





Urban Village or *'Burb of the Future?:* The Racial and Economic Politics of a Houston Neighborhood

by Jordan Bauer

At a 1985 community meeting in Sharpstown, a suburb in southwest Houston, an irritated white homeowner complained, “I can walk up and down the streets of my neighborhood and tell you which yards are the Chinese.” A Chinese resident in the crowd stood up and replied that he knew “which ones belong to Mexicans.” In the nearby community of Alief, a white property owner was taken aback to notice his Vietnamese neighbor mowing his lawn wearing only his undershorts. Another resident was puzzled to see his Asian neighbor come out of his house several times a day to ring bells in a shrine in his front yard. Such observations illustrate some of the anxieties that longtime homeowners felt concerning the changing demographics of their community. For nearly thirty years, Sharpstown and many of its surrounding areas had been predominately white suburbs.¹

Built by developer Frank Sharp in 1955, the master-planned suburb, Sharpstown, earned the title of “the largest project of its kind in the world.” Like many communities along the metropolitan fringe, Sharpstown’s success as a booming suburb owed much to the automobile and a freeway that linked it to the central city. Highway 59 South, the Southwest Freeway, allowed city residents quick access to and from Sharpstown’s many attractions, including Houston’s first enclosed, air-conditioned shopping mall, a prosperous business center, desirable schools and churches, and a country club, complete with an eighteen-hole golf course and three Olympic-sized swimming pools. Not all Houstonians, however, enjoyed Sharpstown’s suburban atmosphere; like many postwar American suburbs, it developed as a predominately white, middle-class community.²

Since 1955, Sharpstown has undergone remarkable demographic change. The neighborhood once exalted for its “wholesome American living,” for a time became synonymous with crime and known for its aging homes, unsafe apartment complexes, and undesirable schools.³ The Sharpstown shopping mall, described by contemporaries in the 1960s as the “jewel in [the suburb’s] crown,” became associated with murder, crime,

An aerial view of the Sharpstown neighborhood in 1959 shows the Southwest Freeway under construction and the land cleared for future development of Sharpstown Mall.

Photo courtesy of The Positive Image.



Today, multilingual signage of businesses in the Sharpstown area reflects the neighborhood's diversity. Photo by author.

and increased gang activity by the 1980s and 1990s. Today, Bellaire Boulevard, formerly lined with predominately Anglo-owned stores and businesses, now boasts minority-owned establishments with multilingual signage, reflecting the area's status as one of the most socially diverse communities in the United States.

The history of Sharpstown calls into question some of our monolithic notions of "white flight" because as the community's demographics shifted, many longtime white residents did not flee to racially-homogeneous suburbs. Longtime residents responded to the changes taking place around them in a variety of ways, and homeowners devised several, often contentious, strategies of combating Sharpstown's growing reputation as a suburb "fallen from grace." Likewise, Sharpstown's new residents remade the landscape and contributed to its changing definition over time from suburban to urban.

In 1954, developer Frank Sharp sold not only modern homes, but a planned lifestyle outside of the central city. "Too often we find children living in congested areas which have grown up without planning," Sharp claimed. "Life in Sharpstown is secure, satisfying, happy and friendly-because it was planned that way," he continued. By painting a picture of the suburb as safe and appealing, he implicitly labeled the city as dangerous and unattractive. In the mid-fifties, Sharpstown embodied what Americans have come to know as suburban culture. The commissioner of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) predicted in 1955 that it would become a model for American residential housing. Sharp marketed the FHA-funded enterprise as "a new experiment in our way of life."⁵

The opening in 1961 of Houston's first enclosed, air-

conditioned shopping center changed the neighborhood from a residential enclave to a regional hub of strip commercial developments, fast-food chains, and high-rise office complexes. The \$30 million shopping complex heralded in an extensive array of mixed-use areas, often centered on retail markets and commercial activity.

Between 1960 and 1970, land-use practices broke the continuity of the "planned" community. With Houston's non-existent zoning laws, large-scale apartment structures sprang up all over the neighborhood, attracting younger, single newcomers to the area.⁶ Although Sharpstown continued to remain predominantly white and middle-class, by 1960, a number of nonwhite families settled in Sharpstown. Largely affluent, these newcomers were mostly Cuban. A medical doctor and his wife for instance, emigrated from Cuba in 1960 and bought a house in Sharpstown, after renting an apartment close to downtown. The couple remembers that neighbors welcomed them and their four children. They picked Sharpstown because they believed, at the time, that it was the nicest community in Houston. Others often facing political persecution, such as Luis Gonzalez, also fled Cuba in the 1960s. He and his wife Georgina (also from Cuba), who had lived and worked on Wall Street since the late 1940s, made their home in Sharpstown and began a family insurance business. Although the all-white community witnessed the beginnings of some diversity in the 1960s, social diversification on a massive scale would not appear for nearly twenty years.⁷

The Texas oil bust and subsequent collapse of the real estate market in the 1980s completely changed the demographic char-

This ad appeared in the Houston Post on March 13, 1955, announcing the grand opening of the subdivision.



Many ranch-style homes, popular in the 1950s, were built in the Sharpstown area.

Photo by author.

acter of Sharpstown, along with several other southwest Houston communities, and helped redefine the neighborhood from suburban to urban. Worldwide overproduction plunged the price of Texas crude oil from a high of nearly \$40 a barrel in 1982 to \$10 a barrel by 1986. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, with 70 percent of Texas jobs depending directly or indirectly on the oil industry, the oil bust crushed the Texas labor force and “the state’s economy collapsed with it.” Betty Townes, a longtime Sharpstown resident and real estate agent remembers that “many Sharpstown residents had to move to Boston or Georgia or other areas to get work.” Thousands of apartments stood vacant, and thus, rent prices dropped.⁸ Before 1970, Sharpstown had only about 3,000 apartment units, but by the early 1990s, the neighborhood had a surplus of over 25,000 units. Along with massive real estate and apartment overbuilding in the 1970s, the oil bust and the housing depression sparked the movement of minorities from the city’s core to communities in Houston’s urban fringe, particularly in the metropolitan southwest. Houston home prices at the end of 1986 had dropped by twenty-five percent; in an eighteen-month period, Sharpstown registered a fourteen percent drop.⁹

Government instability in parts of Central America caused many to flee the region during the 1980s, and Houston’s affordable housing drew them to the city creating a significant change in the overall demographics. Sinking home and rent prices attracted lower income and minority Houstonians to Sharpstown. Jerry Wood, a city planning official, stated that “The best housing program this country has ever seen was the oil bust. Where else but in Texas can someone from a Third World country like El Salvador or Thailand walk into an apartment with a dishwasher and cable TV for three hundred dollars a month or less?” Just as developers had marketed white suburbanization in the postwar years, apartment owners and landlords fueled the outward migration of minorities with their own marketing techniques. Apartment complexes advertised “vigorously” for minority tenants with low rents, no deposits, and offers such as free English classes. By 1980, the non-white population reached over twenty percent.¹⁰

In the mid-1980s, Sharpstown’s minority economic presence paralleled, and in some cases may have preceded, residential settlement patterns. Beginning with Houston’s first Fiesta grocery store as a Hispanic “economic anchor,” numerous retail



The oil bust brought new residents to the area making it one of the most culturally diverse communities in the country.

Photo by author.



A large crowd gathered for the much-anticipated opening of Sharpstown Mall on September 14, 1961.

Photo Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.



The area around the intersection of Bellaire Boulevard and Gessner Road became the city's suburban Chinatown.

Photo by author.

centers and service-sector businesses owned by Central Americans sprang up in the area. In addition, Asian-owned mini-malls and strip commercial developments and redevelopments dominated certain neighborhoods. The area around Bellaire Boulevard and Gessner quickly became the city's "suburban" Chinatown. In most cases, the newcomers recycled "Anglo" buildings left vacant during the oil bust. Many of the entrance signs at grocery stores, local markets, shopping centers, and businesses began to appear in multiple languages, including English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Korean. By repurposing these

structures, minorities actively reshaped their environment, the market, and community within Sharpstown.¹¹

Between 1955 and 1990, the population of Sharpstown increased from a few hundred to close to sixty thousand. During this period, Hispanics made up the fastest-growing segment of the population in Sharpstown and other demographically-similar neighborhoods of southwest Houston, including Alief, Gulfton, and Westwood. Significant numbers of blacks and recent immigrants from Asia flooded the once racially-uniform neighborhood and mixed with Anglos and Hispanics.¹² The community continued to diversify, and by 2000, the total population reached over 77,000. While the community saw significant gains in the number of minorities between 1990 and 2000, the percent of non-Hispanic whites in the neighborhood markedly decreased. By 2000, Anglos comprised just twenty percent of the population, African Americans made up seventeen percent, and Sharpstown's largest ethnic community, Hispanics, comprised nearly half of the population at forty-six percent. Sharpstown's Asian community witnessed significant gains in population and, according to the Sharpstown Civic Association, "economic strength," resulting in the formation of the Asian Chamber of Commerce, "a vibrant and growing force for business in Sharpstown and Southwest Houston." In fact, Houston's Department of Planning and Development recorded that at 16.3 percent, Asians comprised the fastest-growing segment of Sharpstown's population since 2000, nearly exceeding the community's black population.¹³

Homeowners responded to these changes in a variety of ways. An outward movement of Anglos definitely occurred in



Yards reflect residents' culture alongside their concerns for safety.
Photo by author.

the neighborhood, yet, thousands of longtime residents stayed. Anglos continued to represent the second largest ethnic group. One homeowner explained that “Minorities moving here never bothered us. . . . We love the cultural diversions in the neighborhood.” Former resident Darrell Gerdes recalled that in his neighborhood, “A lot of folks put up burglar bars on their houses and installed alarm system[s].” Other residents simply fled the neighborhood. Archie Wilcox, a member of the Sharpstown Rotary Club, noticed that many homeowners welcomed new residents by “moving to more desirable locations.”¹⁴

Since the 1990s, high crime rates have characterized the community. Some residents blamed its tarnished image on the surrounding apartment complexes which, they believed, bred criminal activity. Homeowners explained that apartment dwellers, who “do not take care of [the] property,” caused the deterioration of the neighborhood. Sue Ann Perry, a former Sharpstown resident, argued that a rise in crime “made the

neighborhood lose its appeal as a perfect place to raise a family.” Other property owners claimed that Sharpstown had no more crime than any other area in Houston, or any other large city. Darrell Gerdes disagreed and described trepidation at the thought of entering his parent’s neighborhood after dark. He noted no fear at the thought of being out at night in cities such as Chicago or New York. “But I refuse to venture into the Sharpstown area after dark,” he stressed. “I plan my evening shopping trips to completely avoid even driving through that area.”¹⁵

Examining the community’s youth population, particularly the local high school, which represented a microcosm of the larger district in the mid-1980s and 1990s, illustrates Sharpstown’s multicultural problems. The late eighties witnessed several instances of interracial violence that on occasion turned deadly. At the end of the school year in 1988, a fight at Sharpstown High School between four students (three black, one white) escalated to an interracial brawl of more than 100 that required calling in sixteen police units to control the situation. A few months later, an exchange of racial epithets between black and Asian teenagers led to the fatal shooting of a Vietnamese youth at the Sharpstown Mall. Two years later, a group of whites beat to death another Vietnamese teenager.¹⁶ Such incidents were highly publicized in the media, giving Sharpstown its “new image.” The media did not, however, give such publicity to violence within racial and ethnic groups.

A look at day-to-day activities at Sharpstown High School deepens our understanding of the community’s racial tensions. According to *Texas Monthly* in 1993, none of the high school’s ethnic groups attempted to get along with one another. “Segregation has ended,” the periodical reported, “but the end of separatism is nowhere in sight.” The ethnic clans demanded their equality, while also flaunting their difference. At Sharpstown High, the black students, who made up thirty-two percent of the student body, “dominate[d]” the middle of the hall. The whites (twenty-four percent) and Hispanics (twenty-eight percent) occupied their own respective sides of the hallways, while the Asian students (sixteen percent) tried to “get through as best they can.” Moreover, tensions existed within groups. Although Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese students were a part of the Asian group, their separate cultures often clashed. Many students attempted to transfer to another Houston school “to es-



Sharpstown High School is located on Bissonet west of Fondren.

Photo by author.



The neighborhood welcome sign indicates Sharpstown is a deed restricted community.
Photo by author.

cape the racial edge at Sharpstown.” Because of a few incidents of violence, Sharpstown schools, Townes remembered, became schools to avoid. Rumors about the perceived lack of safety at Sharpstown exacerbated the negative public image of both the schools and the community in general.¹⁷

In the 1990s area property owners, civic associations, and businesses began to address what they saw as problems associated with their community’s dramatic demographic change. In place of zoning, the community had enforced deed restrictions, but more, they believed, needed to be done. To improve Sharpstown’s image, they proposed such plans as the creation of a Public Improvement District (PID) and mandatory civic associa-

tion dues. The district, financed by homeowners, intended to fund increased public safety and beautification projects. While many championed the idea as a way to clean up the area, others opposed it as government control.¹⁸

Homeowners and businesses formed several organizations to improve the area’s image and property values. Along with the Sharpstown Area Economic Development Council, the Sharpstown Civic Association (SCA), founded in 1977, proposed a plan to create a PID, in which the groups hoped that “landscaped esplanades” and “uniform signage,” among other things, would enhance the neighborhood.¹⁹ Plans for the PID, which would tax property owners, also included constable patrol, mosquito control, and deed restriction enforcement. The plan called for expanding the PID to include neighboring areas that would be known as the “Village of Sharpstown.” Advocates believed that neighborhoods needed new home constructions that included and promoted modern amenities, such as central heat and air conditioning, walk-in closets, and two-car garages, to attract buyers. Concerned residents hoped the “village” idea would combat the community’s label as “blighted.”²⁰

The proposal quickly drew opposition from a number of Sharpstown property owners who did not wish to be taxed. At a public hearing at City Hall in September 1996, some forty residents voiced criticism of the plan to create “two special taxing districts,” the PID and related tax increment reinvestment zones (TIRZ). Proponents, such as Ray Driscoll, a city councilman



Today, homes in the neighborhood range from those that have been updated and immaculately maintained...



...to others that are showing their age.

Photos by author.

who represented Sharpstown, pushed the tax districts as the appropriate plan to fund public safety and beautification projects, among other revitalization ventures. Under the PID, the owner of a home valued at \$60,000 would pay \$28.80 a year in taxes. The median price of homes in Sharpstown during the 1990s was \$55,600.²¹ Supporters expected that the district would generate about one million dollars a year for improvement projects that would be overseen by a board appointed by the city council. Not only did opponents take issue with the additional tax burden, they denounced the concept of the Village of Sharpstown as a “template that will be used around the city to bring in more bureaucracy, higher taxes, neighborhood zoning, and a lot of disharmony.” Years later Betty Townes, a booster of the districts, still could not understand why homeowners objected to paying “the tiny extra tax” to revitalize the community. Nevertheless, the neighborhood remained divided on the issue.²² The districts never passed the planning stage in the 1990s, and a second attempt failed in 2000. Townes blamed the “very vocal” homeowners who opposed the districts for their defeat.²³

Despite Sharpstown’s violent image and infighting among some longtime residents, other residents embraced Sharpstown’s multiculturalism and tried to ease antagonisms. In the 1980s, students at Sharpstown High School created an inter-school group called the Network for Social Awareness to break down cultural barriers. The organization sponsored discussions about world conflicts, participated in food drives, fasted for World Hunger Day, and marched outside department stores to protest the sale of animal fur. Some residents at a local community center distributed groceries every Saturday to needy newcomers. When an apartment complex lacked the funds to maintain its grounds, a multiethnic group of renters used their own money to clean up the courtyards and plant flower and vegetable gardens. The “blooming idiots,” as they called themselves, represented a “microcosm of the United Nations,” including a Jewish woman from New York, an Arab from Jordan, an Italian, a woman from Mexico, a family from India, an American Indian, and an African-American couple. A number of multiracial churches in the community stressed their diversity as a strength and advertised their multilingual services. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, then, residents sought not only to improve the physical appearance and safety of the neighborhood, but also social relations between one another.²⁴

In addition, many examples of community-based groups, particularly among Asian residents, have focused on improving conditions for lower-income and minority populations in southwest Houston. Michael CaoMy Nguyen, for instance, began VN Teamwork in 1996, a nonprofit organization, that has sought to improve the social wellbeing of Houston’s “underserved” people. By working with other community-based organizations such as Boat People SOS, the Chinese Community Center, and Asian American Health Coalition, VN Teamwork has promoted quality health care, developed affordable housing for low-income residents, and built a senior housing project.²⁵

More recently, a diverse group in Sharpstown protested the city council’s decision to close a heavily-used street to build a community center in the nearby Gulfton neighborhood. Although the council claimed the center served Sharpstown as well, protesters made up of Latinos, Asians, blacks, and Anglos contended that it benefited only the Gulfton community, not Sharpstown. They argued, moreover, that closing Rookin Street

cut residents off from their local post office, four or five condominium and apartment complexes, businesses, and a church and mosque. Although the street eventually closed, James Nguyen, one of the leaders of the protest, believed the protestors nonetheless benefited from the effort because it brought diverse neighbors together around an issue and fostered a sense of community where they lacked one previously. Such examples illustrate a vibrant community in which a diverse populace sought to learn about, collaborate with, and help one another.²⁶

Beginning in the early nineties, Sharpstown no longer held its once sleepy suburban status as Houstonians, living inside and outside the community, began referring to it as “the city.” Sprawl had pushed the fringe boundaries of the city far beyond Sharpstown. Gloria Scheel and her husband John have lived in Sharpstown for eighteen years. Scheel admitted liking the “hustle and bustle of being right in the middle of it [the city].” She revealed that she enjoyed meeting a variety of people and having an assortment of options for shopping and dining a place such as Sharpstown afforded. “The things that suburbanites don’t like about the city,” detailed the *Houston Chronicle*, “are exactly what appeal [to] some who live close-in,” a relative term used to indicate whether one’s home is “close to” some destination, such as downtown.²⁷ Although Betty Townes described Sharpstown as a suburb when she moved to the area in 1971, she now considers it “close-in,” referring to anything located inside Beltway 8.²⁸

Sharpstown’s changing racial and ethnic character also helped redefine its status as a former suburb. Despite Houston’s vast sprawl, only when the neighborhood’s social composition began to change in the 1980s did residents and non-residents alike shift their perceptions of the area as a suburban haven. Perceptions of place, from inner city neighborhoods to gated communities, have always been linked to social and economic status, race and ethnicity struggles over property values, the role of civic associations and neighborhood groups, and tensions between owners and renters.²⁹

Some believe that because Sharpstown has lost its once important label as “a pacesetter” for Houston, and instead become characteristic of the heterogeneous city, it makes the community less significant. Urban planning and design professor Peter Rowe contended in 1991 that “The Sharpstown that had boldly attempted to chart the course of Houston’s future some twenty-five years earlier had become just another piece of the general landscape.” Others such as City Councilman M.J. Khan, a Pakistani-American and Muslim who has represented Sharpstown since 2003, have argued the contrary. Khan predicts that “District F [which is currently home to Sharpstown] today is what Houston will be in a couple of decades....It is what America will be in about seventy years or so.” Like Khan, others such as longtime resident Keith Thayer have explained that Sharpstown’s diversity “needs to be stressed as a strength.” Many residents believe that just as Sharpstown was the future of cities across the nation some sixty years ago, it continues to represent a harbinger of future U.S. metropolitan growth.³⁰

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