With the exception of the family, the community in which one lives serves as the most basic social construct of one’s life in contemporary society. It is the people and places in one’s community that influence one’s daily interactions and the opportunities one will encounter in life. The community provides space for recreation and interaction between its members as well as commercial shopping, schools, and places of worship. Oftentimes the concept of community can be confused with neighborhood; however, they are two terms with distinct implications. A neighborhood refers to a physical area whereas a community involves much more than just a space with boundaries. A community serves as the social foundation of a neighborhood, providing its inhabitants with the necessary resources to live their daily lives. In essence, a community facilitates networks that promote social interaction between its residents, contains the facilities to promote this contact between people, and encourages its inhabitants to participate in a variety of recreational groups and active organizations that serve to bring members of the community together.

Communities foster the development of associations that give a community a collective character. Churches, community centers, schools, and several other types of social institutions serve this purpose of uniting people together as a community. However, the sharing of a common environment also instills a sense of collective identity amongst people, which influences people’s feelings about their relationship with the community. Over time, Cedar Park has emerged as a flourishing neighborhood with a cohesive community that continues to grow both residentially and commercially.

Cedar Park is one of several neighborhoods that comprise West Philadelphia. The neighborhood itself is bounded physically by 46th street on the east, 52nd street on the
west, the SEPTA tracks on the south and Larchwood Avenue on the north. Although initially primarily farmland, Cedar Park soon developed into a thriving suburb of Philadelphia in conjunction with the construction of trolley routes linking West Philadelphia to Center City in the late 1800s.

At this point in its history, Cedar Park was in the early stages of community development. “Suburban housing developments began to replace the outlying farmland as housing developers and contractors bought real estate and built houses in order to attract people from more densely populated areas who would commute to the city.”¹ However, the electrification of trolley lines in the mid-1890s revolutionized the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia and contributed to further residential and commercial expansion in the neighborhood of Cedar Park, the effects of which can still be seen today. Additionally, with a station located at 49th Street and Chester Avenue, residents of Cedar Park could commute to Center City more conveniently and faster than ever before. While mid-rise apartment buildings, single houses and row houses all permeated its landscape, Cedar Park was notable for ornate Queen Anne style architecture with porch-front houses, bay windows, steep roofs, prominent chimneys and balconies. These semi-detached houses, also known as “twins,” were built in a variety of styles and motifs and situated on wide tree-lined streets. The suburbanization of Cedar Park in this manner attracted a variety of urban families. The neighborhood’s diverse population, with people of different racial, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, is wholly representative of West Philadelphia’s social composition.

As Cedar Park grew, commercial development also sprang up, particularly along Baltimore Avenue between 49th and 52nd street. Not only did several trolley lines intersect at these crossroads, but shops for groceries, clothing, and other commodities operated along the street, providing residents with their essential needs. In the beginning of the 20th century, this business hub of the Cedar Park neighborhood also generated a number of community organizations. The West Philadelphia’s Business Men’s Association, established in 1905, met at Colonial Hall located at 52nd and Baltimore. Additionally, the Cedar Avenue Improvement Association was responsible for developing the tract of land along 50th street between Baltimore and Catherine, depicted in 1908 as “one of the beauty spots of West Philadelphia.”

Furthermore, Cedar Park built a firehouse for Truck Company 13 in 1904 at the center business district, which now houses the Firehouse Farmers Market.

During this time of suburbanization, social institutions also began to form roots in the rapidly growing community. Churches were built in the early 1900’s to serve the community’s religious needs. On the corner of 52nd and Baltimore, Wayland Memorial Baptist Church replaced an older Baptist initiative while St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church (now Hickman temple A.M.E. Church) was erected at 50th and Baltimore to replace the services that had been held outside under tents. Other churches completed during the early 20th century include St. Francis de Sales Roman Catholic Church at 47th and Springfield, Incarnation Lutheran Church (now the Greater Enon Baptist Church) at 47th and Cedar, and Calvary United Methodist Church at 48th and Baltimore. Some of these churches remained prominent within the neighborhood throughout the 20th century.

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2 Wolfe, Fred, and Wells, Joan. IBID.
Even today there still stand churches that have a profound impact on the residents of Cedar Park. The St. Francis de Sales Church runs a very successful catholic school in the community. The school enrolls students from kindergarten to eighth grade and is generally comprised of local children who live in the community. It is relatively affordable, and generous subsidies from the school are made available to new immigrants who do not have the money to afford to send their children there. The school is an affordable alternative to sending kids to private school while simultaneously being a better school than the public schools in the area. The community also benefits from the school because St. Francis is focused on teaching English to all of its students, many of whom are immigrants, which helps to assimilate the children into the community and the nation on the whole.3

The story of Calvary United Methodist Church also illustrates how Cedar Park has been shaped by the churches in the neighborhood. The church lost its congregation in the mid-90s, leaving the pastor with no other alternative but to close its doors. However, the stained-glass windows that decorate the church are worth millions of dollars, and so the pastor decided to sell the windows in hopes of opening a congregation in a different area of Philadelphia. The community erupted in opposition to the pastor’s decision as the church is a massive building that adds both beauty and value to the community. The residents of Cedar Park felt that if the building became vacant, it would fall into disrepair and a cultural center of the community would be lost. The community successfully persuaded the pastor not to relocate the church, which was later reopened and now serves

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as both the congregational home of the West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship and the Calvary Center for Community and Culture.⁴

Over time, Cedar Park has been shaped and transformed by the residents and institutions that dwell in it. Currently, the community remains extremely diverse, yet it continues to thrive, largely due to Cedar Park Neighbors, an improvement association established close to fifty years ago that is dedicated to ensuring that Cedar Park remains an enjoyable place to reside and work. Cedar Park Neighbors is comprised of local residents in the Cedar Park neighborhood who come together to address community-related issues such as safety, sanitation, urban development, and access to city resources and services. “Successful past projects include a low-interest loan program for property renovation, an energy weatherization program, a loan program for senior citizens for improvement, a Police/Community mini-station and the development of the Firehouse Farmers Market.”⁵ However, housing abandonment and deterioration are still of great concern, especially in the section west of 49th Street. In order to help combat this the University of Pennsylvania has extended the Penn Mortgage Program to the Cedar Park community. Under this program, Penn faculty and employees can buy homes in the community and receive a forgivable loan of $7,500, which is forgiven once the person has lived in the community for five years. This money is also given to Penn employees who wish to make improvements on their homes. Moreover, the University guarantees the mortgages in order to entice people to live in the community.⁶

Today, the Cedar Park neighborhood is home to approximately 10,000 people and is included in the West Philadelphia Streetcar Suburb Historic Districts on the National

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⁴ Interview with Professor Michael Nairn. IBID.
⁵ Wolfe, Fred, and Wells, Joan. IBID.
Register of Historic Places. Baltimore Ave. represents the main street in the community, containing Cedar Park, a shopping strip, a farmer’s market, and a police station. Along Baltimore Avenue, there is also a string of ethnic African restaurants. These restaurants indicate that a vibrant West African community resides in Cedar Park. Additionally, nearly every convenience store on the block advertises phone cards. As one walks along Baltimore Avenue, one can see calling card rates and advertisements for phone cards in all of the windows, which further reveals that there is a large immigrant community in the neighborhood.

The Abraccio restaurant represents yet another important commercial component of the Cedar Park neighborhood. Formerly situated on the University of Pennsylvania’s campus under the name Gold Standard, Abraccio relocated to the Cedar Park community with the help of the University. The restaurant moved into a building that had recently burned down, and Penn financed some of the renovations of the building. Abraccio is currently located at 820 South 47th St and prospers in the Cedar Park neighborhood. A beautiful community garden, full of all different types of fruits and vegetables and maintained by local residents, can also be found behind the restaurant.7

According to Tonnies’ theory, community is often defined as “a group of people with common values that comes together to accomplish a common goal.”8 The values of the group relate only to the goal which they are trying to accomplish, thus making the community more of a Gesellschaft institution or more of an area of commerce than family. Along with the concentrated use of local services and facilities, it is these shared activities, values and networks that have created a collective identity for the community.

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7 Interview with Professor Michael Nairn. Ibid
8 Merz, Carol, and Furman, Gail. “Theory of Community: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.” Community and Schools; Promise and Paradox. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 15
in Cedar Park. Cedar Park Neighbors continues to foster collaboration amongst residents of the neighborhood to address pertinent community-related concerns such as safety, housing and education. The commercial district along Baltimore Avenue continues to thrive and expand in conjunction with the residential growth of Cedar Park and the development of community stores and businesses. The diversity within the community is a result of the different religious denominations that have arisen over time, but the ability of the Cedar Park community to find ways to work together has come to define this exciting and satisfying place to live.
Bibliography

