THE "NEIGHBOURHOOD RENAISSANCE": COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ST.LOUIS IN THE 1970S

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This paper will examine how national trends shaped the way in which neighbourhood planning was implemented in St. Louis in the 1970s. This new urban planning focus on the neighbourhood, both nationally and locally in St. Louis, can be seen when examining the planning proposals for two moderate-income neighbourhoods experiencing post-war urban change, Skinker DeBaliviere and Soulard. By tracing the relationship between neighbourhood based planning and policies at the national and local level, this paper will start to define how a growing emphasis on historic preservation and community based development shaped the changing meaning of the neighbourhood as a planning unit at the national level. It will also question how these theoretical trends in planning shaped neighbourhood-based planning projects in the specific context of deindustrializing St. Louis. The paper will argue that the new programs did not benefit all neighbourhoods equally, neglecting poorer, African American neighbourhoods, and promoting gentrification in lower income white areas. In the end, neighbourhood based planning policies in the 1970s leave a mixed legacy for social justice and democratization, both in St. Louis, and in other cities across the nation.

Keywords
neighbourhood planning, historic preservation, gentrification

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In 1977, the city of St. Louis was experiencing a 'Neighbourhood Renaissance' with greater attention to the neighbourhood, rather than the city or metro area, as the unit of planning. In response to the perceived failures of top down urban renewal, the city agencies welcomed the development of neighbourhood associations and actively sought guidance from resident groups, in an attempt to reverse their past "rubber stamp" approach to fulfilling federal mandates for participation. The newly elected mayor, Jim Conway, was a political product of the St. Luis neighbourhood movement of the past decade with grass roots supports from both black and white residents, in St. Louis's divided northern and southern wards. Editorialist, Ernst Calloway notes that Jim Conway, more than previous mayors, understood St. Louis's urban problems "from the people oriented neighbourhood vantage point."[1] Calloway and other commentators celebrated the fact that Mayor Conway would help reverse the long trend of urban renewal, which had tried to solve urban decline by the removal of people from the downtown. The election of Mayor Conway represented a shift in the approach to St. Louis's long-term problems of economic decline and racial segregation. By promoting neighbourhood-based solutions, with direct involvement from community groups, Mayor Conway hoped to spur the "Urban Renaissance" and back-to-the-city movement that had been building momentum over the past decade. In particular, the city of St. Louis consulted with communities regarding decisions about historic preservation, urban redevelopment, and the use of Community Development Block grant funding from the new Community Development Act of 1974.[2]

Some St. Louis commentators saw neighbourhood planning as a local phenomena, inspired by the city's historically distinct neighbourhoods with strong place-based community groups and neighbourhood improvement associations. However this planning approach also reflected national political shifts. The growing predominance of bottom up, small-scaled planning projects under the Model Cities and New Federalist programs reflected a reaction against the modernist top-down, large-scale redevelopment projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Policies such as the Community Development Act of 1974 provided new opportunities for distributing federal funds for innovative urban revitalization programs including infrastructural improvements for historic preservation districts, and small-scale infill and redevelopment projects in blighted areas.

This new urban planning focus on the neighbourhood both nationally and locally in St. Louis, can be seen when examining the planning proposals for two moderate-income neighbourhoods experiencing post-war urban change, Skinker DeBaliviere and Soulard. The two case studies represent two distinct racial and class demographics, architectural conditions, and historical legacies, to show the differences in how St. Louis's urban planning policies were applied in various contexts. Skinker DeBaliviere in west St. Louis, experienced racial integration in the 1960s and used community organizing to stabilize the neighbourhood, avoiding white flight and creating a racially diverse area. Soulard, in the Near South Side, formed a historic district as a way to encourage middle class owners to return to a largely vacant ethnic white neighbourhood. My previous papers on these case studies highlight both the positive ways that neighbourhood groups were able to influence the public funding and planning policies in their area, and the limits of community organizing as a means to ensure the social justice outcomes of revitalization policies, particularly in areas experiencing changes in their class or racial character.[3]

In this paper, these case studies serve as a counterpoint to studying city and nation wide policies. By tracing the relationship between neighbourhood based planning policies at the national and local level, this paper will start to define how a growing emphasis on historic preservation and community based development shaped the changing meaning of the neighbourhood as a planning unit at the national level. It will also question how these theoretical trends in planning shaped neighbourhood-based planning projects in the specific context of deindustrializing St. Louis. This paper will argue that the new programs did not benefit all neighbourhoods equally, neglecting poorer, African American neighbourhoods, and promoting gentrification in low-income white areas. In the end, neighbourhood based planning policies in the 1970s leave a mixed legacy for social justice and democratization, both in St. Louis, and in other cities across the nation.

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NEIGHBOURHOOD COALITION

In the post-war period, neighbourhoods began to organize to address perceived threats to their community, and to claim some local control over services. Nationally in the 1960s, both the New Right and the New Left started pushing for more decentralized forms of government and local autonomy for communities. The left, pushed for community input in response to the failures of redevelopment, and the bottom up reform movements of the civil rights era.[4] On the other hand, the right argued for a decentralization of decision-making and the demobilization of the "big government" welfare state through laissez faire policies of self-rule. The Neighbourhood Government Alliance tried to unite left and right, in an association between local community groups, starting with about 40 neighbourhoods from 6 eastern cities in 1965, and growing to 230 organizational members in 1979.[5] Eventually, the Neighbourhood Government Alliance splintered due to ideological diversity and concerns that neighbourhood governance encouraged economically and racially conservative policies though grassroots fascist institutions. Nonetheless, by the 1980s, most cities across the country had instituted some type of neighbourhood government initiatives. [6]

Like other cities of the country, St. Louis fostered a growing number of neighbourhood associations in the post-war period. In the 1950s, middle class neighbourhoods in an around the urban downtown core formed neighbourhood improvement groups in response to early signs of urban decline. By 1975, St. Louis had over eighty neighbourhood watch groups.[7] Community groups such as the Washington Heights Neighbours (WHN) and the Rosedale Skinker Improvement Association tried to maintain aesthetic and social standards as their neighbourhood started to face physical decay, racial and class integration, and white flight to the suburbs. In some areas, these smaller organizations were able to join with nearby groups to create district level neighbourhood coalitions like the Skinker DeBaliviere Development Corporation (SDCC). In 1965, by working with local institutions like churches and Washington University, the SDCC was able to start coordinating investment in their neighbourhood and working with the city agencies to shape redevelopment plans in their area.[8]

These neighbourhood groups did not only focus on their own immediate environment, but also worked together to address larger citywide threats. In the 1950s, working with other nascent neighbourhood groups around the city, these organizations helped to defeat legislation in the Board of Alderman which would have allowed for an expansion of rooming houses, and fought vigilantly to enforce zoning ordinances and eliminate housing code violations.[9] In the 1960s, another coalition formed between northside and southside neighbourhoods for the Save All Four Municipal Hospitals campaign. Editorialist, Ernst Calloway praised this effort noting, " It would appear that neighbourhood organizations are better suited at working in concert with a common purpose than many of our ward political organizations."[10] These campaigns led to more long-term cooperation, through the Inter-Association of Neighbourhood Organizations, which had developed as a coordinating body for the dozens of neighbourhood associations that had formed spontaneously around the city. In the late 1970s, the coalition of neighbourhood associations has been working to develop a new city ordinance that would create a formal neighbourhood apparatus in municipal government.[11] In response, the city of St. Louis's government agencies gave increasing attention to these neighbourhood groups during the 1970s.

PRESERVATION

One of the other impetuses to neighbourhood organizing was historic preservation. The passage of the Historic Preservation Act in 1966 and the creation of the National Register of Historic Places, opened up the potential for preserving entire blocks or districts rather than individual buildings. The act also encouraged local community organizing to identify new historic neighbourhoods for registration. This act, responding to the problems of federally funded slum clearance controlled from above, not only started to identify a new form to urban development, but also a new process, with more bottom input from citizens. While at first registration served

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primarily as a means to protect buildings from demolition, it also became a tool for private investment, though adaptive reuse tax incentives in the 1976 and 1981 Tax Reform Acts, which allowed for investors to claim tax credits for rehabilitating buildings for profitable ventures.[12]

In St. Louis, the first neighbourhoods to organize for preservation were Lafayette Square and Soulard. These two neighbourhoods on the Near South Side were comprised largely of historic homes either vacant or occupied by ethnically diverse white residents, where urban decline had been accelerated by urban renewal for highways and public housing. Middle class white residents moved back-to-the-city, attracted to the historic homes and parks. Lafayette Square, with its Victorian Houses with Mansard roofs, was the first neighbourhood in St. Louis to be registered as a National Historic District in June 1972. Under the leadership of the Lafayette Square Restoration Group (LSRG) it also simultaneously registered as a city historic district. The adjacent neighbourhood of Soulard, with its more mixed historic housing stock of row houses and multi-unit homes, filed as the second National Historic District, a few months later in December 1972. However to took another three years to form as a city district.[13]

This delay was in large part a reaction to a conflict between the two community groups in Soulard. The Soulard Neighbourhood Improvement Association (SNIA), formed from early “hippy” newcomers to the neighbourhood in 1968. A few years later, the Soulard Restoration Group (SRG), a more “yuppie” group of settlers, modelled themselves after the Lafayette group. The Soulard Restoration Group (SRG) represented the nostalgic bourgeois vision of re-inhabiting the 19th century multi-ethnic urban village through a purist preservation program celebrating the local “French” style row houses. In contrast, the Soulard Neighbourhood Improvement Association (SNIA), attempted to preserve working class culture and economic practices by protecting the interests of the low-income, ethnic and rural immigrants. As the city of St. Louis developed historic district guidelines for Soulard in the 1970s, these two neighbourhood groups fought over how strict to make historic codes and how these codes might affect housing affordability and dislocation in the face of gentrification.[14] The neighbourhood organization of Soulard demonstrates how historic preservation was indeed an incentive for neighbourhood organizing, and that theses associations had direct benefits in promoting private investment and overcoming depopulation, economic decline and physical decay of the neighbourhood. However it also reveals how these neighbourhood associations did not always represent a “democratic” bottom up processes. Community organizing was not always inclusive, and some people’s voices were amplified in public discourse and given more sway in shaping urban policies than others, usually according to their social and economic status.

As part of this process of historic preservation, many neighbourhoods started to write local histories of their area. Residents from both Soulard and Skinker DeBaliviere wrote histories of their neighbourhoods aided by university professors and non-profit experts.[15] Eventually the city also began to promote the creation of these histories, and in 1978 the Community Development Agency published its own *History of St. Louis Neighbourhoods*. The preface notes that not only would the histories be of interest to local residents, but will “heighten interest in their general betterment, rehabilitation, and restoration” and thus be will be “a major asset in their improvement" of the neighbourhoods.[16] The city of St. Louis acknowledged that one of the tools for economic development was though “marketing out neighbourhoods” to middle class residents looking for “attractive housing at relatively low cost.”[17] They believed that a combination of marketing historic character, neighbourhood organization for improvement, and government investment could make these neighbourhoods attractive to middle class homebuyers who would create tax revenue and increase the economic stability of the neighbourhood. Thus governments became increasingly engaged in neighbourhood governance and investment.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GRANTS

Not all neighbourhood initiatives began from the bottom up. Some of the impetus for community organizing came from the federal government though policies that decentralized decision-making and the distribution of urban development funds. While early urban redevelopment laws, like the Housing Act of 1949 had not provided any means for community input, amendments in the 1954 Housing Act, did mandate "citizen participation;" however, in reality the policy was largely implemented by "rubber stamp" commissions that did not reflect true democratic processes.[18] During this period neighbourhoods were often caught of guard by redevelopment projects, which were approved without much publicity, sometime years or decades before implementation. Many urban neighbourhoods had lost their relationship with city government, as the progressive era reforms and post-war convergence of power cut off the close relationships of wards to council members under the earlier machine-style politics. Cities ignored their inner-city neighbourhoods, focusing on the central business district as the locus for economic development, and thus renewal projects intended to benefit the downtown often hurt neighbourhoods. While communities did eventually achieve a "crystallization of resistance" to schemes in their neighbourhood, their participation was primarily reactionary, trying to stop plans they disagreed with, versus collaborating in developing plans they wanted to promote.[19]

This began to change in the 1960s, as the federal government developed deeper forms of participation. The Model Cities Program encouraged fostering leaders within poor communities to participate in self-governance of neighbourhoods. While Nixon dismantled this program in 1974, many of the community elders and groups nurtured by the programs leadership training and funding initiatives remained in place, mobilizing to face issues of housing quality and affordability.[20] A new program, the Community Development Act of 1974 further encouraged neighbourhood based development. While this act is an example of the Nixon-Ford New Federalism, dismantling the welfare state and the federal apparatus of urban redevelopment, it also created new opportunities for decentralized planning efforts. By replacing the old categorical grant structure with a new block grant program, it allowed cities to pursue more creative approaches for urban revitalization. The goal of this program was "'the development of viable communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment, and expanded economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate incomes.'" The act further states that it will '...benefit low and moderate income families or aid in the prevention or elimination of slums or blight.'[21]

The availability Community Development Block grants infused money into neighbourhood projects, at a time when other urban programs received less federal attention and money. The availability of resources encouraged community activists to engage in politics in a new way. They shifted from the type of protests and resistance promoted by community organizers like Saul Alinsky, toward proactive utilization of resources and reform working with governments. With top down and bottom up pressures from the federal government and community organizations, development professionals at the city level began reluctantly to approach economic growth as directly related with the state of neighbourhood improvement. Despite the increasing specialization of policy regimes, there was a push for integration across planning efforts.[22] This paved the way not only for more funding opportunities, but for greater attention to neighbourhoods in city governance more broadly.

In St. Louis the block grants helped to undermine the power of the "'rubber stamp' brigade" which had "reduced participation to a structural farce," and instead empowered community groups to shape how federal money would be spent in their neighbourhoods.[23] Neighbourhoods like Skinker DeBaliviere and Soulard, which had already formed strong improvement associations, were able to leverage the black grants for money for small scale development projects in their neighbourhoods, including improving streets, repairing sidewalks, re-landscaping parks, planting street trees, and providing amenities that would attract private investment. In St. Louis, critics like Ernst Calloway, note that between 1974 and 1977, these funds were spent primarily in higher income or gentrifying neighbourhoods. Also, less than 10% of the funding was spent directly on housing.[24]

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This discrepancy shows how opportunities for locally based economic development did not materialize equally for all neighbourhoods, nor ensure democratic representation in decision-making. Wealthier cities often created more extensive neighbourhood governance organizations than poorer ones. Within a city, the poorer neighbourhoods were less likely to receive block grants than those that were starting to improve economically and attract growth. Even within the same neighbourhood, there were often two competing interests, with wealthier residents interested in protecting property, and poorer interested in improving social services. The policy makers often gave preference to the wealthier interests, not only because they had more political clout, but because with limited budgets, city agencies often need to tie their objectives in neighbourhood projects to their larger goals for economic development within the city.[25] Improvement to middle class neighbourhood and attracting new taxpayers were often viewed as more important to the overall economic development of the city than improving living conditions in low-income neighbourhoods.

Unlike the early redevelopment acts, which focused on housing improvement, the block grants primarily made improvements to public space, leaving housing to the private market, and thus not addressing affordability needs for the poor.[26] By focusing on "revitalization" the block grants requested by neighbourhood groups, and granted by cities, usually encouraged stabilization of middle class neighbourhoods rather than improvement of the quality of like in the poorest areas. Again, like with preservation, not all community groups had equal power to wield community development funds. Like other New Federalist programs in the late 1970s, this neighbourhood based approach switched the priority from addressing poverty to encouraging economic development through the private market, which would supposedly eventually "trickle down" to the rest of the city though increased property taxes.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE

As St. Louis adopted neighbourhood governance it moved away from top down, slum clearance models of urban redevelopment, embracing forms of revitalization based in bottom up movements like neighbourhood organizing, historic preservation, and place based community development. In doing so it followed national policy trends toward localization of governance. While this shift eliminated many of the power abuses, neglect and physical destruction of the built environment for which early urban renewal programs were criticized, it did not necessarily improve the equality of planning programs. The new programs targeting federal and local government spending in areas with potential for growth and stability promoted gentrification. Based on Neo-liberal and New Federalists approaches from the New Left and New Right, the programs empowered local governances, but primarily those with middle class leadership, that could capitalize on narratives of growth and attract new taxpayers to the city. During this period St. Louis successfully began to attract new residents, and start to reverse the thirty-year trend of population and economic decline. However it did so primarily in the white middle class areas in the southern and western areas of the city, neglecting much of the northern area where most blacks lived. The neighbourhood programs contributed to the "growth machine" of St. Louis, thus focusing on exchange value over use value.[27] In the end the neighbourhood's policy leaves a mixed legacy for social justice and democratization, both in St. Louis, and in other cities across the nation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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