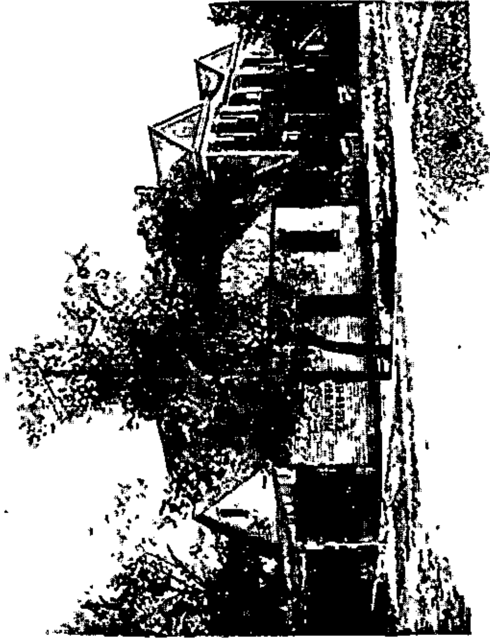
IN order to make and keep Woodland Heights the strictly high grade residence section it is, and to guard against all undesirable features, we have placed certain restrictions on this property as to the character of the improvements and the nature of their use which are embodied in all of our deeds, and are binding not only upon the purchasers, but upon their heirs and assigns. One of the most important of these restrictions is that which provides that no building shall ever be erected on this property to be used for a saloon, blacksmith shop, livery stable or any other kind of trade or business whatsoever. Another, equally important, forbids the sale of liquor of any description anywhere in the addition.

This is an effectual protection against having a corner "beer joint" like the one shown here, located right next your home. Such a scene as this is of frequent occurrence in most parts of Houston *except at* Woodland Heights, where it is forever prohibited, and you can be assured that your property will never be disfigured or impaired in value by anything of this character.

Contrast this picture of one of the older residence streets with the one on the opposite page, which exemplifies the *Woodland Heights way.*



How it is *NOT* done at Woodland Heights.

The advantages of deed restrictions are discussed on this page from a promotional booklet published in 1910.

"Be on the Lookout": Neighborhood Civic Clubs in Houston

Robert Fisher

We must all be on the lookout for [deed restriction] violations, report them, and stand ready to help the Restrictions Committee protest them.

Southwest Civic Club (Houston)
leaflet, 1966

Neighborhood civic clubs abound in the city of Houston. Such widespread neighborhood organizing comes as a surprise to most, for Houston seems to be little more than a massive urban sprawl connected only by freeways and, until recently, a boom-town atmosphere. Moreover, it has a well-deserved reputation as a highly conservative city, not the sort where one expects cooperative efforts like neighborhood organizing to flourish. In 1947, for example, John Gunther in his *Inside America* called Houston, "with the possible exception of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the most reactionary community in the United States".[1] Curiously, while no single image suffices for the Bayou City, its extraordinary growth since the early 1940s and a "laissez-faire" political environment, not the recipe for most neighborhood organization efforts, have combined to forge over 600 neighborhood civic clubs throughout the city.

Before proceeding to this unique situation in Houston, however, a brief introduction to the history of neighborhood organization will provide a larger frame of reference. Since its inception with the first neighborhoods in the nineteenth century, neighborhood organizing has followed three dominant

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[1]Gunther cited in Don Carleton, "McCarthyism in Houston: The George Ebey Affair," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80 (October 1976):167.

forms: a social work, political activist, and neighborhood improvement association type. The social work approach includes neighborhood-based efforts such as social settlements, community centers, community health programs, and community development efforts in the United States and abroad — all of which are fundamentally designed to have "professionals" work for and sometimes even with residents in order to deliver services or create resources. The "political activist" approach, personified by the efforts of Saul Alinsky, unemployed councils in the 1930s, and the host of neighborhood efforts that sprang up in the 1960s in opposition to "urban renewal" projects, see themselves as politically, not socially, oriented, and seek the empowerment of people rather than greater resources and the delivery of services. In the history of neighborhood organizing, these two are the dominant and often the only strands considered.[2]

The third approach to neighborhood organizing, the neighborhood improvement association, is not usually considered by either social scientists or activists as part of the history of community organizing. The approach and constituency of these associations are after all very different from the social welfare and political activist styles. Until most recently, for example, neighborhood improvement associations were generally not found in working class and minority neighborhoods. Moreover, the improvement association is fundamentally conservative; usually it can be found resisting, rather than joining, progressive social change efforts. This conservative form of community organizing predates the other approaches to neighborhood organizing, and, according to one historian, is more common, lasts longer, and can exhibit more pressure in local politics than organizing efforts in working class and slum neighborhoods. This is to be expected, given the fact that people in these neighborhoods are more affluent, wield greater personal power, and generally join formal interest-group organizations more readily than people in poor communities.[3]

In the generation after 1880 neighborhood improvement associations, especially those in more affluent communities, whether in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, or Columbus, Ohio, organized successfully to bring pressure on city officials to provide basic urban services to their neighborhoods.

[2]For additional information on the history of neighborhood organizing and an earlier draft of this article see Robert Fisher, *Let The People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (Boston, 1984). Also helpful is Fisher, "Community Organizing in Historical Perspective: A Typology," *Houston Review* 4 (Summer 1982): 75-89.

[3]For a good introduction to the history of neighborhood improvement associations see Joseph Arnold, "The Neighborhood and City Hall: The Origin of Neighborhood Associations in Baltimore, 1880-1911," *The Journal of Urban History* 6 (November 1979):3-30.

After World War I, however, many of these same associations turned their interest from neighborhood enhancement to protection against lower class and black in-migration.[4] In Houston the initial concern of the first improvement associations was also community enhancement, but here protection practices went hand in hand with enhancement from the outset. The deed in one of Houston's first "streetcar suburbs," for example, included as early as 1910 restrictions which preserved "the original beauty of the property," banned commercial development, forbade the sale of liquor in the subdivision, detailed architectural restrictions for new homes and home improvements, and *"protected from colored neighbors."*[5] The history of civic clubs in Houston offers an excellent opportunity to examine why some neighborhood associations focus on enhancement objectives while others are preoccupied with protection.

In Houston, deed restrictions and civic clubs are said to take the place of zoning. Land use has been determined by private interests and the profit motive ever since the Allen brothers, two New York City entrepreneurs, first began to market Houston in 1836. This is not to suggest, however, that the city has no form of land use management other than the speculations of land developers and businessmen. In residential neighborhoods, once the land is developed, land use is determined, rather explicitly, by deed restrictions. Drawn up initially by the developer, such deeds include land-use controls, architectural restrictions, and, until recently, racial covenants. Under this type of land-use management, individual homeowners are ultimately responsible for enforcing restrictions. They are the ones who have to "be on the lookout." They are the ones who have to take a "violator" to court to prevent a chicken farm or a Colonel Sanders from moving in next door.[6]

Deed restrictions came into use in Houston in the 1890s with the development of residential subdivisions. Prior to the first subdivisions in Houston and other cities, land was purchased in small parcels, usually by individual home owners. The six initial inner-city wards in Houston were settled in this manner without deed restrictions. After 1890 large parcels of land were developed on Houston's periphery and these subdivisions were regulated by deed restrictions. In 1910, a brochure for Woodland Heights

[4]Roderick D. McKenzie, *The Neighborhood: A Study of Local Life in Columbus, Ohio* (Chicago, 1923); Thomas Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto* (New York, 1978).

[5]Woodland Heights promotional brochure, 1910, Houston Subdivision Collection, Woodland Heights File, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Italics mine.

[6]In 1965 the City of Houston was given authorization by the Texas legislature to enforce deed restrictions. The funds of the city legal department, however, are insufficient to handle the task, and thus almost all restriction enforcement remains a "private" matter.

advertised its deed restrictions as one of the virtues of purchasing land there:

> In order to make and keep Woodland Heights the strictly high grade residence section it is, and to guard against all undesirable features, we have placed certain restrictions on this property as to the character of the improvements and the nature of their use which are embodied in all of our deeds, and are binding not only upon the purchasers, but upon their heirs and assigns.[7]

Civic clubs were quickly organized in the "streetcar suburbs" like Woodland Heights. Their *raison d'etre* was restriction enforcement, but they also functioned as traditional improvement associations, supplying necessary services and lobbying City Hall for street repairs, park development, and schools just like associations in the North. As development boomed on Houston's periphery, some three miles from downtown in the 1920s, so did neighborhood civic clubs, since each new subdivision came complete with a set of enforceable deed restrictions. But Houston civic clubs in the 1920s did not pursue restrictions with the reactionary zeal of their outer-city counterparts in northern cities like Chicago or St. Louis. Deed restrictions were seen primarily as a means of protecting property values and preserving neighborhood homogeneity, not as a method primarily intended to exclude blacks.

Deed restrictions in Houston in the 1920s included racial clauses limiting ownership and tenancy to "Caucasians and whites only." But competition for housing between blacks and whites was slight and well controlled. The city was still relatively small in population, with 138,000 people. The number of blacks in the city was sizable, around 34,000 people, but the percentage of blacks (24%) was not expanding. Most important, this was the South before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Segregation was the law of the land. The entire system — institutions, power brokers, police, and day-to-day relationships — enforced Jim Crow. Two separate societies existed, one black, the other white. Blacks were concentrated in three older areas of the city and moving into a white area was suicidal, if not impossible. People "knew their place." Before 1948 residential racial transformation was not a "problem" for Houston's neighborhood civic clubs.

Civic clubs in Houston enjoyed their heyday in the decades after World War II. So did the city. From 1940 to 1960 Houston's population increased from about 400,000 to nearly one million. In 1948, annexations doubled the area of the city; eight years later the city doubled its geographic size again. Suburban construction boomed as well. Federal highway development made the outlying areas more accessible and federal housing loans put the purchase of a single-family home within the reach of the middle class. Developers rushed to

[7]Woodland Heights promotional brochure, 1910, Houston Subdivision Collection.

meet the demand.

The Braeswood area, located in the southwest sector of the city, was one of the more popular subdivisions for upper-middle-class whites. Less expensive middle-income housing could be found in other parts of town, but the Braeswood area offered ranch homes with central air conditioning and central heat, three bedrooms, modern kitchens, and two bathrooms, for around $20,000. In many ways the subdivision was undistinguished: small plots of land, a gridiron street pattern, not many trees, and only a few models from which to choose a home. But it was pleasant enough, accessible to downtown, and on the "right" side — the west side — of the city. The Braeswood development opened in 1951 and by the end of the year there were 6,000 people living there.[8]

The Southwest Civic Club (SWCC) was organized in the Braeswood area on Feburary 13, 1951, and held its first meeting one month later. Eighty-eight residents attended. The goals of the organization were clear: to enhance and protect the neighborhood and to enforce deed restrictions. Like earlier neighborhood improvement associations, initial activity focused on securing neighborhood physical necessities. Houston prided itself on limiting the role of government in the affairs of "private" citizens. Neighborhood residents were expected to furnish their own needs. Accordingly, civic clubs coordinated neighborhood support and financing for services the city would not supply, like mosquito fogging and street lighting.

But the SWCC did lobby City Hall most effectively, for improved services. Residents paid sizable property taxes compared to other neighborhoods in the city and they expected something in return. A meeting on flood control in November 1951 brought out some 200 residents. They resolved not to support county officials who were seeking two new tax measures unless promised road and ditch repairs were completed. The county government responded slowly, but eventually met the neighborhood's wishes. Over the next few years the SWCC effectively lobbied for traffic signs and lights, improved water pressure, road paving and repairs, a new library, a park, an elementary school, and a fire station. They used their political influence to relieve blocked sewers and to stop development of a sewage plant. To accomplish their objectives, the club might hold mass meetings or sponsor letter writing campaigns to pressure City Hall and county officers. But most

[8]Southwest Civic Club MSS, Houston Metropolitan Research Center. I also made use of the papers on the Southwest Civic Club written by Kathy Sexton, Cindy Herbert, and others in my urban history course, Spring 1981. The information which follows on the Southwest Civic Club is based on the historical records of the club which were made available to me by John Shanahan and which are now stored at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

often club successes resulted from personal contacts between club leaders and city officials and prominent businessmen. SWCC leaders over the years included state representatives, realtors, lawyers, and urban planners, each with some contacts and varying degrees of influence in the city and county. In neighborhoods like Braeswood, the prestige and contacts of individual members, enhanced by the backing of the civic association, enabled the organization to be heard and to win services.

In addition to its service acquisition and neighborhood enhancement functions, a central activity of the SWCC, as in all civic clubs in Houston, was deed restriction enforcement. The process of private deed enforcement maintained neighborhood homogeneity effectively, but not without serious drawbacks. The first steps in restriction enforcement were informal: a resident would complain to the civic club, and the club president would write a letter or pay an informal visit to the "violator." Most often the people were simply unaware that they had broken the deed. In one case a young boy was raising two lambs in his backyard for a Future Farmers of America project. However, the deed prohibited the keeping of livestock in the neighborhood, so the resident complied, reluctantly. Sometimes more formal action, like the threat of a civil lawsuit, was required, and it was here that a fundamental problem faced neighborhood civic clubs. Court cases were few and far between because defendants realized the potential expense and the court's support of deed restriction enforcement. On one occasion the SWCC secured a "permanent injunction" against a chiropractor from practicing in his home. On another, they took a motel operator to court, forcing his business out of the area. But court expenses were high for the club as well as for the defendant. Over the years the SWCC built a sizable restriction fund from membership dues. By October 1960 it had over $10,000. The annual expense for legal fees averaged only $500. This covered small cases where a letter from the club's law firm was usually sufficient. One violation pursued all the way through the courts, however, could wipe out the entire restriction fund, and more. Only the wealthiest civic clubs, like the River Oaks Property Owners Association, could finance frequent court battles. Deed restriction enforcement was potentially an expensive means of protecting property values.

It was also divisive. Neighbors had to watch, oppose, and threaten each other with court suits. It was easy to oppose a filling station trying to move into the neighborhood. But what about telling neighbors that they could not extend their carport to the lot line or convert their garage into an apartment for the family of their son or daughter? Given the problems of constant enforcement, potential expense, and intra-neighborhood tension, neighborhoods with active civic clubs ardently supported zoning proposals in 1948 and 1962. Civic clubs preferred to make enforcement of deed restrictions a public rather than a private function, one supported by tax monies and administered by local officials.

While the SWCC, like all civic clubs in Houston, established a democratic structure for resident participation, in practice the affairs of the club were handled by a half dozen men, usually businessmen or professionals. Membership was not open to women until 1956, and then only to women who were "resident owners of real property." The club had four elected administrative officers, ten "area directors," and "block captains." Meetings were run democratically, in that all members could vote, but generally resident participation and interest was slight. The early years of the SWCC were the peak time of resident activism. The neighborhood was young, people were just getting to know each other, and basic amenities still needed to be secured. The residents wanted a community organization. In 1955, eighty-five percent of the residents paid $6.75 per year to join the club: $1 for membership, $1.25 for restriction enforcement fund, and $4.50 for mosquito fogging. Meetings that addressed an "emergency issue," like flood control, could bring out 200 residents. But even in the heyday of the SWCC, most monthly meetings were poorly attended. "Everybody is willing to do everything they were asked to do, but [they] don't attend the meeting," lamented an officer in 1955. Often no more than ten or twenty people came. Block captains and a regular newsletter kept neighbors informed of club activities and this sufficed for most. Elections for club officers were rarely contested. Residents willingly accepted the suggestions of the *ad hoc* Nominating Committee, which was appointed by the Board of Directors. Members were grateful that someone with leadership skills and, quite often, political or business influence, was willing to assume some of the burden.

Over the years the organization became even less participatory and less democratic. In 1956 the number of annual general meetings were reduced from 12 to 5. The Board of Directors continued, however, to meet monthly and to direct the affairs of the club. In 1958 membership hit a low point of only 43½% of neighborhood residents. The reasons were obvious. The Braeswood area was becoming more stable and most initial services and amenities had been provided. Many people, moreover, were not pleased with the club's mosquito spraying service and chose to do without the fogging. Perhaps most important, neighbors did not feel threatened. The Board of Directors proclaimed the need to "Sell the Civic Club" in the neighborhood, but to little avail. In 1963 membership was up slightly to forty-eight percent, but that remained a far cry from the initial years. This pattern of elite leadership and declining resident interest seems nearly universal in Houston civic clubs. The SWCC, like other neighborhood civic clubs, was after all fundamentally a neighborhood-based interest group, and interest groups, especially those in affluent communities like Braeswood, do not require democratic or active participation.

Despite their overt political function as neighborhood interest groups — as coordinators and lobbyists for neighborhood services and protectors of property values — civic clubs picture themselves as non-political. While they do not directly support candidates for public office, the most effective civic clubs, like the Southwest Civic Club, serve a parapolitical function by influencing local officials and power brokers on behalf of the neighborhood and serving as informal conduits of information concerning needs and developments in the community.[9] The SWCC never shied away from addressing political issues. Over the years it invited speakers and sponsored programs that reflected the conservative politics of club leaders. In the 1950s speakers warned club members of the hazards of federal deficit spending and taxing powers. The club also coordinated civil defense programs at the neighborhood level. It showed films like "The Land of the Free," and "Communism on the Map," the latter advertised in press releases throughout the city as "a fully documented film on how the communists are spreading their doctrine throughout the world." These activities were not seen as political because residents supported them. Issues which might cause dissent within the civic club, like partisan politics, were off limits. But political activity was acceptable when it preserved, or at least did not disrupt, neighborhood homogeneity.

The fundamental issue facing most outer-city neighborhood improvement associations in the 1950s was racial integration. In response to black activism and the pressures of the cold war, segregationists organized in the North and South in both neighborhood-based and broader organizations like the white Citizens Councils to resist residential and school integration. In Houston, civic clubs located in neighborhoods contiguous to the black ghettos on the east side of town sharply resisted integration. For example, Riverside, east of Braeswood along Braes Bayou, was a select white neighborhood in the 1940s. Some called it "the Jewish River Oaks." With the "Shelley decision" in 1948, which declared racial covenants unenforceable, white residents in Riverside grew alarmed about the expanding black ghetto to their north. In 1952 they formed the Greater Riverside Property Owners Association (GRPOA) to prevent integration. The Association urged white residents to sit tight, not to sell, to remain in the neighborhood, and it tried to raise money to buy property for sale and "buy out" blacks who had already moved into Riverside. Signs declaring "THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE" were frequently seen

[9]Robert Bailey, Jr., *Radicals in Urban Politics: The Alinsky Approach* (Chicago, 1972), 30, says parapolitical "refers to formal voluntary associations which are not mobilized primarily for political purposes but which may become political when matters of interest to them are being considered by decision-makers."

posted on porches. Bombs exploded at the house of the first black family who moved into Riverside in 1953. But none of this proved very effective. Once the pattern of residential change was apparent, white homeowners sold quickly, even at lower prices, and realtors were most eager to help them do so. The white residents of Riverside fled to newly developed subdivisions in the southwest of the city, like Braeswood, which provided good housing and appreciable distance from the black ghetto.[10]

Because Houston was growing at a breakneck pace after World War II, competition for living space was minimal, limited only to those areas, like Riverside, that bordered the black ghettos of the city. Still, residents in neighborhoods like Braeswood often shared segregationist sentiments with their white counterparts in Riverside. As late as 1970 only thirteen of the neighborhood's 8,654 residents were black. But residents in Braeswood, like most suburban residents in the 1950s living five to ten miles from the central city and the black ghetto, were not as threatened or affected by integration pressures as white neighborhoods that bordered black communities in both southern and northern cities. Nevertheless, organizations formed even in southwest Houston to address this issue and "protect property values."

In the 1950s an umbrella organization of local civic clubs in southwest Houston, the Allied Civic Club (ACC), formed to deal with district-wide issues which went beyond subdivision boundaries. Among other activities the ACC organized workshops on community leadership training and restriction violations, supported a drive toward district representation on the city council, and became a strong advocate of zoning. The ACC also helped coordinate opposition to residential desegregation in southwest Houston. ACC leaders recognized that with the Shelley decision, stopping a black family from moving into a neighborhood was no longer easily accomplished. Indeed, "there is no reason now to believe that this is possible," they lamented. But the ACC could stop wholesale neighborhood transformation and panic selling; ACC leaders called this objective "neighborhood stabilization."

Where integration threatened to destablize a neighborhood, the ACC advised its constituents to remain calm. "Emotional panic of white neighbors solves nothing and is, indeed, self-defeating. The way of neighborhood

[10]Houston *Chronicle*, 18 April 1971; Jack E. Dodson, "Minority Group Housing in Texas," in *Studies in Housing and Minority Groups: Special Research Reports to the Commission on Race and Housing*, ed. Nathan Glazer and Davis McEntire (Berkeley, 1960), 106. An invaluable study of the transformation of the Riverside area is Barry J. Kaplan, "Race, Income, and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970," *Houston Review* 3 (Winter 1981):178-203.

stabilization is much better." The ACC further advised residents to be alert to potential problem houses, such as a G.I. financed home which did not sell quickly. If a black actually moved into the neighborhood, the ACC suggested that local residents meet together, vow to "sit tight," and beware of "unethical" realtors who were willing to "stir up race prejudices" for a profit. The ACC believed that by following this procedure, "every all-white area in Houston that wishes to remain all-white will have a much better chance." The ACC further requested residents to report "wildcat realtors" to the Houston Board of Realtors, the Better Business Bureau, and the ACC, so that such realtors could be singled out and ostracized. The advice was clear: "neighborhood stabilization" was the best way to protect property values.[11]

The SWCC, a member organization in the ACC, followed the recommendations. As late as 1970, when a black family moved into the neighborhood, the civic club president quickly wrote a letter to residents in the immediate area, advising them that "a frantic rush to get out will devalue our properties and deteriorate our neighborhood." The letter specified the realtor who sold the property, and went on to praise the quality of the two Negro families who currently resided in the community: one a doctor, the other an attorney, both "educated and cultured." "Sit tight and face this situation with realism, courage, and goodwill. . . . The value of your property and the future of your neighborhood depend entirely on what you people do."[12]

In summary, the strategy of neighborhood stabilization sufficed to "protect" Houston's more affluent white neighborhoods. Most blacks could not afford to move there and for those who could, a few other areas of the city were opening up which were equally attractive and more hospitable to middle income black families. Neighborhood improvement associations in the North before and after World War II tried the "sit-tight, do not panic" strategy, but with little success in white communities contiguous to the expanding black ghetto. Similarly in Houston, where white neighborhoods bordered the black ghettos, as in the Riverside area, neighborhood stabilization was equally ineffective. Throughout the nation where pressures by blacks for more and better housing were great, violent conflict ensued, bombs exploded, whites resisted militantly, and then, ultimately, moved out.

This was not the case in the Braeswood area, nor in other affluent suburban neighborhoods, North and South, which were more removed from lower class and minority inner-city areas by geographic distance and class barriers. In Houston the largest concentration of blacks remained on the east side of town, away from suburbs in the west like Braeswood. Protecting the neighborhood from racial change was less important to the SWCC than were the routine tasks of service acquisition and maintenance. Throughout its history the SWCC concerned itself with enforcing deed restrictions, keeping out commercial development, and doing mosquito fogging. The extraordinary distances separating races and classes in the new multinucleic cities in the South and the metropolitan areas in the North clearly enabled affluent residents to segregate themselves more successfully and easily than before. Prior to the fifties such separation had been a "luxury" shared only by residents in the most affluent suburbs. But with the federal government subsidizing, through highway and housing programs, the development of low density multinucleic metropolitan centers even moderately affluent suburban developments like Braeswood, whether within or outside the city limits, were removed and isolated from the central city as never before. In turn, improvement associations in these neighborhoods took on the role of maintenance and service lobbying efforts, rather than the combative and defensive style of associations in white neighborhoods that bordered the black ghetto.

[11]Bertram Mann, a past president of the Allied Civic Club, was kind enough to speak with me about and share some of his materials on the history of the ACC.

[12]President, Southwest Civic Club, letter, 1970, Southwest Civic Club MSS, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.