

**Aboriginal Involvement in  
Community Development:  
The Case of Winnipeg's Spence  
Neighbourhood**

By Jim Silver

With Joan Hay and Peter Gorzen

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# Aboriginal Involvement in Community Development: The Case of Winnipeg's Spence Neighbourhood

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## Executive Summary

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The two central questions that we have attempted to find answers to in this study are: first, whether, to what extent, and in what ways the rapidly growing numbers of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner-city Spence neighbourhood are participating in community development initiatives; and second, how Aboriginal people themselves define community development, what they would like to see happening to improve Spence neighbourhood, and what they believe they and other Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood might contribute to neighbourhood revitalization.

To get answers to these questions we asked Aboriginal people themselves. We conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with 24 Aboriginal residents of Spence neighbourhood. All interviews and focus groups with Aboriginal respondents were conducted by Aboriginal interviewers who themselves live and work in, and thus are intimately familiar with, Spence neighbourhood. Consistent with the methods of participatory research, we worked closely with the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA), successfully seeking their permission to conduct the research and their advice about the project, and circulating a next-to-final draft of the paper to SNA staff and Board members for their comments, most of which were incorporated in the final draft.

We found that most Aboriginal people are not involved in the SNA—despite the SNA's efforts to secure their involvement—in part because they do not feel fully a part of the community. Aboriginal people's feeling of exclusion from the SNA is part of their broader sense of social exclusion from the dominant non-Aboriginal culture and its institutions. Their sense of social exclusion is reinforced by frequent instances of racism encountered in the neighbourhood generally and when trying to find local employment, and by their relatively disadvantaged housing status. They do not feel that their own, different culture is understood or appreciated by those in the dominant culture, and they resent the fact that little effort is made by most institutions of the dominant culture to learn about and accommodate Aboriginal ways of doing things.

In addition, Aboriginal people in Spence appear to be quite fragmented, even atomized. They appear not only to be disconnected from the SNA and other neighbourhood organizations, but also to

be largely disconnected from each other. Aboriginal people think of themselves as a community, but do not act as a community.

Most of those we interviewed, however, see the promotion of Aboriginal cultures as being an important part of any community development initiative in Spence neighbourhood. Most of those interviewed told us that they want more opportunities to practice and/or learn about their Aboriginal cultures. From a community development point of view this is an important finding, since culture can be an important means of bringing together Aboriginal people who are not now working together as a community. A community development approach that builds ways to celebrate the urban expression of Aboriginal cultures will promote the involvement of Aboriginal people, and the increased pride and self-esteem that comes with involvement in their cultures will build the foundation upon which Aboriginal people will be better able to engage with the dominant culture on the basis of mutual respect.

We conclude by advancing the view that this process can best be facilitated by the establishment of a Spence Aboriginal Residents Group, operating separately from but in affiliation with the SNA. We believe that the creation of an Aboriginal Residents Group in Spence will create the space in which Aboriginal residents of the neighbourhood can become involved, can identify their own issues, make their own decisions, and be in charge of their own affairs. The result, we believe, is likely to be a greater involvement by Aboriginal people, and a process of capacity building—the development of skills and self-confidence. Growing numbers of Aboriginal people with the skills and self-confidence to engage in community development is the first step in a process that we believe will ultimately lead to a greater sense of unity in the neighbourhood. In the longer run, Aboriginal people who have developed the habit of community involvement are much more likely to work with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in pursuit of common goals.

# Aboriginal Involvement in Community Development: The Case of Winnipeg's Spence Neighbourhood

By Jim Silver

With Joan Hay and Peter Gorzen

In this paper we report on the findings of a study of Aboriginal people's involvement in community development (CD) activities in a Winnipeg inner-city neighbourhood. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which and the ways in which Aboriginal people are involved in CD initiatives in Spence neighbourhood, and to identify both what Aboriginal people themselves believe to be useful forms of CD, and what they believe they and other Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood could contribute to the community's development.

By community development we mean the process by which people in a neighbourhood participate collectively in working to solve problems that they themselves have identified. As Wharf and Clague describe it: "Community development involves people (directly or through organizations) taking democratic control by participating in planning, bottom-up decision making, and community action" (Wharf and Clague, 1997, p.249). By 'development' we do not necessarily mean conventional development—for example, economic growth—but rather the collective undertaking of whatever tasks the com-

munity itself may identify. CD has often in the past been imposed upon communities from the outside, and driven by the paternalistic assumption that poverty and related problems are a function of cultural inferiority. Thus CD has often meant the attempt to replace traditional cultures with more dominant cultures. We use CD to mean people themselves identifying the problems that they want to solve, and the ways that they want to solve them, and we do not assume that this implies the adoption of the attributes of the dominant culture.

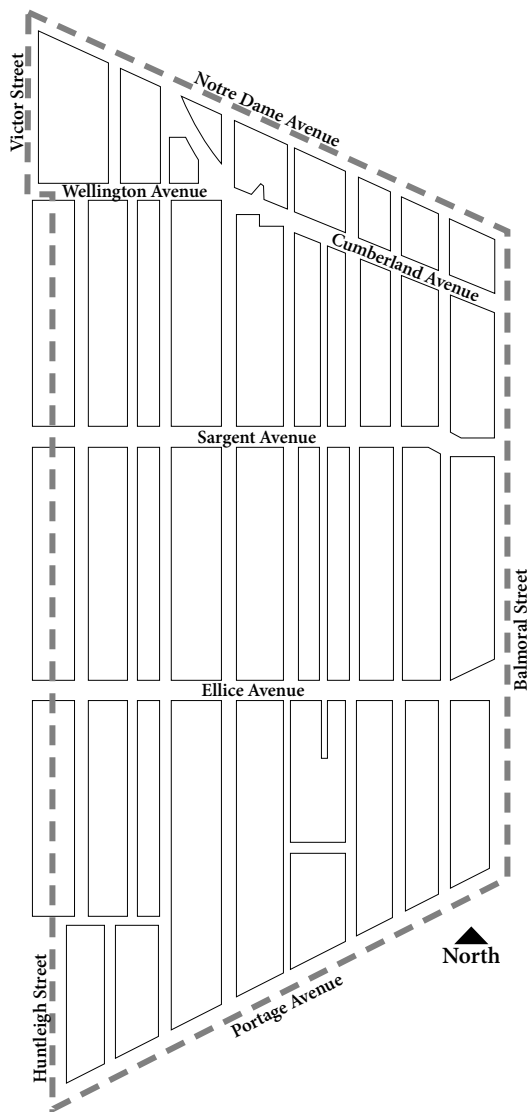
Our starting hypothesis for this study was that Aboriginal people would be less likely than non-Aboriginal people to be involved in CD initiatives, and that they would be likely to have a different conception of CD than the Spence Neighbourhood Association, which is an active and energetic neighbourhood association promoting and implementing various forms of CD in Spence. A distinctive feature of the study is that it is based for the most part on interviews with Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood, conducted by Aboriginal interviewers who themselves live and work in, and are intimately famil-

iar with, the neighbourhood.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Part One we describe the Spence neighbourhood, and the work of the Spence Neighbourhood Association. In Part Two we describe our method, and discuss some methodological considerations. In Part Three we describe our findings. And in Part Four we draw conclusions and make recommendations based on our findings.

#### SPENCE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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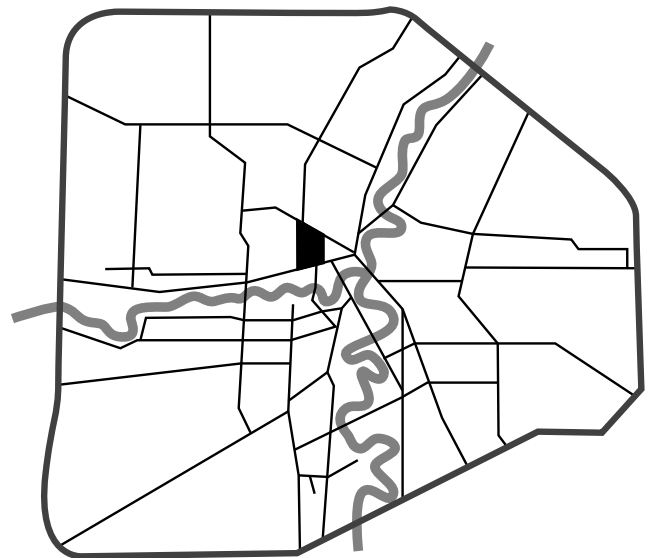


## Part One: Spence Neighbourhood

Spence neighbourhood is located in central Winnipeg in what is now considered to be part of Winnipeg's inner city. One way of describing Spence neighbourhood is to say that it is, by almost any measurement, one of Winnipeg's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The population of Spence has been in decline for at least 30 years—from 6230 in 1971 to 3941 in 1996 and 3750 in 2001; average property values dropped sharply in the 1990s—from \$44,100 in 1989 to \$30,200 in 1997; rates of residential mobility are double that of Winnipeg as a whole; the proportion of households living in rented as opposed to owner-occupied housing is double that for the city as a whole; the incidence of poverty, as measured by the proportion of households with incomes below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-Off, is three times the rate for Winnipeg as a whole; educational levels are, on

#### SPENCE NEIGHBOURHOOD IN WINNIPEG

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average, considerably lower than in Winnipeg as a whole (Spence Neighbourhood Council, 1998). A higher proportion of homes and buildings than in Winnipeg as a whole have been abandoned and boarded up—“...there are between 45 and 50 abandoned, boarded-up, vacant, or demolished dwellings and properties in the Spence neighbourhood, constituting nearly 9 percent of the homes” (Yauk and Janzen, 2002, p.1); prostitutes—some in their very early teens—work the streets of Spence neighbourhood; and street gangs are more active than in Winnipeg as a whole.

At the same time, energetic efforts are now underway, led by residents of the area, to re-build and revitalize Spence neighbourhood. Houses are being renovated; community gardens have sprouted in vacant lots; youth activities are run out of community centres; colourful murals brighten the sides of many buildings; and new lighting and fences can be seen throughout the neighbourhood. Partly as the result of these efforts, a survey of 57 residents in November, 2002, found that almost three in four (74%) plan to stay in Spence neighbourhood (Blake, 2003, p.16).

A key organization in promoting these changes is the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA). The origins of the SNA are in 1996/97, when residents and community groups who wanted to reverse the neighbourhood's decline organized neighbourhood cleanups and barbecues and soon moved to initiatives aimed at improving safety and security and renovating houses. Out of these efforts the Spence Neighbourhood Council—a coalition of individuals and fledging groups in the neighbourhood—emerged in early 1997. Several organizations spun off from the Council, one of them the SNA. The SNA has become a leader in efforts to revitalize Spence neighbourhood.

Central to the task of neighbourhood revitalization, as seen by the SNA, is the *active involvement* of people in the community. The SNA website (<http://www.spenceneighbourhood.com>) says, in its opening paragraph, that “Resident participation is the key to the approach of the organization”. This is a community development approach.

In many respects the organization has been successful in promoting participation. Neighbourhood meetings called to evaluate proposed community development projects are lively and well-attended (Silver, 2003); an active and imaginative youth program is run by the SNA (Keeper, April 22, 2003); a host of activities, especially for women and youth, are run out of the Magnus Eliason Recreation Centre (MERC), home of the SNA; and regular efforts are made to involve people in neighbourhood activities, especially by means of the door-to-door delivery of flyers to promote events.

Yet involvement by residents in the work of the SNA is a struggle. As Board President Danielle Davis puts it: “We try very, very hard to get the community involved, but it's usually always the same people” (Davis, April 16, 2003). Vice-President Sue McKenzie concurs, observing that people participate “to a very limited extent...it's one of the problems that we have” (McKenzie, April 15, 2003). When asked about the participation of Aboriginal people in SNA activities, both Davis and McKenzie offered the view that Aboriginal residents participated less than non-Aboriginal people, but that Aboriginal children are active in the youth programs, and Aboriginal mothers are active in the Mom's Support Circle program. Inonge Aliaga, Executive Director of the SNA, explains this by observing that Aboriginal people in Spence are struggling to survive and are fully occupied with family responsibilities, which is a higher priority

than neighbourhood renewal, and that Aboriginal people, like Spence residents generally, get involved when and where they see involvement as being beneficial to them.

The Aboriginal population in Spence is large and growing rapidly, as is the case in Winnipeg generally. In Winnipeg as a whole the Aboriginal population grew by almost 22% from 1996 to 2001 (Census of Canada data, supplied by Darrin Lezubski). In Spence, the Aboriginal population was the largest single identifiable group in 1991 and in 1996 (comparable data for 2001 are not yet available); the proportion of the total population that was Aboriginal was four times as large in Spence as in Winnipeg as a whole in 1996 (Census of Canada, 1996).

Historically, Spence neighbourhood has been an attractive location for recent immigrants to Winnipeg. At the turn of the century Sargent Avenue, one of the neighbourhood's commercial corridors, was known as "Icelandic Main Street". Later in the century the area was populated by Germans, then by Portuguese immigrants, and more recently by immigrants of Asian descent—Vietnamese, Filipino, and Chinese in particular. In recent years the Aboriginal population in Spence has grown rapidly—by 1991 Aboriginal people constituted the largest ethnic/national group in the neighbourhood.

The two central questions that we have wanted to find answers to with this study are: first, whether, to what extent, and in what ways the rapidly growing numbers of Aboriginal people in Spence are participating in CD initiatives; and second, how Aboriginal people themselves define CD, what they would like to see happening to improve Spence neighbourhood, and what they believe they and other Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood might contribute to neighbourhood revitalization.

## Part Two: Method

In various ways we sought to overcome the gap between those who are the researchers and those who are being researched. In late January, 2003, the lead author approached the Spence Neighbourhood Association seeking their approval for the research project. A summary of the project was submitted to the SNA Board, and the project was approved at a Board meeting attended by the author on March 11, 2003.

A meeting of a small group of Spence community people was organized for April 23, 2003, for the purpose of identifying Aboriginal people who live in and are knowledgeable about the Spence neighbourhood, and who would be good interviewers. The two interviewers were hired on this basis. It was considered to be essential that the interviews be conducted by Aboriginal people, in order to begin to overcome the cultural gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Winnipeg. We were cognitive of the advice advanced by Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet, and Bruyere, in discussing their own interview-based study of Aboriginal families in Winnipeg's north end:

"If researchers cannot create a relationship of mutuality, respect, and shared purpose with their subjects, then it is unlikely that they can acquire authentic information. In this study, then, it was considered highly important for Aboriginal cultural concerns to be investigated by Aboriginal persons themselves, and for them to determine appropriate methods" (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2003, p.8).

Consistent with the experience of Deane *et al*, and with the literature on participatory research—about which more below—it was decided to use open-ended interviews. The interviewers offered tobacco to interviewees as a sign of respect for Aboriginal cultural traditions and as an expression of appreciation for their contribution to the research project. Interviewers opened the interview by saying that they wanted to know something about whether and how the interviewee participated in neighbourhood activities in general, and the SNA in particular. Interviewers were instructed to allow interviewees to take the discussion in whatever direction they chose. However, an ‘aide-mémoire’—“not a questionnaire, but a topic guide that reminds researchers of the topics to cover with each informant” (Barnsley and Ellis, 1992, p.45)—was used. Our purpose was, as much as possible, to allow Aboriginal respondents to tell us whether and how they participated in the community, and to tell us how they would think of community development. We also asked interviewees—in a manner consistent with the philosophy of asset-based community development (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993)—what skills and abilities Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood, and they themselves, might have that could be used in the revitalization of Spence neighbourhood. This proved to be a fruitful question, generating valuable responses. This open-ended interview format was pre-tested in early May, some modifications were made, and then 24 interviews were conducted from May 11 to June 30, 2003. All interviews were tape recorded.

Interview subjects were selected on the basis of consultation with Aboriginal people familiar with and knowledgeable about the Spence neighbourhood. A list of names of potential interviewees was prepared at a May 6, 2003 meeting attended by the lead author, the interviewers,

Joan Hay and Peter Gorzen, and Erika Wiebe, editor of the community newspaper *West Central Streets* and long-time Spence community organizer. A preliminary list of 20 names was prepared—Aboriginal people living in Spence who, it was believed by those present, would have something useful to contribute to the project. Many on this initial list could not be located; some were not agreeable to being interviewed; six were interviewed. For the remaining 18, a quota sampling method was used. It was agreed that in total, we would interview equal numbers of women and men, in three age categories: youth (18-29 years), adult (30-59 years), and elder (60 or older), with at least five in each of the youth and elder categories. It was agreed that at least two of those interviewed would be homeowners as opposed to renters, and that those interviewed would include both long-time and new residents of Spence, and both people living alone and people living as part of a larger household. Hay and Gorzen used contacts established over many years of living and working in the neighbourhood—Hay has lived in Spence neighbourhood for 18 years, Gorzen for seven years, and both currently work in the neighbourhood—to identify the quota of interviewees for each category.

The characteristics of the 24 Aboriginal Spence residents interviewed are as follows. We interviewed 12 women and 12 men. Seven were 20-29 years of age; 11 were 30-59 years; and six were 60 years of age or older. Nine self-identified as Ojibwa or Saulteaux, seven as Cree, seven as Métis, and one as Oji-Cree. In terms of educational attainment, 10 of the 24 have completed grade 12, and of these, four have at least some post-secondary education, including one who has been a qualified teacher, but who has not taught for many years. Six have completed grades 10 or 11, five have completed grades 8 or 9, and three—all in their 70s or 80s—have less than

grade 8. 10 of the 24 are currently employed, five used to be employed and are now retired, two are on disability leave, and four are women at home with children. The remaining three are unemployed or are not in the labour force. Four of our interviewees have lived less than a year in Spence, five have lived from one to two years in Spence, eight have lived between three and 10 years in Spence, and seven have lived more than 10 years in the neighbourhood, including six—or 25% of those interviewed—who have lived in Spence for more than 20 years. This may be consistent with the observations of Ian Skelton who, in a recent study of residential mobility of Aboriginal single mothers in Winnipeg's north end, found that while Aboriginal single mothers may move back and forth between the city and their rural/northern home communities, and may change city addresses relatively frequently, they tend to stay in one particular area of the city (Skelton, 2002, pp.138-140).

In addition to the 24 interviews with Aboriginal people in Spence, the lead author interviewed six Board members and staff of the Spence Neighbourhood Association, including the Executive Director, and interviewed both Hay and Gorzen in their roles as long-time Spence neighbourhood residents. Two focus groups were held in June in which a total of eight people who had previously been interviewed participated.

In recent years a good deal has been written about the difficulties inherent in conducting research across cultural divides. We chose to follow that stream of the literature which argues in favour of using a participatory form of research. Participatory research seeks to involve the local community in the research project to the extent possible in the hope of overcoming, at least to some extent, the gap between those who are doing the research and those who are the objects

of the research. Hiring Aboriginal interviewers who live and work in the neighbourhood is a part of our attempt at participatory research, as are the meetings and consultation with the Spence Neighbourhood Association and other community members, and the circulation of a next-to-final draft of the paper to SNA staff and Board members for their comments.

In October, 2003, a draft of this paper was circulated to members of the SNA Board and some staff for their comments, and they were invited to a meeting to provide the authors with their responses to and suggestions regarding the draft paper. Seven people attended the meeting on October 21, 2003, and most of their suggestions were incorporated in the final draft of the paper.

Most importantly, perhaps, some members of the SNA Board expressed to us their uneasiness and their disappointment with what they read as criticism of the SNA Board and staff for our observations about the relative lack of involvement by Aboriginal people in the SNA. We offered the view that while there are things that the SNA might do differently to encourage the involvement of Aboriginal people, the problem has less to do with the specific actions of the SNA than with broader societal and historical forces—the long-term impact of colonialism in particular—which have created the feeling, and the reality, of social exclusion for many Aboriginal people. The relative lack of involvement of Aboriginal people in the SNA reflects the relative lack of involvement by Aboriginal people in most of the institutions of the dominant culture. Indeed, if anything, the SNA has done more than most institutions to seek to include Aboriginal people: three of seven and one-half SNA staff positions are filled by Aboriginal people, and all three of these are full-time positions; and four of 11 Board members are Aboriginal. The SNA is an effective and energetic community develop-

ment organization, making significant efforts to be inclusive, especially as regards Aboriginal people. That Aboriginal people, based on our interviews, are nevertheless relatively uninvolved in the SNA suggests that the roots of their social exclusion are broader in character.

The use of an open-ended interview format is also consistent with participatory research. The Women's Research Centre in Vancouver, describing "participatory action research for community groups", observed that:

"The questions we ask are usually open-ended. They encourage people to talk about their lives and concerns....It's the down-to-earth questions that let people tell their stories. Asking too many questions makes people divide up their experience. Then it's easy for researchers to lose the full picture in its complexity" (Barnsley and Ellis, 1992, pp. 14 and 17).

In a discussion of oral history methodology, David Lance makes a similar argument: "...questionnaires have not been found suitable....Partly this is because no questionnaire is sufficiently flexible to accommodate, in itself, the unexpected and valuable twists and turns..." that arise from allowing the interviewee to address what s/he considers to be important (Lance, 1984, p.120). What is more, the use of an open-ended approach is consistent with the important observation that, at the outset, "...researchers rarely know the most important issues or questions..." (Skelton, 2002, p.132). To make use of a survey-style questionnaire would require determining *a priori* what the most important questions and issues are. Using an open-ended interview format allows the interviewee to decide what is more and what is less important.

This approach is consistent with recent devel-

opments in anthropology which argue that what is important is to attempt to see what the interviewee actually experiences. The Women's Research Centre observes that in participatory research "the focus is on learning about how people actually experience the specific issue or problem" (Barnsley and Ellis, 1992, p.9). This is in contrast to the traditional anthropological approach which is predicated upon a researcher observing, from the outside, a culture that is different from hers or his, and then creating a narrative about that culture based on those observations. "The predominant metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside-looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, 'reading', a given reality" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986, p.25). The gap across cultures cannot be wholly bridged, and the picture that emerges from such research is both partial and, to some extent, fictional. In the past 15 years, critics from those cultures studied by ethnographers and anthropologists have "...turned around the anthropological mirror, questioning the way they had been represented by outsiders and offering their own, more complex...representations..." (Behar, 1996, p.162). In an insightful study of the residential mobility of Aboriginal single mothers in Winnipeg, Skelton demonstrates that the interpretation of their behaviour when viewed through the lens of the dominant culture is different from the interpretation that arises from interviewing and listening to the women themselves (Skelton, 2002). As Mintz argues, "The culture's internal perceptions of a specific activity's meaning are thus more useful than an external appraisal" (Mintz, 1984, p.306; see also Barroe, 1975). Thus our attempts to develop the culture's internal perceptions of Aboriginal people's neighbourhood involvement, by asking Aboriginal people them-

selves, and by having Aboriginal people do the asking.

The same logic applies to our consideration of community development. What is 'community development'? Do Aboriginal people living in Spence neighbourhood have the same views of what CD may be as does the Spence Neighbourhood Association? The way to find out is to ask Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood. Doing so is consistent with much literature on 'development' more generally. "Development begins with listening to the people" (Fernandez and Tandon, 1981, p.3); "It is essential that the aspirations and opinions of people subject to the processes of development or non-development be taken seriously..." (Wallman, 1997, p.249). Those who are the poor ought to be involved in the design and implementation of development initiatives, although this is often not the case. This is consistent with the view that "...there can be no social change to the benefit of low-income communities if the poor do not participate in designing, managing and realizing that process of change" (Patel and Mitlin, 2002, p.128). As Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, p.5) argue: "...all the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. This observation explains why communities are never built from the top down, or from the outside in". It follows that CD in Spence neighbourhood has to include the people of the community, including the large and growing numbers of Aboriginal people in the community, and since "development begins with listening to the people", we sought to determine, by asking them, what Aboriginal people consider CD to be.

## Part Three: Findings

### Involvement With the Spence Neighbourhood Association

Of the 24 people interviewed, only one is involved with the Spence Neighbourhood Association. Many had not heard of the SNA; some had heard of it but knew nothing about what the organization does; and many said they have seen very little advertising about the SNA (See sidebar).

There are some simple practical reasons for this lack of knowledge of and involvement with the SNA. The organization promotes its activities primarily by means of flyers delivered door to door. However, they are unable to get into most apartment blocks and rooming houses because the front doors are locked, and most Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood are renters living in apartment blocks or rooming houses. In some cases Aboriginal residents are not involved for

#### **Involvement in and Knowledge of the Spence Neighbourhood Association**

\* "...I don't know what that Spence Association is..."

\* "I've never heard of it".

\* "I know very little about it. I know that it's a community organization but I'm not certain exactly what it's all about...I don't even know where it's located".

\* "In the past five years, I've only seen maybe a couple of posters up for meetings or events held by SNA".

\* "...not enough advertising. I've never seen signs or stuff like that about it".

\* *“I got too much to do, I can’t spare any extra time. I have eight kids so all my time is here with them”.*

\* *“Not any more...because I’m working all the time”.*

\* *“I tried to become involved last year when I first moved into the area and then I ended up finding other work”.*

reasons identical to those that keep most people from being involved: they are too busy (See sidebar). As described above, Board members of the SNA confirmed that getting neighbourhood residents involved—whether Aboriginal or not—is always a concern.

However, some of the people interviewed said that they were not involved with the SNA because they had never been personally invited to be involved, and they considered anything other than a personal invitation not to be an invitation. (See sidebar).

We think that the comments about the absence of a personal invitation lead us into a deeper understanding of the relative absence of Aboriginal involvement in the SNA. Our interviews have led us to believe that Aboriginal people feel disconnected from, excluded from, the dominant culture, and thus are hesitant to approach and to get involved with the institutions of the dominant culture. They see the SNA—rightly or wrongly—as a typical dominant-culture institution. And they do not believe that they are welcome in such institutions, or in the city generally. One senior Aboriginal Spence resident, who has lived in the neighbourhood off and on for 25 years, put it this way:

“To me, I think, most of our people they come here, don’t really feel part of the

community. Right away, new Canadians come in and they get an awful lot of ‘welcome wagon’ treatment, you know, they get an awful lot of help, they get guides, they get mentors, they get people who are willing to even take them shopping, it doesn’t matter if they speak the language or not, they have people who are taking them around and yet a lot of new Canadians come from urban areas and they’re used to urban areas. Our people come from [non-urban areas] and yet when our people come here there’s nobody to show them around, there’s nobody to say ‘hey, you’re welcome’. I’ve never heard of an Aboriginal being met by the welcome wagon yet, you know, I’ve heard of the welcome wagon, I’ve never heard of anybody getting a welcome

\* *“First of all, I was never extended a personal invitation, and second of all it’s hard to find out information as to when the meetings are....If somebody made the personal contact to say this is what we’re doing, this is what we need you for, you know, things like that...putting out posters is not really communicating...”.*

\* *“Although they do have their monthly newsletter delivered and it does tell you about upcoming meetings and stuff like that, maybe some people want a more in-person type of invitation...personal invitation”.*

\* *“Sure you see a poster now and then, about a meeting, but stuff like that doesn’t really work, eh?...to know that you’re welcome, to know that you’re being asked, you know, I don’t necessarily say that you should have your hand held to go to those places, but, just posters don’t really mean anything”.*

wagon visit—an Aboriginal, you know, that's not racist, it's just the truth, and when we come here...a lot of people they land here with no job, nothing, they come in with hope, but there's nothing for them, there's nothing, compared to the new Canadian...".\*

Another respondent, when asked at a focus group meeting why so few of the Aboriginal people interviewed are involved with the SNA said the following:

"I think most of it is not feeling comfortable, or not trusting....I think it's just part of not feeling that you're listened to or looked at different or just the usual racist feeling....that when you are surrounded, or outnumbered, by the other community members that are non-Aboriginal you sort of feel intimidated."

Another participant in the focus group responded to this by describing his feelings about participating in an annual community festival in his Ontario home town, a non-Aboriginal centre:

"I never felt comfortable going there

because of the fact that I was Native and the stereotype was, you know, drunken Indians, you were looked down upon shamefully for being drunk and not getting a job...that stigma, I think...why Native people feel that way."

A young woman at the focus group added the following:

"...a lot of people put down the Aboriginal people and say, oh, you're not going to do it, you're just going to go back to drinking and all that and that's what a lot of people do to Aboriginal people and that's why a lot of Aboriginal people don't go to these programs because they have no self-esteem...because of all of these other people putting them down all the time. There is a lot of discrimination in this area, for jobs...you can tell, just the way they look at you, the way they treat you and everything."

A young woman who had made an earlier effort to join the SNA described the perceived gap between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and in so doing revealed the social class component of the gap, when she said:

"A couple of my friends were talking about that the other day, how they feel, I guess, intimidated by, I don't know, non-Aboriginals, you know, like, even to job interviews and stuff like that, you know, and like even how I felt last year when I tried to join them....I felt low class, because there was no other Aboriginals in there and they just seemed all, older, married, you know, living 'decent' lives."

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\* This view is supported by the findings of a recent Canada West Foundation study:

"Although the transition from rural and reserve areas to a major city can be much like immigrating to Canada from another country, the Government of Canada does not fund urban transition programs for Aboriginal people nearly to the extent that it funds transition programs for recent immigrants to Canada. Urban Aboriginal transition programs receive less than five cents for every dollar spent on immigrant settlement and transition" (Hanselman, 2003, p.5).



This feeling is consistent with what we know about non-Aboriginal attitudes to Aboriginal people in Canadian towns in recent decades: there has been no place for Aboriginal people in such communities, there has been “intense hostility” directed by townspeople at Aboriginal residents and visitors (Peters, 2002, p.56). Aboriginal people have responded to this hostility, to this social exclusion, by withdrawing. Lithman found that Aboriginal community members in a well-known rural Manitoba Aboriginal community did not become involved in non-Aboriginal organizations or opportunities in order to avoid “...the indignities of most interactions with white men” (Lithman, 1983, p.58. See also, among many such examples: Brody, 1971, p.71; Comeau and Santin, 1990, pp. 39 and 47; Dunning, 1959, p.172; Stymeist, 1975, especially pp.68-75). The same is the case in larger urban centres. Deane, Morrisette, Bousquet and Bruyere, in a recent study, observed that Aboriginal people in the William Whyte neighbourhood in Winnipeg’s North End often “...withdrew to avoid interactions based on values that were incompatible with, or perhaps even offensive to, their own value orientation” (Deane et al, 2002, p.16).

This social exclusion is worsened by racism. Instances of racism in the neighbourhood are common. One young woman described walking with three female friends on one of the main streets in the neighbourhood early in the evening:

“There was me and three of my friends out for a walk. This was just over here, and we were crossing the street and this car drove by and he said, ‘Hey, you fucking Indian’, you know, and it was just like, that hurt! You know, like...it really, really bothered me.”

Another respondent, a young man, independently related a similar story: “...a bunch of my friends, we were just walking...a bunch of people in a car started yelling at them calling them sniffers and drunks and everything...”. One of the older men described an incident in the neighbourhood in which an Aboriginal couple were leaving their apartment to go to an evening social event and were dressed formally for the occasion. The man went around the corner to hail a cab, and while he was gone the police confronted his wife on the suspicion that she was a hooker. Several respondents reported incidents of racism related to jobs—we will refer to these in a later section. Such incidents serve to confirm and to reinforce the social exclusion that is felt by many Aboriginal people.

Many others mentioned, in various ways, this sense of social exclusion. One referred to the largely non-Aboriginal character of the SNA as “...a bunch of White people that don’t really know...they don’t really know how it is inside the Aboriginal person’s spirit, you know...”. Another said: “...some people say that they feel, like, isolated, they don’t feel part of the community”. Another added: “The gap is so vast”. A young man who attended some SNA Board meetings found the formal process very alienating: “...at the Board level, even when I would come to meetings I would find that they were talking around me, like I wasn’t there”. He added that there were very few Aboriginal people there and “...after bumping my head there a few times I didn’t want to go there anymore...I didn’t feel comfortable”. Yet another, after revealing that “*some* people seem to have the idea that it [the SNA] is kind of elitist in its own way”, offered the view that “I would welcome the opportunity to be treated like part of the group rather than an outsider”.

The feeling of being an outsider, of not being

part of the community, may be at least partly attributable to the very different sense of community that prevails in the city compared to most reserves. One respondent said:

“Growing up on the reserve, there was a community feeling there that I don’t feel here. Sure you know a lot of people, you meet a lot of people, you see them every day going down the street, you say ‘hi’, but being in a community like on the reserve you’re basically welcome in a lot of places, you know, you go visit your relatives, your grandmother, or whatever, or your friends, you know...that to me was community, but, not like here.”

By this description, life on the reserves is lived in a more intimate, face-to-face fashion than life in the city. On most reserves, everybody knows everybody else, and knows their family background, and many are related. Social interaction is frequent. In the city, by contrast, associations are more fleeting, there is a greater degree of isolation, of anomie and alienation, which adds to feelings of social exclusion.

The fact that most Aboriginal people are renters—all but three of the 24 people interviewed are renters—also sets them apart. When a participant in one of the focus groups expressed his desire to own one of the renovated SNA houses, another responded by saying: “Yeah, of course, because what you have then is you have a place that’s permanent, you’re not a stranger, you’re now part of the community, this is yours...”. The point of this discussion was that Aboriginal people are not involved with the SNA because they do not feel part of the community, and they do not feel part of the community, at least in part, because they are renters, they live in apartments and rooming houses which are often very run

down and poorly maintained, and they have to move frequently. They are marginalized by their housing status. If a plan were created to enable Aboriginal people who want to stay in the neighbourhood to become homeowners, then they would feel more a part of the community and would be more likely to become involved.

A senior member of the Spence Aboriginal community, resident in Spence neighbourhood for many years, said: “I don’t know what the Spence Neighbourhood Association is doing, because we’re not part of it, are we?” He offered the view that:

“...perhaps if you went to the Thunderbird House or the Aboriginal group there on Higgins [the Aboriginal Centre] and the leaders in Spence [Neighbourhood Association] if they went there and were willing to sit and listen to the Native leaders there, you see, because we have a lot to teach but the thing is basically most of us here are unemployed and nobody wants to listen to an unemployed Indian, let’s face it, and if you [the SNA] went to some of our leaders and listened and learned and came back with a little, you know, I hate to use the word sensitivity, it’s such a buzzword [laughter] but that would work, and then you’d come back and not only would you identify with us but you’d be immediately putting us to work.”

This is an expression of the frustration that arises not only because Aboriginal people do not feel fully a part of the community, but also because they know that in order for them to become a part of the community it is they, the Aboriginal people, who have to change, to become more like non-Aboriginal people, rather than non-Aboriginal people having any obligation to learn

about and accommodate Aboriginal culture. They are saying, let non-Aboriginal people show enough interest to learn about us, just as we have to learn about them, and this too will facilitate our involvement in the community.

We conclude that most Aboriginal people are not involved in the SNA—despite the SNA’s efforts to secure their involvement—in part because they do not feel fully a part of the community, they feel excluded from the dominant culture and its institutions. Their sense of social exclusion is reinforced by frequent instances of racism, and by their relatively disadvantaged housing status. They do not feel that their own, different culture is understood or appreciated by those in the dominant culture, and they resent the fact that little effort is made by most institutions of the dominant culture to learn about and accommodate Aboriginal ways of doing things.

Given this, a flyer in the mailbox is not enough to induce most Aboriginal people to attend a Spence Neighbourhood Association function. A personal, face-to-face invitation would, however, be seen as an attempt to reach out to Aboriginal people, to listen to what they have to say, and perhaps to begin to bridge the cultural gap.

## **Community Development in Spence: An Aboriginal View**

We asked the Aboriginal people that we interviewed: “how important is Aboriginal culture to you?” We got a variety of answers. We concluded from what we were told that the promotion of Aboriginal cultures is a necessary step in an Aboriginal-driven community development strategy in Spence neighbourhood.

Some Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood are very knowledgeable about their

culture and they practise it regularly and want more opportunities for cultural involvement. For example, one woman said: “Oh, very much so, very much so. I speak my language, and I do go to sweats....Within my household I do smudge, I do pray”. Another woman replied that she considers herself to be spiritual, and that her culture is “very important, very, very important” to her. She described taking her children to pow wows and dancing lessons at the Indian Métis Friendship Centre when they were young, putting her oldest son in Children of the Earth, Winnipeg’s Aboriginal high school, and said proudly that: “...now I’m working on my grandchildren”. She added that what should be done in the neighbourhood is: “More spiritual components, if there was an elder, we could have sweats and healing circles and things like that, I’d *really* be interested in that”.

Most of the people that we interviewed have fragments of their Aboriginal culture, and want to know more. One 33 year old man, for example, said that: “I’ve been to...various pow wows...and I’m still not certain about the full names of the dances...”, but he added that, “I’m now finding in the last two years that I actually have a craving and a desire to find out more about my cultural past”. A young man said that he does not now go to traditional ceremonies. “No, I haven’t done anything with that since I was a kid, when I was staying on the reserve”, but “yeah, if they had something like that out here it would be good. I heard there’s things like that at Thunderbird House”. A young woman in her early twenties, who used to be but is no longer involved with gangs, said:

“I think ceremonies are important, like, I want to get involved with it more because I never grew up that way, I never grew up in that kind of way, when I was 15 that’s

when I started getting involved with it [Aboriginal culture]...”

She added that:

“I think there should be more community centres too out here like in this neighbourhood, and maybe get some elders in here to talk to some of these youth...get some sweat lodges going on in this area, so some of the youth could try to heal themselves too, and hopefully get out of the gangs that they’re in and the involvements that they’re doing, like drinking and drugs, getting them into trouble...”

Another respondent added that “I know a lot of people have interest in it [Aboriginal cultures] but they don’t know where to go to learn about it...and find out about spirituality and traditional ways”. As one of the co-authors said in an evaluation session: “My feeling is that a lot of them have only bits and pieces that they’ve picked up through their parents or relatives...and I think that’s why that interest is there”. Some people are anxious for their children to learn about their culture. One young woman with two daughters said: “What about following traditional ways? I’ve just started learning about these and they’re really interesting...I’d even get my daughters to participate, like say in learning how to dance, the pow wows and that, like, jingle dancing”. A man with two young daughters said: “Yeah, it’s important, our culture, because our language is disappearing”. He and his wife try to teach the daughters their language, “...but they find it funny, the way it sounds”. Nevertheless, he continues to believe that “...it’s important for our girls...”, and he is heartened that they have shown a real interest in jingle dancing.

Some of those we interviewed first told us

that they were neither involved with nor interested in Aboriginal cultures, but then made comments that made it clear that they are not at all distantly removed from their culture. One woman said: “...I’m not a traditional person, I wasn’t brought up that way”, but when asked if she would attend if traditional ceremonies like pow wows were held in the neighbourhood she said “yes, I would attend that. That would be...something nice to see, like, I’ve seen it before...when I was younger...I’ve seen a lot of it back home. But that would be something nice to see”. An older man long resident in the neighbourhood said “I’ve never been brought up in my culture, I’ve never really practised it”, and then added that he goes to pow wows and believes more such opportunities would be a positive thing. A very young woman said: “I don’t really bother with it, I’m not into my culture”, but added: “I’ve been to pow wows, I like those...”. A woman who is a Christian, when asked about her involvement with Aboriginal cultural events, said: “No, I’ve never been involved in that...I’m a Christian, I’m a Pentecostal”, but quickly added “...well, my father was, at one time he was involved in the Sun Dance...”, and she added that although she does not use it, she has a Spirit Name and she told us her Spirit Name in Ojibwa. In short, even for those most minimally involved with and least interested in their Aboriginal culture, there is still a connection to their culture through parents and/or home communities, and in many although not all of these cases, there is at least a vague interest, and in most cases a very keen interest, in participating in Aboriginal cultural activities.

From a community development point of view, this is an important finding, since culture can be a means of bringing Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood together. At the moment, as will be described at more length later,

Aboriginal people in Spence are quite separated one from the other. Although they think of themselves as a community, *vis-à-vis* non-Aboriginal people, they do not act as a community. They are fragmented, and in fact quite atomized. The promotion of Aboriginal cultural activities may be a way to begin to build community, and to re-create a positive sense of identity.

Many of those we interviewed are fully aware of the importance of Aboriginal cultures in healing Aboriginal people and in re-vitalizing the Aboriginal community. One man described the role of culture in shaping individual identity by saying:

“Neighbours come and go, people come and go, the people you pass on the street come and go, that’s life, you’re going to meet people and pass them on the street, but that does not take away from who you are as a person, and that is very important because if you lose that then there really is no point in living because you’ve lost who you are as a person and so it doesn’t matter who you are, whether you’re rich, poor, white, black, always maintain your culture...”

He added that after 100 years of attempted assimilation, “...now it’s time for us to take that back and to regain our lost customs and traditions...”. Another young man, after saying [speaking in the third person] that “...a lot of these people don’t really...believe in themselves, so, that’s sad but...[that’s] how we got into a bunch of, like, drugs, alcoholism and what not”, said about the promotion of Aboriginal cultures that:

“I think it’s important because with it comes a sense of pride, a sense of pride as being Anishinabe. I think it’s a key to

changing the perception of Native people, it’s the solution for the stigma that Native people as a whole...have, that low self-esteem, that are affected by the colonialism and alcoholism, would be a way out for them, to heal, not only to heal but to teach their children, ultimately the next generations, a sense of pride. It’s very important, very important.”

Another young man added, about the promotion of Aboriginal cultures, that:

“It’s pretty important due to the fact that there was times before like I heard people putting down my culture and stuff but in a way I wasn’t too involved with it when I was younger because when I was growing up I grew up in a White community pretty much all my life until I began to live more in the inner city and I began to see how everyone was treated...”

Urban Aboriginal people have not lost their cultures. There are urban Aboriginal cultures, but for historical reasons they are fragmented, complex. Leroy Little Bear has described this well:

“Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview—but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Their consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand. Many collective views of the world competed for

control of their behaviour, and since none was dominant modern Aboriginal people had to make guesses or choices about everything. Aboriginal consciousness became a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing desires and values” (Little Bear, 2000, p.22).

However fragmented and complex they may be, Aboriginal cultures are still crucially important to urban Aboriginal people. Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, based on their recent study of Aboriginal people in the William Whyte neighbourhood in Winnipeg’s North End, put it this way:

“As this research has shown, Aboriginal culture still exerts a powerful influence on inner city Aboriginal residents. Years of colonization, impoverishment, and immersion in the mainstream life have not erased its relevance. Aboriginal culture may be a collage of jigsaw puzzle fragments, it may be an amalgam of traditional values, mainstream adaptations, and inner city survival skills, but urban Aboriginal culture is nevertheless recognizable to those who share it, and powerful in its normative influence” (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2002, p.25).

Yet at the same time, a century and more of the denigration of Aboriginal cultures has taken its toll. As one of the co-authors, speaking in an evaluation session, said: “...I think that our whole culture is, like, totally fragmented and in a lot of ways people have lost their culture and probably sometimes people are grieving and they don’t even realize what’s going on, why they’re involved in addictions and just have lost their way because

there’s a part of your soul that’s missing, which is probably the spiritual part...”

It is this complex cultural reality that can, and we believe must, be built upon to pull together and strengthen Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood. Aboriginal people have told us that they want more opportunities to experience and to practise their cultures. Many want to learn more about their cultures, and want more opportunities for their children to learn their cultures. This, we believe, is an important part of the basis of an Aboriginal community development strategy.

## **Social Capital and Aboriginal Cultures**

A way of thinking about this is to connect it to the literature on social capital. One respondent said about the promotion of Aboriginal cultural activities in Spence neighbourhood: “I think that’s...a way for people to connect”. This is what social capital is about. Although there are many definitions of social capital in the literature, the idea of establishing connections, of building networks, is a common theme. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines social capital as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups” (National Statistics, 2001, p.8). Robert Putnam, the scholar most closely associated with the concept of social capital, has written that “...the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value” (Putnam, 2000, p.19), and more recently that “The central idea of social capital, in my view, is that networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value” (Putnam, 2001, p.1). Their value is that social capital is strongly associated with lower crime rates,

reduced levels of violence, improved child welfare, better health, better educational outcomes, improved economic performance and greater income equality (Putnam, 2001, pp.12-16).

But in Spence neighbourhood, our interviews suggest strongly an absence of connections and networks in the Aboriginal community. In fact, our evidence leads us to believe that the Aboriginal community is disconnected, disjointed, and fragmented at the community level.

First, Aboriginal people appear to be disconnected from each other. Many keep very much to themselves. One woman told us that “I really don’t talk to too many people, I just kind of stay to myself here. My kids are my biggest priority, and that’s who I deal with and I don’t bother with anybody else”. An older woman who has raised her family in the neighbourhood over the past 20 years said: “I never bother anybody, the only one I talk to here on this street is these people next door here, maybe every once in a while just say hi...”. Her husband concurred: “For all these years I’ve been in here, I’ve never bothered nobody. Nobody bothers me, I don’t bother nobody”. For some Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood, this has to do with fears about crime and safety. At a focus group meeting one participant, who has kept very much to himself over the past eight years that he has lived in Spence except for going to and from work in the neighbourhood, said that he is “...scared because [of] everything that happens around here. You’ve got to be cautious who you talk to...”. A second focus group participant replied to that by saying: “...with that kind of thinking, with that kind of attitude, there is no community, like the community I knew when I was growing up on the reserve”. At this particular focus group, three men were present. They had spent 25 years, eight years and seven years in Spence neighbourhood. They live close to each other. They had never before met.

Second, Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood are, for the most part, not involved in the Spence Neighbourhood Association or other community organizations. Only one of the 24 Aboriginal residents of Spence neighbourhood that we interviewed is involved with the SNA. Only four said that they were involved with any other community organization in the neighbourhood, and a large majority told us that they know of no other Aboriginal people involved in the SNA or any other community organization in Spence. Based on our interview evidence, we believe that the Aboriginal community in Spence is quite atomized.

Third, there appears to be little connection, little networking, across neighbourhoods. We spoke with the executive of the West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group, which formed in February 2002 in an adjacent inner-city neighbourhood. They told us that they would be very pleased if there were to be a Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association, or a Spence Aboriginal Residents Group. Jo-Anne Spence, President of the West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group, told us that they would hope such a group would “...work collaboratively with us and network, like, I see networking as a key factor for Aboriginal people no matter what community you go to so it’s networking and sharing ideas and stuff like that”. This would, by definition, build social capital, with all the benefits that follow from the accumulation of social capital. Little of that now happens across neighbourhoods, although it is possible to imagine a network of Aboriginal community organizations forming in Winnipeg, meeting regularly, sharing ideas and cooperating on projects, and even working with and learning from similar neighbourhood organizations in other urban centres, as has been done in other parts of the world. A recent study of such exchanges involving

women's community organizations in India and Africa argues that: "The exchange process is powerful in creating skills. First, community members quickly believe that they can do it. When they see professionals undertaking an activity, they may be sceptical about how easily they might take it over. When they see another community member doing it, they know it is possible" (Patel and Mitlin, 2002, p.132). This cannot even begin to happen as long as Aboriginal people are as atomized as our evidence suggests that they currently are in Spence neighbourhood.

Our evidence suggests that there is relatively little social capital, in the form of connections between and networking among members of the Aboriginal community, in Spence neighbourhood. Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood are little connected with each other, little connected with the SNA or other neighbourhood organizations, and consequently are not networking with Aboriginal organizations that do or might exist in other neighbourhoods. The benefits that are strongly associated with social capital are not being realized in Spence neighbourhood. This is an area where great gains could be made.

## **Building Social Capital by Promoting Aboriginal Cultures**

There is evidence that Aboriginal people in Spence could be brought together, and social capital could be created, by developing more opportunities to learn about and practise Aboriginal cultures in Spence neighbourhood. Our interviews, as shown above, provide strong evidence that there is a great deal of interest in the Aboriginal community in doing this. Aboriginal cultural activities would connect Aboriginal people with each other, and would promote pride and self-esteem.

This has been found to be the case elsewhere. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, there are numerous cases where "...relatively small amounts of money invested in a people's expressive culture served to promote their social cohesion and enhance their self-respect" (Kleymeyer, 1994, p.xv). People desire to maintain their cultures because:

"...it is through them that they make sense of the world and have a sense of themselves. We know that when people are forced to give up their culture, or when they give it up too rapidly, the consequences are normally social breakdown accompanied by personal disorientation and despair. The attachment of people to their culture corresponds, then, to a fundamental human need. That is why development programs that build on cultural traditions are likely to be the most successful" (Kleymeyer, 1994, p.xiv).

In Canada, personal disorientation and despair have certainly been the consequence of more than a century of attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture—via residential schools, the Indian Act and Indian Agents, and the outlawing of Aboriginal cultural and spiritual beliefs (Silver and Mallett, 2002, pp.32-41). Despite this onslaught, many Aboriginal people have clung tenaciously to their culture, although in many cases, as described earlier by Little Bear, and by Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, in a partial, complex and fragmented form. And there is, as seen above, a desire on the part of many Aboriginal people to learn more about their traditional cultures.

There is a growing belief among Aboriginal people that this desire is the basis upon which to re-build Aboriginal communities. The Royal



Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Round Table on Aboriginal Urban Issues, held in June, 1992, listed the following as the first of the themes that emerged at the Round Table: "the survival of Aboriginal identity in an environment that is usually indifferent and often hostile to Aboriginal people" (Canada, 1993, p.2). Cultural concerns were raised over and over again at the Round Table:

\*"Young people growing up in the city ask: 'Where can I go to learn who I am?'"

\*They say they need spiritual renewal and restoration of culture in order to become whole human beings again.

\*One presenter at the round table pointed out that if he wanted to merge into the general population, institutions are already there to be used. However, if his goal is to retain or regain his Indian-ness there does not seem to be a vehicle.

\*Many Aboriginal young people, participants said, are facing the same situations as their older counterparts: cultural confusion, a sense of lost identity.

\*Children are confused about their cultural identity" (Canada, 1993, pp. 3-7, 41 and 43).

The same arguments have been made repeatedly by Aboriginal people in Canadian cities. Evelyn Peters has recently summarized these. She observes that "...Aboriginal people have argued that supporting and enhancing Aboriginal culture is a prerequisite for coping in an urban environment", and that "In their submissions to the 1992-94 public hearings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, participants stressed the need to enhance Aboriginal cultures in urban areas" (Peters, 2002, p.61). She quotes David Chartrand, then President of the National

Association of Friendship Centres, as follows:

"Our culture is at the heart of our people, and without awareness of Aboriginal history, traditions and ceremonies, we are not whole people, and our communities lose their strength....Cultural education also works against the alienation that the cities hold for our people. Social activities bring us together and strengthen the relationship between people in areas where those relationships are an important safety net for people who feel left out by the mainstream" (quoted in Peters, 2002, p.63).

Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, in their study of Aboriginal people's relationship to Winnipeg's North End Housing Project, reported that: "The community indicated that they wanted space for recreation programs for young people, and some means through which Aboriginal young people could learn their language, retain their traditions, and maintain a greater closeness to parents and elders" (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2002, p.13).

There are urban Aboriginal cultures. They are fragmented and complex: "...a collage of jigsaw puzzle fragments...an amalgam of traditional values, mainstream adaptations, and inner city survival skills..." (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2002, p.25). Many urban Aboriginal people identify strongly with their cultures, and want more opportunities to learn about their historical roots, and to experience and practise their ceremonies. The deliberate promotion of Aboriginal cultures would build social capital by promoting relationships and connections and by networking between and among Aboriginal people, and would build among urban Aboriginal people a sense of community and of identity.

Thus such promotion is an essential part of a community development strategy in Spence neighbourhood.

## **Promoting Aboriginal Involvement in Spence Neighbourhood**

Based on our interviews with Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood, and our examination of the literature, we argue that there are at least three steps that could be taken that would increase Aboriginal involvement in the community. Two of these are steps that could be taken by the existing Spence Neighbourhood Association, and the steps are not mutually exclusive—any, all, or some combination of the three are possible. However, we believe, based on our interviews, that the third of the steps to be described—the creation by Aboriginal people of a *separate* Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association, that would be organizationally affiliated with the SNA—is the preferred way of promoting Aboriginal involvement in the community, and that such an organization could best take the first two steps, i.e., the hiring of an Aboriginal community organizer and the development of an Aboriginal Cultural Resource Centre.

As observed earlier, a significant number of the people we interviewed told us that they had not become involved in the Spence Neighbourhood Association because they had not been invited. They meant that they had not been *personally* invited. We believe that this reflects the fact that many urban Aboriginal people grew up on reserves where face-to-face contact was the norm, and consider the in-person form of contact that prevails there to be an appropriate form of communication, as opposed to the more distant and impersonal method, the

more ‘urban’ and mass-based method, of distributing flyers door-to-door. They told us that they do not consider a flyer delivered to the door to be an invitation. We believe that this also reflects the sense of social exclusion felt by Aboriginal people, as observed earlier, a social exclusion that manifests itself in a reluctance to get involved in, and in some cases even a fear of getting involved in, non-Aboriginal organizations. A flyer dropped in a mailbox cannot by itself overcome this barrier.

One means of beginning to respond to these realities is to hire an Aboriginal community organizer—an Aboriginal person whose job it is to personally meet and get to know the Aboriginal people in the Spence neighbourhood, to identify their issues and concerns, and to personally invite them to become involved in the community. The face-to-face approach, though seemingly unsophisticated, continues to be the best form of neighbourhood organizing. In his classic book *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders*, long-time organizer Si Kahn says: “Person-to-person contact is one of the great strengths of organizing...” because it “...carries the message that we see people as individuals...When we communicate person-to-person we say that each person’s ideas are valuable, that each person should have control of his or her life” (Kahn, 1991, p.198). This applies generally in neighbourhood organizing, and, we would argue, applies particularly to attempts to promote the involvement of urban Aboriginal people.

A second response to the observed reluctance of Aboriginal people to become involved in the SNA is the development in the neighbourhood of an Aboriginal Resource Centre or Aboriginal Cultural Centre, where a wide variety of Aboriginal cultural activities could be offered—dance, languages, drumming, elders, books and videos, for example. A significant proportion of

the people that we interviewed expressed an interest in learning more about, and having more opportunities to practise and participate in their cultures. They told us that there were very few opportunities to do so in the Spence neighbourhood. At one of the focus groups people advanced the view that there are not enough places like the Aboriginal Centre and the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre to meet the demand for Aboriginal cultural involvement, especially for adults. Those cultural institutions that exist are not in the Spence neighbourhood—“there’s nothing really in this area...”—and “...one of our basic problems here in this end [in Spence neighbourhood] is we’re damned poor”, so that often it is hard to get to places like the Aboriginal Centre or the Indian and Métis Friendship Centre.

Another woman said:

“I think it’s great that they now have an urban sweat lodge at the Thunderbird House. If we had something like that over here [in Spence neighbourhood] it would be good. Also, if they could have a library it would be good so that Aboriginal people know their own history from their own perspective....so that people learn a different history than you would learn in junior high or high school because they don’t learn it from our perspective...it’s the whole colonization thing...”

An Aboriginal cultural centre could offer a very wide array of opportunities. Dancing and drumming classes would be popular—they are in other parts of the city. Many of the people that we interviewed expressed an interest in learning their language, and this might best be done in a non-formal or ‘natural’ way, with Cree and Ojibwa conversational meetings, for example (Morrissette, June 16, 2003). Such attempts to

keep alive the languages and the cultures could be extended to include youth—for example by creating local history clubs that offer young people the opportunity to interview local Aboriginal people and record their stories, or to delve into their own family histories. Interviewing skills could be developed, a local archive could be established, local histories could be created, and in the process Aboriginal people would be satisfying the expressed need to learn about themselves and their people.

A variant of this is the desire to get Aboriginal youth out of the city to a setting where they can be exposed to their traditional cultures. One middle-aged man whom we interviewed suggested that what is needed is to “bring people out for a day or so and get them away from the rat race they’re in right now....get them back to reality, you know, their Indian ways...”. The West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group is investigating ways of doing this, of getting people out of the city and into the bush “...where they actually live off the land...” and get in touch with traditional Aboriginal cultures. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre is similarly looking into such a possibility (Morrissette, June 16, 2003). It is clear that there is a desire on the part of Aboriginal people to create the institutional means by which Aboriginal cultures can be learned and practised.

A third option in promoting Aboriginal involvement in the Spence neighbourhood is for Aboriginal people to create their own Spence Neighbourhood *Aboriginal* Association, or Spence *Aboriginal* Residents Group. A significant number of those we interviewed raised and discussed this possibility. One relatively young man, speaking in one of the focus groups, said:

“I think there should be a branch that is mostly [an] Aboriginal group...I think a lot of Natives have an aversion to having a

group that's run by Whites. If Spence Neighbourhood [Association] wants to, I don't know maybe there are Aboriginals on the Spence Neighbourhood group, but in order to be more receptive to the community, the Aboriginal community, they should have a group that is made up of Aboriginals”.

An older man at the focus group carried on:

“...I think it would be a good thing to start that way because then we would have a sort of made-up family in a way and then we'd gain confidence, you know....The thing is, I ran around with all these fears too, that we have, and it would be really nice to have a focus group that we could identify with, come in and just let ourselves lay back and just be ourselves, you know. Oftentimes when we go to groups where it's mixed, not only the Aboriginals but the minorities there kind of watch the way the wind blows first before we speak up, not because we're afraid of you guys or anything like that but we don't like trouble, basically, and you guys outnumber us by about 30 million to, you know... (laughter)”.

The younger man replied:

“I would honestly prefer that an Aboriginal group be started independent of the Spence Neighbourhood Association but as part of Spence Neighbourhood Association, because what SNA is doing now, they've already got a mind-set, eh,...and Aboriginals are not involved in it and they have a different way of thinking, a different way of doing

things, you know, different attitudes towards things, because you know you can't come in and join a group and see the mind-set, you know, and you're kind of discouraged, you know, or you don't feel like you want to be part of it, because like I said the mind-set is already there, whereas if you start a grassroots movement amongst the people you get the ideas....the Aboriginals have a different way of doing things....Maybe sometime in the future both groups, when they learn to understand how each other works, could get together as one group”.

In the adjoining West Broadway neighbourhood, Aboriginal people have recently formed the West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group. The President, Jo-Anne Spence, described why she and others got together to form the group:

“I kind of recognized there was a lack of Aboriginal participation everywhere I went, because I was on many Boards, any Board you could possibly think of in the neighbourhood, I was involved in....I just noticed there was a real lack of Aboriginal participation, and then I thought, well, how can we solve this problem, so we took the initiative from there and formed an Aboriginal Residents Group”.

The West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group, established in February, 2002, offers a variety of activities, most with a cultural component—for example, Aboriginal cultural awareness workshops, cultural and leadership workshops, monthly gatherings and sharing circles, and Aboriginal youth leadership programs. They are hoping to find a way to start a wilderness camp for Aboriginal youth, and to hire an Aboriginal

liaison worker. So far they have had some successes and some failures, but a major part of their objective, as Jo-Anne Spence put it, is to enable Aboriginal people “to get a sense of being part of the community...a sense of pride in their own community”. And this is happening. One man told us that he was planning to move from the West Broadway neighbourhood, “...and then I got involved with the group and it gave me some sense of belonging, you know, you belong to something, and it’s been very positive...”

We believe that a sense of belonging, now largely absent among Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood, can be promoted by the creation of a Spence Aboriginal Residents Group, preferably operating in a loose affiliation with the Spence Neighbourhood Association. A Spence Aboriginal Residents Group could hire an Aboriginal community organizer to meet with Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood and personally invite them to become involved, and fund-raising could start for the establishment of a Spence Neighbourhood Aboriginal Cultural Centre. A Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association could adopt the traditional Aboriginal cultural practise of ‘giveaways’. This is rooted in the belief that when things are good you do not forget the people around you. A giveaway could, for example, involve the simple gesture of handing out school supplies to neighbourhood children at the beginning of the school year, and inviting people to a feast, as a gesture of solidarity and reciprocity (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2002, pp.17-19). Such a strategy would be community building. It would be a specifically Aboriginal form of community development, made possible precisely because of the existence of an Aboriginal Residents Group.

In a study of why inner-city people become involved in their communities, Keiffer concluded that:

“Among the central lessons of this study is the conclusion that we should not seek to do for others what they can do for themselves....Involvement in an organization of peers appears to be the essential ingredient in cultivation of rudimentary political skills” (Keiffer, 1984).

This is consistent with the principles of community development and of capacity building, which involve people learning to define and solve their own problems. It is consistent, too, with the practise of many early feminist efforts, which established separate organizations, or women’s caucuses within existing organizations, in order that women could feel free to speak their minds without fear of male domination, and in order that they could develop a sense of confidence in their own skills and abilities.

## **Skills and Abilities**

The skills and abilities to run a Spence Aboriginal Residents Group are certainly present among Aboriginal people in the neighbourhood. We were struck by the many skills that Aboriginal people living in Spence have. We asked people a version of each of these questions: “What skills or abilities do you know of in the local Aboriginal community that could be used to improve the neighbourhood?” and “What skills or abilities do *you* have that could be used to improve the neighbourhood?” Although this question was not pursued in the thorough kind of way that is suggested in, for example, Kretzmann and McKnight (see pp.19-25), and although many people were modest about identifying their own skills and abilities, many were nevertheless identified. One 33-year-old man, for example, is an amateur historian and runs a website. “It’s not

just chat lines and what not, it goes beyond that". He added: "I'm very big into history....everybody has a history and that is so very important in the cultural traditions that will carry us on into tomorrow...". Such a person could lead a local history group, tracing the histories of local Aboriginal families, getting young people involved in interviewing elders and becoming more aware of their personal histories and their culture, and working with young people to create a website for a Spence Aboriginal history project. Two of the people we interviewed have written for the community newspaper, *West Central Streets*, and one of the two aspires to a career in journalism. One has been the Secretary of a large public housing Tenants' Association for many years; several say that they are good at working with people with addictions; one man has experience in coaching baseball; and several of the men have construction skills and experience. One 20-year-old man told us, in response to the question about skills and abilities to improve the neighbourhood:

"One of my neighbours, like, his house is slowly deteriorating and a bunch of us we talked to him about, like, fixing up his yard and stuff like that, and going around and everyone helping each other....because a lot of my neighbours they have different skills, like, one does fences for a living, another one's a painter, like, I can do a lot of things also".

One woman, after some prodding, told us that she is very good at sewing. "I know how to sew, like, I am an awesome seamstress, without a machine, I don't need a machine to sew, I sew by hand, I've been into leatherwork, belts, I sew pants, I make my own dresses." This woman is currently unemployed. Yet she told us:

"I can learn anything, if somebody will give me the opportunity to learn. I've had to go back to school for my GED because I quit [when she was young] but I went back and I got it and now it's just the opportunity for something to come up that would suit me".

The skills that Aboriginal people living in urban areas have are often unrecognized. One older man told us the following:

"There is an awful lot of wisdom that's not highlighted, for instance my neighbour down the hallway here has worked many, many years in many different trades...he has spent those years learning how to budget his money....he had a drinking addiction, he's been free of it for many years, so he's learned how to deal with his own addictions, he has the wisdom I think to teach younger people that. And many of our Aboriginals from up north who come here, if they had the same entry program that many of our new Canadians did would be able to channel their hard-won wisdom to helping immediately".

He described the case of an older woman he had known in a northern Aboriginal community, who had lived through many of life's tragedies, including seeing children and grandchildren die. He said:

"She had a heart, and when people came to her with problems she just immediately went to work and she never took a person and said 'I'll fix it for you' but she said, 'why don't we think of how you can fix it', and that's something that many counselors don't think of, you know, putting the

responsibility back on the person who has the problem, and this lady did, and I think we have an awful lot of these people coming into the city who could really...use their wisdom”.

He added:

“Our society is a paper society, if you don’t have something behind your name then you’re not considered a wise person, but the Aboriginal society, it’s very experiential—if you have the experience and you know how to translate it to someone who has never gone through that experience then you’ve got a gift that you can give and that’s I think what should be done with our elders. Many of our elders don’t have the credentials to go out and wave paperwork around but they have the experience, and they have the respect to be heard by the younger people, and if they were given the opportunity they would solve a lot of the problems that the young people have because the young people would be listening. One of the things that I find best about our culture is that we do listen to the elders...”

We were provided some evidence of this by a young man who was employed (by the Spence Neighbourhood Association) as a summer youth counsellor in Spence neighbourhood:

“I remember one summer there we had an elder come to the community centre and the kids were very, like, even the bad ones, like, they were misbehaving, but once the elder came and talked to them they all sat and listened and they all wanted him to come back...”

Two of the women that we interviewed are interested in, and skilled in, working with children. One told us that: “I’d like to be part of the ones that set up events, something for the kids to come out more, to get the community out more, like all the street festival there [the annual Ellice Avenue Street Festival]. Just set up more, like, volleyball teams, stuff like that...for younger children to go in and have the opportunity to play instead of having them on the streets...”. Another woman, a young parent, told us that: “I’m well involved with a lot of the children around here, like they all know who I am and you know, they see me coming and they come running up, ‘hi [her name]’, you know, and I like talking with the kids, you know, and I think that’s a good skill”.

These are skills that an Aboriginal Residents Group would be able to put to very good use. The benefits would accrue to the neighbourhood as a whole.

## **Jobs, and the Community Development Principle of Hiring Locally**

In the discussions of skills and abilities, and of involvement in the Spence Neighbourhood Association and the community more generally, the issue of jobs arose frequently. Some of the Aboriginal people we interviewed expressed resentment at the fact that so many jobs with inner-city agencies are filled by non-Aboriginal people. They told us that they believe that Aboriginal people would be more likely to become involved with community organizations if more Aboriginal people were employed with such organizations. For example, one young man who is employed in construction observed that if the SNA employed more Aboriginal staff:

“That would be better because there’s times I hear people talking about, like, they don’t see enough Aboriginal people doing things, like, they see maybe more White people or maybe other kind of people, they don’t see enough Aboriginal people in the community. It’s like, I hear some people either saying that, ‘oh, Native people are drunks’ and that, ‘and they don’t do nothing’, but I see a lot of people that have potential if they set their minds to it”.

A woman added, referring to the Spence Neighbourhood Association and the relative lack of Aboriginal involvement there:

“I would probably want to have at least half of the staff as Aboriginal people...I think we’ve got enough Aboriginal people now that are educated enough that they could surely find some who would be qualified....People do notice whoever is in an organization. If there’s any Aboriginals or whatever, they’re drawn to them right away...”

Jo-Anne Spence, President of the West Broadway Aboriginal Residents Group and a staffer with the West Broadway Development Corporation, made the same observation:

“When I was hired I believe I was the only Aboriginal, and that was just a stepping stone for them and as a result more Aboriginals were hired after that, like more front-line work type staff, and I think that’s really important that the Aboriginal people need to see, you know, their people up front....that’s really important to them because they’re a lot more comfortable talking to their own peo-

ple....like a lot of people have told me that”.

A similar observation was made in a recent study of Aboriginal adults in Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba. One of the authors of that study commented on the importance to Aboriginal people of seeing Aboriginal people employed in an organization:

“There is the perception that...Aboriginal people are accepted because there is one on staff, and the students know, ‘oh, they’re hiring Aboriginal people’, so there is immediately that perception when you’re walking in there that they’re a non-racist institution. When I walk into a place and see a familiar (i.e., Aboriginal) face, your comfort level immediately goes up” (Klyne, in Silver, Klyne and Simard, 2003, p.13).

The employment of non-Aboriginal people in agencies and organizations much or even most of whose clientele is Aboriginal is inconsistent with the important community development principle of hiring locally, and it creates deep resentment among Aboriginal people to be subjected to what they often see as a charitable model:

“I went to...a Baptist Church, nothing against Baptists, nothing against those good people, we walked in and we had to wait outside for a little while and we got in and they prayed over us first and they mentioned the word S-I-N [he spells it out] a few times and then we got our food, you know. Oh, and they gave us tracts as well, gospel tracts, just in case a sinner might have gotten a bit of food, why, we had a chance to get saved, you know”.



This man, speaking in one of the focus groups, then went on to say that local Aboriginal people should be hired to run programs running in Spence and delivering services to Aboriginal people in Spence.

“I bet you these two men [two other men at the focus group] could run a program very easily, and they’d know exactly where the people are too, and they wouldn’t put on airs, you know. Some of the people, they have white shirts on and they have ties and when you walk in: ‘aren’t we ever good people, we’re helping these poor Aboriginals to a meal.’ My son went to a Union Gospel Mission thing and they had cameras there, would you believe, they had cameras and they were panning the tables to see the poor Aboriginals eat a Thanksgiving meal, you know. That’s ridiculous!”

Not only is it ridiculous. The use of a charity model for the delivery of services and the employment of non-Aboriginal people is also inconsistent with the community development principle of hiring locally, and does little for capacity building.

There is also a good deal of racism encountered by Aboriginal people attempting to find employment in Spence neighbourhood. One 20-year-old, now employed, said this:

“I hang around with a lot of my friends, we work at JobWorks, that’s on Agnes [Street], we work there. But before that we were looking for jobs around this neighbourhood and it was hard for us because, like, we tried at the Seven-Eleven, corner stores, little businesses around here, and what happened was everywhere we went

into, like, we went to the store to buy something, whatever, they accused us of, like, maybe, trying to steal something or they looked at us different, or [we] tried to apply and one time we went to apply at that place and we gave them our resumes and everything, they threw our resumes in the garbage right away, because we walked right back in and we seen them right in the garbage, right? So, that’s why it was hard for us but then once we went to JobWorks there was a lot of Aboriginal people working there and they gave us a chance to find a place to work and helped us out around here a lot because there’s a lot of places around here that didn’t give us that chance”.

A young woman, speaking in a separate interview, said much the same:

“I think they should come out with more stuff for youth to do, like, even volunteer, or, more jobs, even, for Aboriginal youth, because a lot of people do discriminate, and I know that, like, there is a lot of people that discriminate... and a lot of businesses say they’re not discriminating and stuff, but they do it, no matter what”.

That this has been the case for many years is evidenced by the story related by a man now in his 60s, who came to Winnipeg years ago having recently graduated as a teacher, but who was unable to secure a teaching position. “Nobody would hire an Indian teacher...they wouldn’t take a chance on an Indian....that’s the kind of welcome we got. That’s why we’re not part of it”. In short, the exclusion from the labour market that is a function, at least in part, of racism, is simply a part of the larger exclusion, the marginalization,

## Have You Ever Considered Buying One of the Houses Renovated by the SNA?

\* *“If we could afford one, yeah. We probably would, like, I like the area...”*

\* *“Yeah, but I can’t afford it”*

\* *“Definitely, I’ve seen some nice houses in this area...I like it [the area]...that’s what’s kept me here, because I like it”*

\* *“Well, I would if I had the money. It doesn’t matter to me where I live, you know, it’s dangerous all over the place”*

\* *“I’ve actually asked about it...really nice, those houses”*

\* *“As a matter of fact I have, I have enquired about it...I guess you would need some [financial] stability”*

that Aboriginal people feel in Spence neighbourhood, and that manifests itself in their relative lack of participation in the Spence Neighbourhood Association.

## Housing and Community Development

The same process is at work as regards housing. Of the 24 Aboriginal people interviewed, only one woman and one couple are homeowners. All the rest are renters, in apartment blocks or rooming houses. However, when we asked interviewees if they had ever considered buying one of the houses renovated by the SNA, almost everyone said that they had, and that they would like to stay in the neighbourhood (see sidebar). Many people observed that the housing renovation work done by the SNA is good for the neighbour-

hood. One man said that the work “makes it look better, that’s really a good thing”. A woman described her mother’s observations:

“My Mom, she lives in the North End and she would come down here to visit and she would say ‘these houses are really nice now, not like before, we’re really improving the area’. She’s impressed. Actually, so am I”.

Aboriginal people are pleased about and impressed by the housing renovation work being done in the neighbourhood by the Spence Neighbourhood Association. There is concern felt, however, about the fact that so few of the renovated houses are being purchased by Aboriginal people from the neighbourhood, despite the obvious desire of so many of the people we interviewed to become homeowners and to stay in Spence. One woman expressed this concern, and linked it to a community development strategy for Spence—a strategy rooted in the observation that if local people and particularly local Aboriginal people are hired for jobs that are available, and are given the opportunity to become homeowners, they will stay in the neighbourhood and bring to it a much-needed level of stability:

“It goes along with my belief that we can change the neighbourhood, because, I have a good job but I haven’t moved out of the neighbourhood and I’m not planning on moving out of the neighbourhood because I want to see people get a job and stay in the neighbourhood....I’m hoping that we can have more actual Aboriginal and local people to own these houses that are being renovated....[if] we could have at least a few Aboriginal owners...it might

somehow give people hope that one day they could aspire to owning a home”.

An older man linked the relative absence of Aboriginal homeowners to the process of gentrification, and displayed the commitment to the neighbourhood expressed by many of the people we interviewed:

“If my income were better I would think of it, I would actually buy one for a family. [But what is happening now is a process of] gentrification, which I’m really totally against...because it takes good housing that could be used by the poor and it excludes them because it puts the prices out of reach...and yeah, I would buy one if I could and I would make sure that a poor family lived in it”.

At the moment, although they would like to be homeowners in Spence, few Aboriginal people are, and this adds to their sense of exclusion from the neighbourhood, as does the racism frequently encountered when trying to find local employment, the racism encountered on a day-to-day basis, and the fact that relatively few local Aboriginal people are hired to fill positions in agencies providing services in the area. Aboriginal people in Spence see themselves as outsiders in a broad and general sense, and this adds to their reluctance to become involved with the Spence Neighbourhood Association.

Promoting home ownership by Aboriginal people who want to stay in Spence neighbourhood would be consistent with the principles of community development. It would counteract Aboriginal peoples’ sense of social exclusion, and be likely to promote their involvement in the community. The obstacle to home ownership for most Aboriginal people to whom we spoke is

financial. However, the North End Housing Project, working closely with a local credit union with a history of innovative inner-city involvement, is close to developing a rent-to-own strategy—it includes no down payment, and a five-year rental period followed by an option to purchase at low monthly mortgage payments—that will enable even very low-income households, including those on social assistance, to eventually become homeowners. Other, more innovative strategies that build on the strong, extended family tradition of Aboriginal people—for example, the possibility of ‘clusters’ of housing for extended families which support each other—are also worth exploring and developing (Deane and Morrisette, June 16, 2003).

## **Crime and Safety and Community Development**

Concerns about crime and safety add to this feeling of exclusion for many of the Aboriginal people that we interviewed. When we asked people what they thought should be done to improve the neighbourhood, many mentioned crime and safety issues, and told us that they are often afraid to walk about the neighbourhood, and are fearful for their children’s safety (see sidebar).

The fear felt by many people in the neighbourhood for themselves and for their children adds to their sense of social exclusion. Many are afraid to go out, especially in the evening. One man described to us that he had been afraid to attend the focus group meeting that he had come to at five o’clock on a sunny June afternoon, and had had to screw up his courage to do so. Their responses to these problems are contradictory. Despite their fears, some people expressed empathy with those involved in the drug trade and prostitution and those strung out by years of

## Concerns About Crime and Safety in Spence Neighbourhood

\* *"It's dangerous around here, I guess you can say, especially at night"*.

\* *"...the place is not very safe to go around in the dark, eh, in the night-time...lots of young guys come here, you know, they travel in the night-time...especially in the back alleys, eh, that's where the gangsters are"*.

\* *"I feel freaked out to go anywhere by myself even if it's during the day...I hear a lot of kids running around that are, you know, cursing and smoking and I don't like my kids seeing that at all, you know"*.

\* *"I got no complaints about where I live...but one thing I notice is there's a lot of kids running around loose, unsupervised, and they're kind of like a wrecking crew"*.

\* *I see a lot of stuff going on, pushers...alcohol, sniffers, seen quite a few. My wife is even afraid to keep the girls in sight all the time because of what happens.*

\* *"I see problems such as street gangs and prostitution and drugs on the streets"*.

\* *"Around here there's a lot that needs to be done, in this neighbourhood especially, the theft has gone crazy, the hookers are gone wild, the dirt is, the garbage is pathetic...I can't let my kids go to school by themselves...it's not safe"*.

sniffing:

"There's lots of alcohol, and there's a lot of people that are sniffing out on the streets out here because I seen a lot of sniffers at this old building that I'm staying at...we

get a bad name because of some of the people that are doing it, and everybody gets called down now because of them and it's not really their fault either because some of them grew up really bad too I think, like they grew up really bad through residential schools and everything else and maybe that's why they're doing it".

An older man said:

"We see unfortunately prostitutes that are here and some of them, I'd say perhaps even the majority of them, are victims because they're turned on to this life by drugs. If we could come down harshly on the hard drugs, especially like cocaine, and clear that out you'd see a lot of our prostitutes would have a better chance at a stable life".

Aboriginal people in Spence are split: some people and some families are involved in various types of illegal, destructive, and anti-social behaviour; most are not, are appalled by and fearful of such behaviour, and resent the labelling that they are subjected to because of those who engage in such behaviour and because of the frequent racist response that *all* Aboriginal people must therefore be engaged in such behaviour.

Several people had concrete suggestions about how to deal with this problem. Some want a greater police presence in the neighbourhood, and mentioned their resentment at the fact that there is no community police station in Spence. The nearest community police station is in neighbouring West Broadway. Police foot patrols have recently been added in Spence neighbourhood on Friday and Saturday nights, but concern has been expressed about the budgetary implica-

tions—officers are on voluntary overtime—and it is not clear how long the foot patrolling will last (Winnipeg Free Press, July 8, 2003, p.B.1-2). And several mentioned the possibility of reinstating a neighbourhood patrol. One young man, for example, said: "...that downtown patrol they have is a great idea....that's a concept that works....to patrol just this neighbourhood and increase that awareness, would be a way for people to feel more safe and secure to walk around it". This idea was tried before in Spence neighbourhood, and the patrol team was disbanded amidst a host of problems (Leach, 2003). It is, however, an idea worth revisiting, particularly since it is potentially a means of involving people in the neighbourhood. Foot patrols are apparently active in West Broadway, and in William Whyte neighbourhood in the North End, where they are effective in involving people in the community. This alone would begin to break down the atomization and sense of social exclusion experienced by so many Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood.

## Conclusion

Aboriginal people appear to be little involved in the Spence Neighbourhood Association—only one of the 24 we interviewed is actively involved. Their lack of involvement is in large part a product of a more general sense of social exclusion, of being outsiders to the dominant culture.

The sense of social exclusion came out clearly in the interviews. Aboriginal people living in Spence neighbourhood repeatedly told us, explicitly or otherwise, that they do not feel part of the community (see sidebar). The sense of social exclusion is reinforced by what Aboriginal people in Spence told us about instances of discrimination in the job market, and about resentment that so many jobs in inner-city agencies that serve

\* *"To me, I think, most of our people they come here, don't really feel part of the community".*

\* *"I think most of it is not feeling comfortable, or not trusting....not feeling that you're listened to or looked at different....when you are outnumbered by the other community members that are non-Aboriginal you sort of feel intimidated".*

\* *"...a lot of Aboriginal people don't go to these programs, because they have no self-esteem...because of all these other people putting them down all the time".*

\* *"A couple of my friends were talking about that the other day, how they feel, I guess, intimidated by...non-Aboriginals, like, even to go to job interviews and stuff like that...how I felt last year when I tried to join them...I felt low class...".*

Aboriginal people are held by non-Aboriginal people. It is reinforced by the grinding poverty that forces so many in the neighbourhood to survive on a day-to-day basis. It is reinforced by the fact that so few Aboriginal people are home-owners in the neighbourhood, and by the random instances of day-to-day racism that some described to us. Aboriginal people in Spence feel that they are different. Referring to the mind-set that he sees prevailing at the SNA, one man said: "Aboriginal people are not involved in it and they have a different way of thinking, a different way of doing things, you know, different attitudes towards things...". Because they feel different and excluded, and in some cases lack self-esteem and self-confidence, flyers in the mailbox announcing SNA events are not enough to overcome the deeply-rooted barriers to their involvement.

The origins of Aboriginal people's social exclusion are in their history, the history of colonialism. For well over a century, Canada sought

to eradicate Aboriginal cultures, languages and spirituality—by means of residential schools, the Indian Act, and the outlawing of Aboriginal religious and spiritual practises, for instance—on the grounds that Aboriginal cultures were inherently inferior to European cultures. Many non-Aboriginal people still believe this to be the case; the decidedly non-Aboriginal cultures of most institutions imply that this is the case; and public spaces in Winnipeg—largely devoid of any evidence of the Aboriginal presence in the city—visually suggest that this is the case. The result of this process of colonization has been the creation of “...a racial and economic hierarchy with an ideology that claims the superiority of the race and culture of the colonizer”, an ideology which has come to pervade Canada’s culture and institutions, and which “...becomes an inseparable part of perceived reality” (Adams, 1999, p.6). In this way, colonialism is at the root of Aboriginal people’s social exclusion, and their reluctance to involve themselves in institutions or organizations run by or dominated by non-Aboriginal people. Their lack of involvement in the SNA is consistent with a more general reluctance to involve themselves in institutions of the still-dominant culture.

Colonialism has been and continues to be unsuccessful in fully extinguishing Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal people expressed to us—as they did, for example, to Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere in Winnipeg’s North End, and to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples across the country—a keen interest in learning more about, and having more opportunities to experience and practise, their cultures. We believe that this desire constitutes the basis of a community development strategy that could contribute significantly to the revitalization of Spence neighbourhood, and by extension of other Winnipeg neighbourhoods.

The systematic effort by Aboriginal people in Spence to promote their cultures would have several positive results. It would be a means of bringing Aboriginal people together, of making connections with each other and thus building social capital. Aboriginal people said clearly to us that they would become involved in traditional cultural practises. The celebration of their cultures would off-set the deleterious effects of many decades of having their cultures denigrated, and would promote a deepened sense of pride and self-esteem among Aboriginal people. And the promotion of cultural activities would serve as a platform for further community development initiatives. As one author put it, writing about cultural expression and community development in Latin America: “...there is another element to development besides change. Sometimes people must first fortify their base before they sally out to change the world” (Kleymeyer, 1994, p.39).

The promotion of Aboriginal cultures is neither a matter of attempting to return to some mythical past, nor of attempting to cling to an abstract idea of a ‘pure’ culture. Cultures change. Aboriginal cultures have changed, and continue to do so. But there are urban Aboriginal cultures, and as Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere have argued: “Years of colonization, impoverishment, and immersion in the mainstream life have not erased its relevance”, and although it may be “...an amalgam of traditional values, mainstream adaptations, and inner city survival skills...urban Aboriginal culture is nevertheless recognizable to those who share it, and powerful in its normative influence” (Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet and Bruyere, 2002, p.25). A community development approach that builds ways to celebrate the urban expression of Aboriginal cultures will promote the involvement of Aboriginal people, and the increased pride and self-esteem that comes with

involvement in their cultures will build the foundation upon which Aboriginal people will be better able to engage with the dominant culture on the basis of mutual respect. New and dynamic cultural expressions will emerge from this engagement of strong and healthy cultures, to the benefit of all.

The organizational means by which this culturally-based community development strategy can best be approached is, we believe, the establishment of a separate Spence Neighbourhood Aboriginal Residents Group, operating in loose affiliation with the Spence Neighbourhood Association. Based on our interviews, we believe that there would be strong support in Spence neighbourhood for such a development. Aboriginal people would then be in charge of their own community development organization, and could take it in directions that they choose—promoting increased opportunities to learn and experience Aboriginal culture; creating ways and means by which Aboriginal people who want to stay in Spence neighbourhood can purchase renovated homes; establishing neighbourhood patrols to build a greater sense of security and community; and engaging in traditional ‘give-away’ practises, for example—and could build their skills and confidence in the process. The result may be—in fact would be likely to be—a different way of promoting community development. This should be viewed as a positive thing. Community development for Aboriginal people is about their taking charge of their own affairs in an autonomous fashion, about their deciding what they want their community to look like. It is about having “...the right to invent one’s own future...” (Oakley, 1998). This is the way that we will build in Winnipeg a unique culture that arises out of the engagement of strong and healthy Aboriginal cultures with other strong and healthy cultures.

Central to this vision is the need for *non-Aboriginal* cultures and institutions to be open to change. Aboriginal people in Spence said this to us. They expressed their frustration that the SNA expects that it is Aboriginal people who should change, rather than the SNA. One Aboriginal man told us, speaking about the SNA, that “...they’ve already got a mind-set, eh...and Aboriginals are not involved in it...”, and he expressed the view that they were not likely to change that mind-set. Another man suggested that the members of the SNA should go to the Aboriginal Centre or Thunderbird House and listen to and learn from Aboriginal leaders “...because we have a lot to teach...”. He said this without any real expectation that this would be done—rather, it is something that he believes *should* be done\*.

The establishment of a separate Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association, loosely affiliated with the SNA in a manner mutually agreed upon, is an important step in this direction. Aboriginal people must first establish their own strong and autonomous organizations. Doing so would create the many advantages already discussed. And in the future—when a strong and vibrant Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association has established itself, involved large numbers of Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood with all the advantages that brings, promoted many new opportunities for the learning and expression of Aboriginal cultures, and begun to ‘invent its own future’ with all the pride

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\* At the October 21, 2003, meeting with SNA staff and Board members, the Executive Director referred to this paragraph and said she believed that the SNA ought to take up this challenge, and meet with Aboriginal elders to begin to learn more about Aboriginal cultures.

and sense of accomplishment that doing so would create—then the two cultures could begin to work together to create something new and exciting. As one Aboriginal man said to us:

“...if you start a grassroots movement amongst the people you get the ideas...the Aboriginals have a different way of doing things....Maybe sometime in the future both groups, when they learn to understand how each other works, could get together as one group”.

This is our vision of what might emerge from the establishment of a Spence Aboriginal Residents Group. When we circulated an earlier draft of this paper to SNA staff and Board members for their comments and suggestions, some responded negatively. Their argument was that what is needed is not the creation of separate organizations, but rather greater unity. They expressed the desire for *all* people in the community to work together. We concur with this sentiment. However, at the moment, all people are *not* working together, and Aboriginal people in particular feel excluded, and reluctant to become involved. We believe that the creation of an Aboriginal Residents Group in Spence will create the space in which Aboriginal residents of the neighbourhood can become involved, can identify their own issues, make their own decisions, and be in charge of their own affairs. The result, we believe, is likely to be a greater involvement by Aboriginal people, and a process of capacity building—the development of skills and self-confidence. Growing numbers of Aboriginal people with the skills and self-confidence to engage in community development is the first step in a process that we believe will ultimately lead to a greater sense of unity in the neighbourhood. In the long run, Aboriginal people who

have developed the habit of community involvement are much more likely to work with other Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal people in pursuit of common goals.

Indeed, partly as a result of the process of interviewing Aboriginal people in Spence neighbourhood, a fledging Aboriginal Residents Group has emerged in Spence. Calling itself I-CAN (Inner-City Aboriginal Neighbours), the group is developing plans for its work in Spence neighbourhood, and Aboriginal people are coming to these first planning meetings. The Executive Director of the SNA has been very supportive of I-CAN, and there is evidence that, after some initial opposition, or at least concern, the SNA will be supportive of the initiative.

There is no simple solution to the problems faced by inner city neighbourhoods like Spence. Nevertheless, based on the results of our interviews, we believe that the conceptually simple steps of creating a Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association, operating in loose affiliation with the SNA, promoting Aboriginal cultural initiatives, and working together to build neighbourhood strengths in ways Aboriginal people themselves decide upon, will create a strong foundation for the continued revitalization of Spence neighbourhood. There is great strength in working collectively. Aboriginal people in Spence do not now do that. Bringing Aboriginal people together by creating a Spence Aboriginal Neighbourhood Association and promoting Aboriginal cultures is the first step in this direction.



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