

CHAPTER 1

The Chosen Community

The Community and its Setting

Until the 1980s, a tourist driving down the main street of Pittsfield could assume that the area was thriving. For those coming from New York or Boston, the downtown streets appeared exceptionally clean, homelessness was rare, and panhandlers almost nonexistent. Incorporated in 1891 with a total area of just over forty-two square miles and a population just under 49,000, the city had the appearance of many towns in upstate New York and southern New England: its low buildings of brick and wood built in the 1930s has the feel of Norman Rockwell's paintings of small-town America.

Economic restructuring has transformed the physical layout of Pittsfield and the lives of its inhabitants. This process is not bounded within the city limits. The main corporate employer is multinational; the tourists who come for skiing and summer leisure and the second home seekers that are buying available land arrive from regions and states far beyond the city's territory. Pittsfield is one of two cities in Berkshire County, with North Adams, about twenty-five miles to the north, its considerably smaller sister.

Today, the General Electric (GE) plant dominates the east side of town and has been the largest employer since the early part of the century. Its buildings span one whole side of the city, with the Shaeffer Eaton plant to the south dwarfed in comparison. Smaller manufacturing plants dot the landscape around and in Pittsfield, occupying old textile buildings as reminders of the city's history.

Electrical, electronics, and paper product manufacturers are the largest employers. Tourism runs a close second. Equidistant from New York and Boston, the area boasts over a hundred lakes and ponds and almost 85,000 acres of state reservation. The interchange between these mainstays of the

economy is a source of tension as the requirements of one often collided with those of the other.

The significant turnaround took place in the 1980s, when GE announced that it was scaling back its production of power transformers and was likely to cut production in other areas as well. The announcement coincided with the change in the appearance of North Street, once the city's main shopping district. A new mall, debated for forty years, finally encouraged store owners to abandon the storefronts they occupied. With the opening of the mall in the fall of 1988, North Street began to have the look of Cottrell's (1951) description of Caliente, the town that became obsolete with the development of the diesel locomotive engine. Englands department store, a symbol of retailing dedication to a community (the store granted long-term credit to GE workers during strikes), closed its doors in 1988, leaving the largest store on the street empty and disheveled. Though a hangout for teenagers, a Saturday morning finds the street and the entire downtown area with few pedestrians.

The physical changes that took place in the downtown area belie other transformations: an old movie house was in a state of disrepair; another became the Berkshire Public Theater. An abandoned store in an alleyway off the main street was turned into an art gallery, as was an old candy store. The second floor of one of the largest downtown buildings was made into studio space for the artists who exhibit in those galleries.

This is not the first time that structural change in the look and physical use of buildings has taken place in Pittsfield. The city transformed from a dying textile town into a thriving industrial center when the General Electric Corporation bought the Stanley Works in 1904, sustaining a dominant economic presence through most of the twentieth century. The shifts that have occurred since then—along with the international development of the corporation—have affected the town in dramatic ways. Old mill factories became the sites of small competitive factories, and later retail outlets. General Electric paid the highest wages for industrial work, attracting immigrants and later their families, and provided the health care and other benefits won in the union struggles and strikes during the past eight decades.

The thread that permeates through the changes in Pittsfield is dependency. The community is dependent on the corporation for the tax dollars that maintain the city infrastructure developed to house the plant and its workers; workers are dependent on the corporation for jobs; families on wage earners; and secondary industries on the wages that the workers generate. With General Electric as the largest employer in the area, Pittsfield can comfortably be called a "company town." Even the proliferation of the small industrial firms producing plastics products are linked by their history and workers to the General Electric plant. The current concern for redevelop-

ment is intricately related to the role the corporation plays in the economy, and the role of the corporation in its own worldwide context.

Individuals and their families process the effects of these changes through an atmosphere of uncertainty. The expectation that children followed in the footsteps of their parents coincided with the certainty that General Electric paid the highest wages in the area. Children of long-term workers at the General Electric plant no longer depend on employment through family ties. Households swing between periodic employment at the plant and work at much lower-paid service jobs. There is no assurance of security, even for those workers with the most seniority. While managers make attempts to place laid-off workers in other positions at the plant, the closing down or restructuring of major areas of production leaves many skill-specific workers without recourse. The uncertainty about employment has created a strange reliance on "luck": workers see themselves as lucky to have jobs, families are lucky to have the money to pay their mortgages, individuals are lucky to be in good health.

Our interest in Pittsfield was in part due to the proliferation of small industries started by former General Electric employees. We assumed that how workers previously adapted to restructuring could inform present circumstances and point to ways that the community might view development efforts and its attempt to save the viability of the city.

Strong ethnic communities have solidified their kin-based ties through employment in the plant and entrepreneurial activities. Even when large divisions of the plant did restructure or close down, as was the case with the chemical division in the 1950s, strong community ties fostered by ethnic identity facilitated regrouping. From the start of one entrepreneurial small business grew a network of over thirty-eight small, competitive plastic injection and molding operations, enough to label Pittsfield the "Plastics Capital of America." General Electric is still the largest employer, with around 3,000 employees, followed by the Berkshire Medical Center with 1,800, the City of Pittsfield with 1,500, Kay Bee Toys with 350, and the Berkshire Life Insurance Company with 350.

The substantial changes occurring in the 1980s resulted in a gradual erosion of the community base. The population has steadily declined during the past two decades as children move to other areas and workers migrate in the hope of finding work in sunnier climes; rumors of a major part of the plant's closing down have been realized; the hope of the community—the plastic's industry—has been threatened by foreign competition and cyclical downturns. The city government is divided over development issues, and development managers do not have long tenures. Issues concerning the use and abuse of the environment, as well as the effect of chemicals used in the pro-

duction process, have come to a head as segments of the community are pitted against each other on fundamental issues of human health.

The city's struggle to restructure its economic base embodies community conflict. General Electric maintains that it is still committed to the area, citing the placement of its international plastics headquarters there in the mid-1980s. The center, based on research and development, employs only a small number of workers and is overshadowed by the public relations text generated for the community. The tensions created in the community become more apparent as economic stability erodes. The Chamber of Commerce promotes the area as one of scenic rural beauty and rare cultural opportunities. The literature designed to attract industry describes the lush hills and crisp air that has long attracted summer residents to Lenox and Stockbridge in the south and Williamstown and to the hill towns of the north. Tanglewood, Shakespaere and Company, Jacob's Pillow, and the Williamstown and Berkshire Theater festivals draw substantial numbers from New York City and Boston, just as the fall foliage and winter skiing jam the roadways into the growing number of resort towns.

City government and development agencies realize that tourism alone will not solve the city's budget problems. But there is a desperation inherent in current planning: a need to quickly generate money to offset the sudden tax decreases caused by General Electric's scaling down of production. The tourist and second home industries resist new initiatives that will potentially pollute the environment, just as any open confrontation that might further compromise the community's relationship with the corporation is avoided. Thus, the major fights that have evolved are not over how to attract industry but rather about the placement of income-generating parking garages and the building of shopping malls within or outside the city limits.

Community leaders and consultants locate the creation of economic stability in the realm of new development. What this means in the context of underlying economic change and adaptive response is the subject of this work.

CHAPTER 2

Community and Context

There was this Englishman who worked in the London office of a multinational corporation based in the United States. He drove home one evening in his Japanese car. His wife, who worked in a firm which imported German kitchen equipment, was already at home. Her small Italian car was often quicker through the traffic. After a meal which included New Zealand lamb, California carrots, Mexican honey, French cheese and Spanish wine, they settled down to watch a programme on their television set, which had been made in Finland. The programme was a retrospective celebration of the war to recapture the Falkland Islands. As they watched it they felt warmly patriotic, and very proud to be British.

Raymond Williams, *The Year 2000*

The experience of dependency on a major employer is a delicate balance predicated on an understanding of both the community and the company's needs. As in Pittsfield, the American experience has been one of towns and cities building their infrastructures around the physical prerequisites of industry that, in turn, hires its citizens and provides the tax base to keep the community afloat. With the restructuring of capitalism around the globe, this relationship has changed. Cities and towns find themselves providing incentives and tax breaks they can ill afford to keep industry within their borders; companies threaten to leave areas at the slightest hint of labor unrest. The balance that used to exist between corporate and community management is no longer respected by heads of corporations, who are, more often than not, far from the plant site.

This imbalance generates a series of confusing alternatives for communities trying to keep their infrastructures afloat. Corporate managers, who

are, however temporarily, citizens of these communities, may try to negotiate with corporate headquarters to keep production intact, but more often than not they fail to convince their superiors unless they can provide financial incentives that compete with planned operations. The pretense of the corporation is that they are doing their best and are committed to the community. The reality is the deindustrialization and downsizing that has characterized the current economic decline.

The emphasis on new development by city planners assumes that restructuring has taken place or is well under way. The flight of industry from northern to southern cities and to other parts of the globe has devastated the infrastructure of entire regions and has left unemployed entire segments of the population dependent on industrial work. The hardest hit are the old, northern, industrial cities that flourished during the industrial revolution and survived the restructuring of industry after the Second World War.

The Growth of the American City

The rise of the modern American city is closely bound to the fluctuations of capitalist development during the last half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Gordon (1984) posits that American cities have passed through three stages of development—the commercial, the industrial, and the corporate—and that each of these stages corresponds to dynamics of capitalist accumulation during that period (1984:22).¹ The commercial city, based on merchant accumulation, used the city as trading centers for the exchange of commodities. Political capitals or colonial control centers served to regulate market privileges and housed the entrepreneurs and craftspeople who migrated there to produce the luxury goods consumed by capitalist traders. Ports served as transportation centers. The early development of these cities were regulated by the British Crown, which kept control over the size and distribution of port cities. With the coming of independence, American merchants took control of the commercial functions of the cities and the number and size of port cities expanded rapidly, along with a distinct urban population.²

Gordon places the transition between the commercial and the industrial city and its corresponding forms of accumulation between 1850 and 1870. Cities grew as propertyless laborers and unemployed craftsmen flocked to central areas. The first industrial cities were centered on the riverbanks of New England, tied to the use of water as the main power source.³ With the transition to coal and the development of railroads as a major source of transportation between 1850 and 1870, industry became located in large cities with ample labor to meet the growing demand for factory production. Large cities functioned to better control the labor force, a factor that had become

increasingly difficult in small and medium-sized cities that contained militant pockets of resistance to industrial discipline.⁴ The greater physical separation of workers and owners and the increased impersonality of the city worked in favor of the capitalist industrial enterprise. With factories located in the center of the urban areas, the upper classes, with more access to transportation and leisure time, moved out of the cities into newly developing suburbs. At the same time, however, this concentration of industry in the urban areas was creating contradictions for capitalist accumulation. The rapid rise of factories created a demand for labor, which increased wages, and for worker organization. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, resistance to capitalist discipline grew and substantially threatened capitalist control over production.

The corporate city developed in response to growing instability as manufacturing migrated from central cities to the outer rings around the urban areas. As Gordon tells us, "Between 1899 and 1909, central-city manufacturing employment increased by 40.8 percent while ring employment rose by 97.7 percent" (1984:40). With the movement of manufacturing out of the city, central city areas were reorganized as business districts coordinating the administrative aspects of capitalist trade. Corporations, after the First World War I, had grown enough to separate administration from the sites of production and skyscrapers housing corporate headquarters flourished in the major cities around the country. The dispersal of industrial production also scattered and diffused working-class neighborhoods, militating against the community-based pockets of resistance that had been organizing during the late nineteenth century.

The form of the corporate city took shape in the first half of the twentieth century and became solidified with the hegemony of the United States after the Second World War. Defense spending and the growth of transportation increased the strength of corporate holdings and allowed the expansion to new cities while decapitalizing the old. The move to new cities was both the result of aging physical plants and increasing union organization. New cities were loci of nonunion labor and wide open spaces. With hegemonic control over vast areas of the world system, United States-based corporations also started to expand their operations overseas. Increasing improvements in technology have allowed for the organization of production around the globe with unskilled or semiskilled labor and have opened up new arenas for capitalist control. Along with these developments, however, are major changes in the economic structure of U.S. cities and regular cycles of crisis, particularly in the older cities, but expanding to the new ones as well. These changes have prompted growing social problems and challenges to large segments of the populations dependent on factory production and its offshoots.