

America can use a settlement houses renaissance

Rich Baum : 5-6 minutes : 3/24/2025

Headwinds swirl around us, stemming from the economy, the government, the environment and rapidly developing technology.

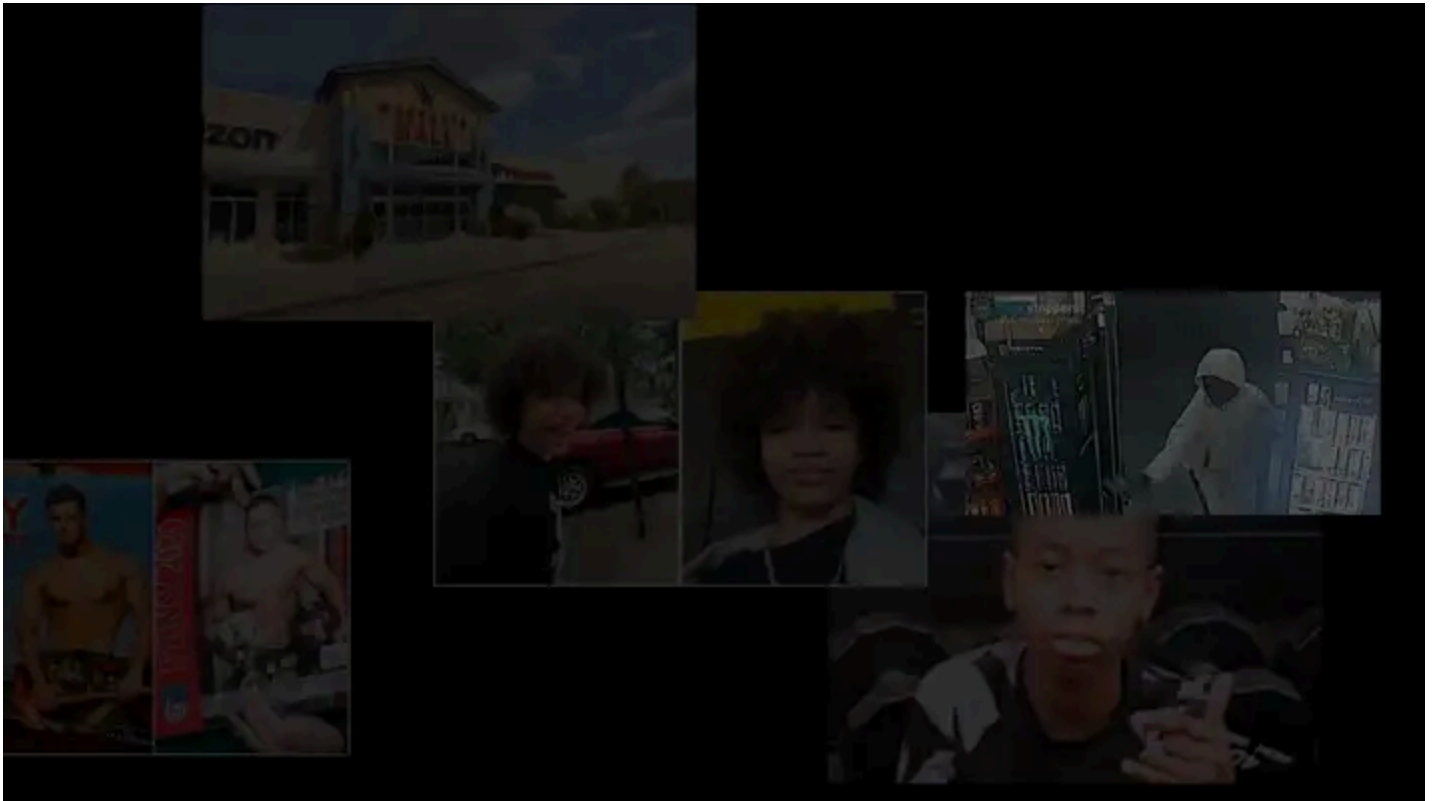
We've been here before and our history offers us a powerful response: Support and build settlement houses that will provide spaces in which we can thrive together, in spite of all the forces that work to the contrary.

The late 19th century experienced turmoil remarkably similar to today — government dysfunction, profound changes in the economic landscape, decreasing standards of living, and massive technological transformations.

The [settlement house movement](#) emerged at that time, and at the height of the movement more than 400 settlement houses created community in neighborhoods across the country. The first ones emerged as a private, charitable reaction to the crushing poverty and lack of services among immigrants in neighborhoods throughout New York, as well as places like El Paso's Segundo Barrio, and Chicago's Near West Side, where the most prominent among them, [Hull House, was started by reformer Jane Addams](#).

Settlement houses quickly established themselves as much more than simply a place to find social services. Instead, they embodied the idea that — despite all the forces that pull us apart — humans thrive best in an environment of mutual support, trust, and community.

Although the “settlement house” terminology is unfamiliar to many, numerous still exist today as hubs of activity that anchor their neighborhoods, including New York's Lower East Side, where I work.



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Every day I see our settlement house come to vibrant life. Hundreds of older adults gather for free lunch and breakfast served by volunteers and then move on to exercise, art, and other activities. While kids from the neighborhood fill the pre-school, their parents meet with social workers who connect them to needed services.

Recent immigrants come to us for clothes that have been donated by the community and for help navigating their lives in the United States. Teens stop by to play sports in our gym, attend support groups, take college prep classes, and volunteer to help the older adults. Individuals in treatment for addiction staff a food pantry and distribute bags of groceries to people in the community.

A settlement house harkens back to when community and neighborhood were the building blocks of a flourishing life: where the staff knows everyone, and no one is allowed to fall through the cracks; where various forms of assistance are coordinated with each other and are located right in the neighborhoods; where people in the same community help each other in a multitude of ways; where a wide variety of services and activities encourage connections across age, race, and class.

Many of the settlement houses that were created since the 1800s still serve their communities as they always have, although they often operate under extraordinary stress, needing increased investment and support as they attempt to address new challenges of our society.

Moreover, just as hundreds were created more than a century ago, starting new settlement houses now in areas of need is eminently doable. Government or philanthropies can partner with nonprofits

to start settlement houses with seed funding that would allow them to get on their feet and begin delivering services.

Settlement houses can seek government contracts to deliver social services and raise funds from the community, as well as the wide network of philanthropists and donors who want to provide on-the-ground, direct aid.

Support for these community hubs sparks a virtuous cycle: they are rallying points and centers of gravity that affect thousands of people. The model exists many times over, and it works well. A settlement house would be as impactful in an urban immigrant neighborhood as it would in a Midwestern town struggling with a collapsing economy due to loss of manufacturing jobs.

Settlement houses offer what we have lost as our society spirals through various crises: compassionate, localized assistance when we need it; a way to experience life together, as friends and communities; kindness, and generosity of spirit. Individuals don't have to suffer alone, without companionship, support, or hope. In a time of turmoil, we can create our own places in which to flourish.

Sometimes the best innovations are already part of our heritage, the old becoming new again. A hundred years ago, settlement houses showed another way of life was possible in our communities. In 2025, they can do the same again.

Baum is president/CEO of [Educational Alliance](#), a community-based nonprofit that includes its original settlement house on the Lower East Side as well as a network of community centers and social service programs in lower Manhattan.