings given to the term community. The most common definition focuses on an aggregate of people with shared common interests in a particular locality, most notably residential.

During the early 1960s Melvin Webber questioned the preoccupation with territory in defining community as he promoted the notion of "communities without propinquity" within the American landscape. Networks for maintaining social contact and shared interests did not have to depend upon physical proximity of people to each other or to services, but only upon accessibility to them. The emotive or experiential dimension of community was available, he argued, from transit and telecommunication networks instead of territory. Machines originally developed to entertain and inform were now also to "reach out and touch someone." Place-community in the residential sphere became little more than territorial areas with "limited liability" or casual associations.

However, interest communities and associations exist outside the residential realm. Such associations often transcend residential boundaries. One pervasive association, often territorially bound, is the "world of work." As described below, it may well be the last remnant of place-community.

If we look at our social scene today, we see that to a great extent we are a nation of strangers. The deep roots of the extended family and the highly supportive social systems of
years ago have declined and almost vanished. This makes me think that there is a new kind of neighborhood, and that one of the major reasons why people come to work is to be with other people. At work, they see and touch and exchange information and confidences as they do nowhere else. (Malcolm & Houseman, 1985)

Today, however, this last bastion of place-community seems threatened by the prediction of widespread introduction of computers into the home. Futurists and forecasters envision an electronic community, with people seldom venturing out of their homes to work or socialize, but rather communicating through electronic bulletin boards and electronic mail, purchasing household goods from mail-order catalogs and on-line networks, and educating and entertaining themselves from a myriad of software programs. Social contact, they suggest, will depend less on face-to-face contact, or even wires and waves, and increasingly more upon a chip.

Similar concern was expressed with the introduction of television into the home as it reshaped the form of American housing and community:

Everything now can be done inside. We can be entertained in the coolness and privacy of our own homes. No need for neighbors. The family unit is now independent from Mankind except for the long wire that brings the amazing power from the electric company. (West, 1976, p. 47)

The grandfather of the electronic community image is futurist Alvin Toffler. In his 1980 bestseller, The Third Wave, he predicts an immense transition of people basing their work at home, leading to what he calls, the "home-centered society." This would result in greater community stability (people don’t have to move because of job transfers), better environmental quality (due to reduced transit), and a change in the service industry (e.g. he predicts a new group of small-scale computer stores and services would increase while the postal service would decrease).

From these new communities emerges the "electronic expanded family":

The work-at-home family of tomorrow inviting an outsider or two to join it--for example, a colleague from the husband's or wife's firm, or perhaps a customer or supplier engaged in related work, or, for that matter, a neighbor's child who wants to learn the trade. One can foresee the legal incorporation of such a family as a small business under special laws designed to foster the commune-cum-corporation of the cooperative. For many the household would become an electronic expanded family. (p. 221)

This electronic commune, economically-centered rather than place or emotively centered, he predicts, will be a workable, stable family form because of its foundation of economic sharing rather than psychological.
Toffler sees the possibility of place-community untenable in American society today with the present commuting and work structures. His enthusiasm for the electronic community, or what he calls telecommunity, anticipates a closer networking of individuals to each other. However, his focus is on a very small collective scale, and what he really advocates is little more than increased bonding among family members. He does suggest a proliferation of neighborhood restaurants, theaters, pubs, and clubs as a result of telecommuting but these seem incidental to his major focus.

All these futuristic visions are based on little more than personal exposure and preference. Such visions do not lend themselves to planning and policy decisions. Here questions are posed which address the nature of the neighborhood in the lives of professional homeworkers. The questions are:

What amenities and services of the immediate neighborhood are of increasing importance in the lives of homeworkers?

Are professional homeworkers more attached to their immediate neighborhood?

When working, are they attentive to activities happening in the neighborhood?

SERVICES AND AMBIENCE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Respondents rated the importance of having several listed neighborhood amenities, services, and characteristics in close proximity to the home (i.e. within a 15 minute walk). They also indicated whether each neighborhood characteristic had increased or decreased in its importance since working at home. For some respondents their latter response to changed importance was directed not only to the initiation of homework but also to incidents which coincided with this initiation, particularly the birth of a child. Appendix K lists the percentage of homeworkers desiring each amenity in their immediate neighborhood. More pertinent here are those services and amenities which increased in importance since working at home, as listed in Appendix L (and abbreviated on Table 15).
Table 15
Percentage of Homeworkers Expressing Increased Importance in Select Neighborhood Amenities Since Working at Home

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copy Center</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Supply Store</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful and Quiet</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant View</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy, Neighbors Leave You Alone</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient to Downtown</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Walking Conditions</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As expected, because of the changed location of work, proximity to facilities and services instrumental to the work tasks (i.e. copy center, post office, office supply shop, library) took on added importance. One fellow, a magazine writer, mentioned that before he started working at home he always wondered who on earth would use a copy center. Now he uses it daily. Another respondent said she wished the post office was right next door now. A public relations specialist is, according to her postal clerk, the best post office customer in her small rural town, especially for special services such as express mail and shipping of packages.

Convenience to downtown was important also, disconfirming speculation that the professional homework force will lead to migration to rural and non-metropolitan areas. At least for this sample, the nature of their work, and the current state of telecommunications usage, many homeworkers want to be close to downtown for legal and other services and also because they need to travel to visit clients or attend business meetings. Being close to downtown also makes it easier for the client to come to the home office when necessary.

Libraries also grew in importance. As one woman mentioned, proximity to the library used to be important for her children’s use. Now it has become a work-oriented service center for her, where she can get reference materials.

Domestic-related services such as fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and supermarkets also took on added importance. Convenience services are needed to adjust to the ever-present time crunch. Now one
does not stop on the way home from work to pick up a bucket of chicken. Rather a homeworker wants to stop working and head out from home to the neighborhood market or store or fast food restaurant.

Besides services, ambient neighborhood qualities were also more highly valued. Privacy from neighbors, peace and quiet, a pleasant outdoor view, and a place for a quiet walk were rated by more people as increasing in importance than many domestic-related services. Spending more time in their neighborhood, homeworkers want it pleasant. One woman mentioned it was important to have a quiet walk during the day for her "breaks" which she needed outside the home.

But also having the neighborhood project a professional image is important for professional homeworkers who have clients and business meetings in their homes. As one word processor said, "My street represents my business." One woman who did not have clients in her home expressed that since "clients know the address" the image they have of the location of her business was important. This was not always reflected in the questionnaire prestige item but also the item of "clean and unlittered." Professional homeworkers who have business meetings at home, compared to those who do not, express almost twice as much that prestige and clean/unlittered qualities have increased in importance since working at home (see Table 16).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With Business Meetings at Home</th>
<th>Without Business Meetings at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean &amp; Unlittered</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**EYES ON THE STREET OR ON THE SCREEN?**

The majority of professional homeworkers in this sample resided in five metropolitan areas. Homes were in places as diverse as a barn in the Wisconsin farmlands; high rise, multi-use buildings on Michigan Boulevard in Chicago; Southern California's version of the Italian hillside villa--homes overlooking the Pacific Ocean on the bluffs of Laguna Beach; and the ever-ubiquitous suburban ranch community in the
outskirts of Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Los Angeles, and Sacramento.

How attached were homeworkers to their neighborhoods? Perhaps no more or less than other residents, although we are unable to make such a comparison. Olson (1983a) reported that the relationship of homeworkers to their community had not been altered by the additional time spent at home. None became more involved in community activities although they did spend more time in leisure activities. However, her interviews did not specify whether or not those leisure activities were within the immediate neighborhood community.

A scale was developed from 4 questions addressing desire to be in the neighborhood, with 1 representing strong desire to spend time in the neighborhood, 9 weak. The average for this sample was 5.5 (see below).

\[
\begin{array}{c}
5.5 \\
1) strong \quad \checkmark \quad weak \ (9)
\end{array}
\]

*Desire to spend time in neighborhood*

The homeworkers did not display the attention hoped for by police departments and other community concerns. When asked whether or not they felt they recognized more of their neighbors, 70% replied that it had not changed; 27% said they did recognize more people.

Replying to a five-point scale of how attentive they were to neighborhood activities while working (see below), there was only moderate attention reported. Most people said they only attend to noisy activities.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
2.6 \\
1) never pay \quad \checkmark \quad always aware \ (5)
\end{array}
\]

*Attentiveness to street activities while working*
Similarly people felt they would be very unlikely to notice someone on the street while working (see below).

4.2

(1) very likely [ ] very unlikely (5)

Likeliness to notice person on street while working

Even though homeworkers thought they would be fairly likely to recognize a person on the street if seen (see below), still it was unlikely that they would even notice in the first place. One woman living in a ranch home said that a burglary had occurred two doors from her while she was working. She never knew anything about it until the police came. Another writer mentioned a burglary occurring on the same floor of the apartment building she lived in. Again this occurred while she was working but she did not hear or notice anything. A few people mentioned that when they notice a stranger on the street hanging around they go out and talk to that person.

2.5

(1) very likely [ ] very likely (5)

Likeliness to recognize person on street when noticed

The assumption that because people are in their homes working they will survey activities outside is fallacious. Such an assumption does not account for what people are doing and how they are doing it. Homeworkers are absorbed in their work. A few people mentioned having to discipline themselves to concentrate on their work and not be distracted. This concentration does not lend itself to glancing out the window, taking in neighborhood scenes. Some people did mention that when they took breaks from their work they would get up and move around the house, sometimes glancing out the window or going out to do yardwork. For the most part though, people concentrate on their work. Only if an unusual sound occurs or dogs are barking will people break from their work to look outside.

In addition people often work in the back of their homes, far from a front window. They may choose to work in the back to be away from the noise of a busy street, or because they want a view of landscaping in the backyard. Also many people use a spare bedroom as their workspace and these tend to be located in the rear of the home. Some people were using
their living rooms as workspaces. One might suspect that these rooms would be ideal situations for people to glance out the windows onto the street. But even in these cases, people typically kept the drapes closed. Exceptions were those people who were active members of neighborhood watch groups.

Computer technology decreases a person's likelihood of looking out the window. Glare is one of the most constant problems VDT (CRT) users face. Numerous people mentioned keeping blinds or drapes closed to reduce glare on the screen, thereby reducing the chances of seeing what is happening outside on the street.