

THE “QUIET REVOLUTION”: A History of Neighborhood Empowerment in Los Angeles

by Leonard Pitt

Several months after the Los Angeles riot of 1992, I attended a League of Women Voters meeting in a downtown restaurant to discuss charter reform. I sat next to a young attorney and we chatted about a shared interest in Los Angeles history as we listened to the buzz about something called neighborhood councils. The discussion was interesting but seemed idealistic and I was sure that neither charter reform nor neighborhood councils had legs.

To my amazement, in a few short years the voters had approved both concepts. Moreover, the attorney, whose name was Robert Herzberg, was elected to the State Assembly and became speaker of that house. He was instrumental in pushing the idea of boroughs for Los Angeles and in placing the secession referendum on the ballot.

When I began looking into this as a historian I was further astonished to learn that for a good number of years, many Angelenos had felt deep frustration, resentment, and anger toward City Hall government and had sought solutions that were amazingly persistent, bold, and creative—and sometimes, perhaps, a little foolish.

This report is what I have learned about the “quiet revolution,” as neighborhood councils and neighborhood empowerment have been called. What grievances motivated the reformers, what forms of empowerment did they seek, and what accomplishments did they—or did they not—achieve?¹

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- tical *Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), cited in Councilman Joel Wachs' "Grass-Roots Guide to Forming Neighborhood Councils" (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles, October 15, 1999), [14].
- ³⁵Columnist Sam Hall Kaplan, "Hope for Local Planning Boards," in *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1986; interview with Bill Christopher, January 30, 2003.
- ³⁶Plan L.A., "Policy on Charter Reform," a flier, March 20, 1993. The coalition had representation from Brentwood, East Los Angeles, San Pedro, the Santa Monica Mountains, San Fernando Valley, South Central, Wilshire, and the Westside.
- ³⁷NCM *Newsletter and Calendar* (May 1993); flier advertising "General Meeting of Neighborhood Councils Movement." Interview with Fred Dewey, co-founder of the Neighborhood Councils Movement, August 26, 2002.
- ³⁸Former Massachusetts Governor Michael S. Dukakis, an invited speaker at the first meeting, paid the audience a high compliment for starting something reminiscent of a New England town meeting. Dukakis to author, October 15, 2000; interview with Greg Nelson, June 30, 2000.
- ³⁹Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portnoy, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1993). The authors were Tufts University scholars.
- ⁴⁰Berry, *et al.*, *Rebirth*, 286, 290-298.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*, 295. Stakeholder categories acceptable to DONE were: faith-based institutions, political lobbying groups, labor unions, homeowners association, non-profit social service providers, educational institutions, immigrant advocate groups, senior groups, women's groups, block clubs, lesbian and gay groups, etc. See DONE pamphlet, "Your Voice, Your Neighborhood, Your City (Los Angeles: DONE [December 14, 2000]).
- ⁴²*Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1998, quoting attorney Connie Rice.
- ⁴³"Los Angeles: The Sum of Its Parts?" *The Economist*, July 12, 1997. Civic participation at the municipal level seemed to sink to an all-time low in 1989, when only 23 percent of eligible voters turned out for a mayoral election.
- ⁴⁴Interview with Raphael J. Sonenshein, August 28, 2002. See also his essay, "Gotham on Our Minds: New York City in the Los Angeles Charter Reform of 1996-1999," in David Halle, ed., *New York and Los Angeles: Politics, Society and Culture, A Comparative View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁵*Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1998, quoted in Jim Bickhart, "Taking It to the Streets: The Debate Over Neighborhood Governance in Los Angeles," Occasional Paper No. 2 (Los Angeles: Center for Government & Policy Analysis, 1998), 5.
- ⁴⁶Nelson predicted that land developers might now feel compelled to seek the approval of neighborhood councils before going to the zoning or planning commissions. Interview with Greg Nelson, General Manager of DONE, August 12, 2002.
- ⁴⁷*Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2001.
- ⁴⁸The charter also established a Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) to oversee policy, including certification, the approval of contracts, and enforcement of basic rules and regulations. In addition, the charter proposal asked voters to approve a provision enlarging the size of the City Council from its current 15 members to 21 or 25 members. (The 15-member body was created in 1878, when the population was 10,000; Chicago, by contrast, with a million fewer people than Los Angeles, has 50 councilmembers. *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2002.) The electorate rejected both alternative proposals.
- ⁴⁹See City of Los Angeles, *Charter of the City of Los Angeles* (Cincinnati: American Legal Publishing Corp., 2002), Article IX.
- ⁵⁰Support for neighborhood councils gradually increased. See, for example, USC, *Creating Neighborhood Councils*, 11, quoting opinion favorable to neighborhood councils by Les Himes of the Chatsworth Chamber of Commerce; Jo Young, leader of the 73rd Street Block Club in Central Los Angeles; Tisha Bedrosian of the Rose Avenue Working Group in Venice; and Fran Reichenbach of Brentwood Canyon Neighborhood Association and Hollywood Neighborhood Councils. See, also, DONE, "Plan for a Citywide System of Neighborhood Councils" (Los Angeles: DONE, approved May 30, 2001 and amended November 8, 2002).
- ⁵¹Interview with Bill Christopher, January 30, 2003.
- ⁵²USC, *Creating Neighborhood Councils*, 5. I am indebted to Prof. Musso for allowing me to review the draft of an unpublished paper on neighborhood empowerment.
- ⁵³Councils began collaborating early in 2003 in opposition to a new policy announced by Police Chief William J. Bratton to curtail drastically police response to private burglar alarms. A deliberative congress was mandated in the 1999 charter out of a need expressed by Erwin Chemerinsky and others to establish machinery to deal with thorny NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) issues, such as the location of trash dumps and of housing for the mentally ill.
- ⁵⁴Interview with Bill Christopher, January 30, 2003.
- ⁵⁵On the future of boroughs, see *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2003.

Looking at the city's history from its incorporation in 1850 to about 1890, one is struck more by instances of neighborhood disempowerment than of empowerment, as exemplified in the area near the Old Plaza, with its cluster of Native American, Mexican, Californio, and Chinese neighborhoods. Most minority residents of the city—and, of course, all women, regardless of race or ethnicity—were literally disenfranchised. In addition, the minority neighborhoods bore the brunt of neglect, racism, and social violence.

The Native Americans were the first to feel the sting. The Tongva Indian village of Yangna (located roughly just south of Olvera St.) had stood in place for possibly more than a thousand years. During the Mexican War the U.S. army commander ordered the entire village moved across the river to end prostitution. Later, officials moved the village again, to the far northern reaches of the county, where it died out.

To the north of the Plaza lay Sonora Town, founded in the 1850s by a wave of Mexicans arriving in the city after being expelled from the gold mines in the northern part of the state. This part of town was the scene of lawlessness and bloody racial conflict in the mid-1850s that was ignited by both bandits and vigilantes.²

Old Chinatown developed in the late 1860s where Union Station now stands. For the most part, city officials regarded much of this neighborhood, with its saloons and houses of prostitution, as a public nuisance. In October 1871 it was the scene of a mob attack that left nineteen Chinese dead, most of them by hanging. To cope with the unsavory reputation of Chinatown, in 1888 the city eradicated the main thoroughfare, known as *Calle de los Negros*.

But the neighborhoods of Anglo blue-collar workers who were able to vote and who could vocalize their demands were also at risk. These were located east of Main St. toward the Los Angeles River, and across the river in Boyle Heights and Lincoln Park. These residential areas stood precisely where railroad tracks, freight yards, factories, and dumping grounds began spreading out beginning in the 1870s.

Irate residents of these neighborhoods appeared repeatedly before the City Council to complain of gas plants discharging industrial waste into the river, factory chimneys belching smoke, railroad trains creating safety hazards, and noxious odors arising from the hog farms where garbage contractors deposited household trash. Residents appealed for redress to the City Council and the city Fire Commission, the agency that issued factory permits. But the local business community questioned whether a problem even existed. One real-estate developer wrote to a local newspaper that "this talk of 'soiling the atmosphere' [is] . . . a lot of nonsense. Such a thing wouldn't happen, but if it

- ¹²Steven P. Erie, "How the Urban West Was Won: The Local State and Economic Growth in Los Angeles, 1880-1932," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 27 (June 1992): 534.
- ¹³William Fulton, *The Reluctant Metropolis* (Point Arena, Calif.: Solano Press Books, 1997), 49.
- ¹⁴H. Eric Schockman, "Is Los Angeles Governable? Revisiting the City Charter," in Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise, eds. *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996), 58.
- ¹⁵See commemorative pamphlet, Los Feliz Improvement Association, *Anniversary . . . 1916-1991* (n.p., 1991), 18.
- ¹⁶Of course, some communities, such as the Italian community near the Old Plaza, disappeared owing to demographic changes rather than government pressure. Conference on the "Disappearance of Ethnic Minorities from City Center," September 25, 1999, with presentations by Ronald Lopez, Chester King, Gloria Lothrop, Sue Embry, Chi Mui, and Susan Nelson.
- ¹⁷See Robert Slayton, *Back of the Yards: The Making of a Local Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 27, citing Margaret Rose, "Gender and Civic Activism in Mexican-American Barrios in California: The Community Service Organization, 1947-1962," in Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Ross is said to have taught Cesar Chávez the art of organizing. See Don Normark, *Chávez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 53, and interview with Greg Nelson, May 12, 2000.
- ¹⁸Katherine Glover, "Stopping Crime at Its Source: The Neighborhood Councils of Los Angeles," *Woman's Home Companion* (September 1936): 28 ff.
- ¹⁹Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 123-132.
- ²⁰Bowron lost his re-election bid to Norris Poulson largely because he continued to support Wilkinson.
- ²¹Actually, the ravine had three separate neighborhoods: La Loma, Bishop, and Palo Verde. City officials complained of misaligned streets, substandard houses, poor sanitation, juvenile delinquency, and a high tuberculosis rate in Chávez Ravine.
- ²²After a protracted political struggle that resulted in a referendum, the voters backed the plan for the new ball park. *Los Angeles Times*, "Southern California Living," October 22, 1999. See Normark, *Chavez Ravine, 1949*.
- ²³Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (3rd ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 285-299; David Gebhard and Robert Winter, *Los Angeles; An Architectural Guide* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1994), 257.
- ²⁴*Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1984.
- ²⁵Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
- ²⁶Henry Reining, Jr., et al., *City Government for the Future: Report of the Los Angeles City Charter Commission* (Los Angeles: n.p., July, 1969), 24; see also Los Angeles City Attorney's Opinion to the Charter and Administrative Code Committee of the Los Angeles City Council, December 24, 1964.
- ²⁷George Frederickson, ed., *Neighborhood Control in the 1970s: Politics, Administration, and Citizen Participation* (New York: Chandler Publishing Co., 1973), vii; Daniel P. Moynihan skewered the concept in a book entitled *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1969).
- ²⁸Reining, et al., *City Government for the Future*, 28-29.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 21-27.
- ³⁰Friends of Mayor Sam Yorty, *The Yorty Years: The Story of Sam Yorty's Leadership as Mayor of Los Angeles since 1961* (Los Angeles: Friends of Mayor Sam Yorty, 1968), 10.
- ³¹Los Angeles City Planning Department, *Centers Overview Report* (Los Angeles, 1983), 4; Fulton, *The Reluctant Metropolis*, 48-49.
- ³²Among the best historical overviews of neighborhood movements in the U.S. in the last century are: Sidney Dillick, *Community Organization for Neighborhood Development-Past and Present* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1953); Howard W. Hallman, "The Neighborhood as an Organizational Unit: A Historical Perspective," in Frederickson, ed., *Neighborhood Control in the 1970s*, 5-16, and Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984). Among other valuable urban commentaries are Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*; Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Suzanne Keller, *The Urban Neighborhood: A Sociological Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1968), and Matthew A. Crenson, *Neighborhood Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- ³³Malcolm J. Abzug, *Palisades Oil: A Community Battles over Oil Drilling* (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Pine Hill Press, Inc., 1991). A two-decade struggle against Occidental and Chevron and their lease holders culminated in November 1988 when the voters approved Proposition "O" to end oil drilling.
- ³⁴Serious empowerment advocates were well acquainted with Alinsky's writings, such as *Rules for Radicals: A Prac-*

did happen it would be better to soil the atmosphere and be a great metropolis, even if one had to chop one's way through it downtown every day."³

The blue-collar neighborhoods won a few temporary turf battles, but in the end they lost the war to an indifferent, or corrupt, City Council and mayor. These residential neighborhoods gradually disappeared in the next century.⁴



Angelenos first began developing a concept of the neighborhood as a place in need of empowerment from around 1890 to 1910. It started in settlement houses established in the poorest neighborhoods. These institutions originated in Britain and took root in Chicago in the 1890s. In the Windy City a passionate young reformer, Jane Addams, founded Hull House in an immigrant neighborhood. "Social workers," operating within the homes and neighborhoods of the immigrant poor, devoted themselves day and night to improving the physical, economic, and spiritual needs of the residents. This became one of the driving forces of the social movement known in this country as Progressivism.⁵

In 1892, women belonging to the Friday Morning Club, a civic and charitable Los Angeles association, saw the need to improve the living conditions of the Mexican railroad workers in Sonora Town and Boyle Heights. Not knowing how to go about it, they appealed to Jane Addams for help. She came to Los Angeles, and in 1894, in the depths of an economic depression, assisted a group of college women from Los Angeles Normal School to establish the College Settlement in old Sonora Town (today's Chinatown).

Los Angeles social reformers of that era hoped to make Los Angeles into a model city, something far superior to the eastern cities with their corrupt regimes and slum housing. The Rev. Dana Bartlett published a book entitled *The Better City* in which he described his settlement house, the Bethlehem Institute on Vignes St. It was not a case of religious missionaries

going down to the people to lift them up, but rather . . . just "folks," living the simple life of friendship and neighborliness. Their motto is—each for all, and all for each. Grant [them] the spirit of service, and the development is natural . . . two rooms in a tenement may be a settlement. Nor will it be long until about this center neighbors will meet for self-improvement and mutual benefit.⁶

His colleague, the Rev. George Henry Hewes, an avowed Christian Socialist, established a house called, simply, "the Neighborhood Settlement." Besides offering his own social services, he encouraged his flock to agitate for a shorter work week, woman suffrage, social security for the elderly, public

stay; and that they could have a thirty-year lifespan before being superceded. Few things last longer than thirty years in Los Angeles.

If I were to speculate on the future, my hunch would be that boroughs will be the next step. I read that Robert Hertzberg (among others) is working on such a plan. Boroughs, with their taxing power, can be useful for addressing large issues such as economic development in depressed areas and smart growth. A possible scenario might be that, in a few years, reformers will introduce a charter amendment to convert the five appointed regional planning commissions into five elective bodies. A year or two after that, they may introduce another amendment giving these bodies taxing powers and changing their name to boroughs.⁵⁵

In the movie *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen declares that the greatest thing about Los Angeles is that you can make a right turn on a red signal. Well, we have a few significant features he missed. We may yet even have boroughs one day—who knows?

NOTES

¹I use the term "neighborhood" more or less interchangeably with "community," although the former generally refers to something smaller than the latter. The word "empowerment" connotes acquiring authority, or legal power, and the resources necessary to bring about improvement. See *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), and Editors of American Heritage Dictionaries, *Roger's II: The New Thesaurus* (3rd ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995).

²Leonard Pitt, *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1968), Chap. IX, "Race War in Los Angeles."

³*Los Angeles Express*, October 7, 1905, quoted in a memo to me from Daniel Johnson, Ph.D., August 19, 2000.

⁴In a sample of the census of 1900, more than half of the population worked at blue-collar trades in Ward No. 1 (northeastern L.A. in Lincoln Park, etc.); Ward No. 2 (west of Main St. and north of 1st St. in Echo Park, etc.); Ward No. 7 (between Main St. and the river and 1st and 9th Sts.); Ward No. 8 (at the Plaza and in today's Chinatown), and Ward No. 9 (east of the river and Boyle Heights, etc.). Daniel Johnson to author, February 3, 2003.

⁵An address by Jane Addams, "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements, 1892," in Christopher Lasch, ed., *The Social Thought of Jane Addams* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), 28-43; and Elisabeth R. Frank and Alice Collins, *Settlements and Centers: Their History, Self-Study and Development* (Los Angeles: Welfare Planning Council, Los Angeles Region, June 1954).

⁶Dana W. Bartlett, *The Better City: A Sociological Study of a Modern City* (Los Angeles: The Neuner Company Press, 1907).

⁷Virginia Elwood-Akers, "George Henry Hewes and The Neighborhood Settlement in Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* 83 (Winter 2001): 377-398. See also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), who would probably regard this as "creating social capital."

⁸Michael Engh, S.J., "Meeting the Needs of Our Time: Builders of the Humane City in Los Angeles, 1900-1950," *The George A.V. Dunning Lecture* (Los Angeles: Historical Society of Southern California, 2001), 2-6.

⁹Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), "The Neighborhood Unit," 30-35. Bartlett, a proponent of the City Beautiful movement, was the first to propose cleaning up the areas near the Los Angeles River. See Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 116-117.

¹⁰Six settlements and centers associated with the Catholic Welfare Bureau were established from 1922 to 1945, in Watts, Glendale, Torrance, San Fernando, and Pacoima. Frank and Collins, *Settlements and Centers*, 4-5.

¹¹*A. J. Crose v. City Council of the City of Los Angeles*. 175 Cal. 774, 1917.

kindergartens, and child care for pre-schoolers. He also ran a "men's club for . . . the overthrow of boss rule, and the purification of politics."⁷ The Catholic Church also opened several settlement houses.

Settlement workers pressed the city government to establish permanent social services, such as a public health nurse, a juvenile court, a sanitation engineer, public baths, playgrounds, and city parks. They also backed the formation of a new housing commission.⁸ As Professor Greg Hise has written,

In response to the perceived anomie and dislocation of the industrial city, social reformers seized on the comprehensive and comprehensible neighborhood as a framework for community. They understood the neighborhood as a fundamental social unit, the scale at which face-to-face relations could be encouraged and maintained.⁹

In all, thirty settlement houses and social centers were established in Los Angeles by 1951.¹⁰ To some observers, the settlement workers' approach has seemed patronizing and naïve. Ironically, the new housing commission merely tore down the dismal shacks with little regard for the Mexican occupants. Nevertheless, the settlements deserve recognition as the pioneers of neighborhood empowerment.

Progressives created at least three other reforms that would have a lasting effect on the local communities of the city. First, in 1906, Los Angeles leaders were eager to annex San Pedro and Wilmington for an outlet to the sea. They courted the harbor voters by promising them the right to form a borough government, which by definition would have an elected board and taxing powers. Three years later city leaders added such a provision to the city charter. The harbor towns voted to consolidate a year later, but when push came to shove, the City Council refused to act on a Wilmington borough petition. In 1917, the State Supreme Court invalidated the Los Angeles city charter provision on a technicality, setting off a long tug-of-war over boroughs.¹¹

Second, in 1909, a victorious reform administration swept into office eager to eradicate the powerful political influence of the Southern Pacific Railroad. To do so, it set out to eliminate partisanship from municipal elections.¹² That is, the city barred candidates for city office from using party affiliations on the ballot, and it scheduled city elections only when partisan elections were not scheduled. This move not only dealt a body blow to party organizations in general, but, equally important, it eliminated the precinct captains, who, in other cities, lived primarily to satisfy constituents and answer neighborhood needs. Vote for our party, said the precinct captain to the voter, and I'll not only install the new electric street lamps, but I'll also bring a gift and dance at your daugh-

- *First*, a city had to make a strong and fundamental political commitment to neighborhood councils, and not just voice a vague declaration of admiration;
- *Second*, a city had to seek actively community input on budgetary matters;
- *Third*, city officials had to provide neighborhood leaders with early notification of pertinent city meetings; and,
- *Fourth*, each council had to embrace all stakeholders—that is, everyone who lived, worked or owned property—not merely the organized homeowners—in a given neighborhood.⁴¹

Of course, Los Angeles was not a small town like Dayton. It had a powerful and entrenched City Council, and a huge and ethnically diverse population. There were no guarantees that smaller models could be imposed here. But local reformers thought they could meet the basic conditions.

Three factors drove the reform at this point:

First was the broad consensus, even among City Hall pros, that the City Council had lost touch with its constituents. Each of the fifteen members represented a staggering 250,000 people. Some City Hall watchers decried the “pit bull, junkyard-dog mentality” that characterized council meetings.⁴² Los Angeles was by now world-famous for its lack of civic engagement. According to *The Economist*, a leading British journal, “The biggest reason for LA’s continuing lack of civic pride is the sheer sprawl of the place. Angelenos tend to be intensely loyal to their own neighbourhoods but indifferent to the surrounding megalopolis.”⁴³

The *second* driving force was secession. The real and growing threat of secession in the Valley, and perhaps in the harbor and elsewhere, helped spur the drive for city-sponsored neighborhood councils.

The *third* main issue was Richard Riordan’s yearning to increase the mayor’s power vis-à-vis the City Council and city department heads. In the fall of 1997, Mayor Riordan initiated the election of a charter reform commission (headed by USC law professor Erwin Chemerinsky). The City Council then appointed its own second commission (headed by prominent attorney George Kieffer). This body hired Professor Raphael Sonenshein, a California State University, Fullerton, political scientist, as executive secretary. A scholar with a strong historical bent, Sonenshein hoped to avoid a repeat of the explosive empowerment elections he had seen in the 1960s in Newark, New Jersey.

ter's wedding. Without the precinct captains, constituents were at the mercy of City Hall officials who might be sitting in an office twenty miles away.

Third, the city passed a pioneer zoning act in 1910. It did create distinct industrial, commercial, and residential zones so as to protect residential neighborhoods. Unfortunately, within the framework of the city zoning ordinance of 1946 that envisioned a city of ten million people, developers would find it easy to manipulate the regulations at the expense of homeowners.¹³



In the period from 1911 to the end of World War II, Los Angeles emerged as a large, centralized, progressive city, but a city with all power focused in City Hall, with none in neighborhoods.

The new city charter adopted in 1925 served as the basic government framework until the year 2000. It vested most power in the City Council and, to a lesser degree, in the mayor. While it gave lip service to boroughs, it totally ignored neighborhoods. In fact, according to Eric Schockman, under the charter, "... neighborhood power bases were systematically dismantled . . . to prevent alternative power structures from threatening the fifteen 'council-barons' . . ."¹⁴

The stubborn borough advocates from the harbor area had long memories and managed somehow to have a new borough provision inserted into the 1925 charter. It gave annexed areas of at least 4,000 acres and 40,000 residents the right to petition to form a borough. The hitch was that the City Council could—and did—ignore petitions for borough status.

Meanwhile, neighborhood empowerment was emerging from other quarters in the city, outside City Hall. One form of empowerment was the homeowner association, the first of which was the Los Feliz neighborhood organization that closely monitored activities relative to Griffith Park. Besides lobbying City Hall, many of these associations had legal powers conveyed through binding covenants in home deeds to enforce standards of architectural design, landscaping, and, in those early days, racial exclusion. Many people buying tract homes in L.A. from around 1920 to 1954 signed agreements forbidding them from selling to persons of color.¹⁵ This created racial boundary lines, so that, for example, blacks found it extremely difficult to buy property west of Crenshaw Blvd.

Meanwhile, the Chinese and the Mexicans were still having trouble controlling the fate of their neighborhoods. In the 1920s, Los Angeles voters decided to create a union passenger station on the site of Chinatown. The city

ning of the "quiet revolution" in favor of neighborhood empowerment.³⁵ Christopher was subsequently appointed chairman of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners.



After 1985, when the devotees of neighborhood councils met in coffee klatches, they assumed it would take fifty years for their dream to materialize. They could never have imagined that in a few short years a new charter would establish citywide elected councils with the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) to oversee them. How did it come about so quickly?

It began when the Planning Commission rejected neighborhood councils and the momentum moved to the grassroots. The coalition known as PLAN L.A. (People for Livable and Active Neighborhoods in Los Angeles) issued a concept paper with a sophisticated proposal for citywide neighborhood associations.³⁶ Another organization, the Neighborhood Councils Movement, reached out to various communities throughout the city. In May 1993, it held a general meeting at Rosemont Avenue School in the Rampart district that influenced the mayoral election.³⁷

At the same time, in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas created his Eighth District Empowerment Congress to serve as an advisory conclave of local leaders. He gave them leave to deal directly with city agencies to fix the chronic problems of poor neighborhoods in his district. Some people scoffed that it was merely the councilman's "fan club," but it produced notable successes.³⁸

Meanwhile, Councilman Joel Wachs' chief deputy, Greg Nelson, became interested in neighborhood councils. He had discovered an ongoing study of such councils in the cities of St. Paul, Portland, Dayton, Birmingham, and San Antonio. A team of Tufts University scholars working with a Ford Foundation grant was finishing a report entitled *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*.³⁹ It indicated that neighborhood councils decreased community conflicts, smoothed the functioning of city government, taught participants how government worked, and helped them achieve meaningful goals.⁴⁰ While the number of activists on any given council was usually small, the councils did nurture face-to-face participation. These councils had earned an excellent reputation among average city residents, and, most surprisingly, had won the respect and cooperation of city officials.

The book identified the crucial elements necessary for success:

uprooted its occupants, sending the residents packing in all directions and assigning the business owners new premises in Sonora Town. In this game of musical neighborhoods, Sonora Town was renamed New Chinatown.

In the same decade the city evicted Mexicans from a barrio on Spring St. to make way for the construction of today's City Hall. During World War II, the Japanese were forced out of Little Tokyo into internment camps. Some of their housing went to African Americans. Some internees returned after the war, but they soon faced the problem of civic expansion, which had significantly reduced the number of apartments available in Little Tokyo.¹⁶

The term "neighborhood councils" first surfaced in Los Angeles in the 1930s. It evidently came from Chicago during the Great Depression. In that city, a college-trained social worker and union activist, Saul Alinsky, was appalled at the dismal living conditions in the immigrant neighborhood adjacent to the odious Chicago stockyards. This site was the very area made famous by Upton Sinclair's best-selling novel, *The Jungle* (1906). Alinsky teamed up with a city park director and several young Catholic priests to help empower the local Polish and Mexican residents. After years of organizing activities, in 1939 they formed the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, the grand-daddy of all neighborhood councils. The organizers brought together poor and illiterate immigrants, and coached them on how to confront government officials and businessmen and present an organized set of demands for neighborhood improvements.¹⁷ In Los Angeles in the 1930s, some of the settlement houses had reconstituted themselves as youth centers, while county government increasingly took over some of their social services. In 1933, the County Probation Department teamed up with a juvenile court judge to create 50 local panels to fight juvenile delinquency. Each local panel included, among others, police officers, probation workers, school officials, welfare workers, health and case-workers, and Catholic and Jewish welfare counselors. In 1936, the *Woman's Home Companion* carried an article describing these local Los Angeles teams, referring to them as "neighborhood councils."¹⁸ This is the earliest printed reference to neighborhood councils that I have found in Los Angeles.



In the post-World War II decade, Los Angeles experienced a vast population boom. Many new families were able to fulfill their dreams for the good life, even as a host of older communities throughout the city experienced dislocation and discrimination.

- In the Pacific Palisades, homeowners, tenants, and business owners coalesced to form the Pacific Palisades Community Council to cope with police protection issues. Many of the same people later conducted a successful legal battle to stop Occidental Petroleum from drilling in Temescal Canyon.³³
- In Central Los Angeles, block clubs originally formed for socializing began confronting myriad issues, from trash collection to liquor store regulation to controlling drug sales.
- In widely dispersed communities, the Los Angeles Police Department's Neighborhood Watch network encouraged local leaders to work with police officers from each station house to control crime. This became the most successful community-based activity ever mounted by the department.
- On the east side, Latino women took a leaf from Alinsky's book and organized a successful campaign to stop the State of California from building yet another prison in their midst. They then regrouped, and with the help of University of California, Los Angeles, scientists stopped the city from building a high-tech trash furnace downtown. Considering the long list of community defeats experienced by Latinos, this was an epochal victory.³⁴
- In the west San Fernando Valley, business leaders invited the entire City Council to visit their part of town and see with their own eyes some of the perplexing development problems concerning roads, parks, water, and energy. The Council agreed to make the trip, but never arrived. This sparked deep anger and stoked a campaign for secession that would not quit.
- In the mid-Wilshire area, the Miracle Mile Civic Coalition brought together what was then a rare alliance of homeowners and apartment dwellers to stop a powerfully connected developer from overdeveloping the Miracle Mile.

Architect Bill Christopher, a co-founder of this mid-Wilshire coalition, was subsequently appointed to a blue-ribbon committee created by the Planning Commission to democratize the planning process. He believed that the time had come to push for a new reform—citywide neighborhood councils. In 1986, he and his committee penned a report proposing that the city appoint thirty-five advisory councils, one for each planning district. The Planning Commission rejected his proposal, but for him and others, this was the begin-

The distinguished journalist Carey McWilliams, in the October 1949 edition of *Harpers*, wrote, "For the past fifteen years, the city has shown the incompetence of an idiot giant in dealing with its affairs. The story of this vast city's bungling of such problems as traffic, transportation, spoiling of its beaches, the sewage, smog, and related items would make a monumental municipal comedy of errors."

The way the city handled its old, poor or minority neighborhoods in downtown and on the eastside could also be considered as inane. Chavez Ravine, Bunker Hill, and Boyle Heights suffered grievously in the name of "urban renewal." To expedite "slum removal," make way for new commercial development, and construct a vast freeway network, the city permitted some 50,000 housing units to be torn down from 1933 to 1980 in the name of "progress."¹⁹

Mayor Fletcher Bowron was the first American mayor to apply for, and win, federal funds under the National Housing Act of 1949. He obtained a grant of \$100 million and hired the distinguished architect Richard Neutra to build apartment towers and two-story buildings in Chavez Ravine. The project was supposed to house 10,000 tenants on a mile-square site.²⁰ Bowron insisted that the federal funds be used for racially integrated housing as well as for replacement housing for the poor. Amid the growing Cold War atmosphere, the building industry raised the hue-and-cry about "creeping socialism" and "the menace of Communism." A leading city housing official, Frank Wilkinson, was sent to federal prison for refusing to cooperate in a political witch hunt. The City Council killed the Chavez Ravine housing project, and the mayor lost his bid for reelection. Henceforth, Los Angeles would make few commitments for low-income housing.²¹

Meanwhile, the Brooklyn Dodgers relocated to Chavez Ravine.²² In spite of the feeble resistance from a few old-time neighborhood residents, the new and much-heralded Dodger Stadium opened on the site in 1962.

It was only a matter of time before the Alinsky strategy of organizing in Catholic-based, working-class immigrant communities would find its way into the *barrios* of Los Angeles. Amid the bruising battles over urban renewal, housing discrimination, school segregation, and police abuse in Eastside Mexican neighborhoods, Alinsky protégés Fred Ross and Tony Rios formed the Community Service Organization (CSO). Instead of launching a neighborhood council, however, they made it their main task to elect a Chicano to the Los Angeles City Council. In this they had singular success in 1949 by launching the career of Edward Roybal, who became the first Latino to sit on the City Council since the previous century, and who later went on to carve out a dis-

In the 1970s and 1980s, the quality of municipal services declined further and the number of citizen complaints increased. When Proposition 13 reduced local revenues, the city curtailed services. Constituents flooded City Hall with complaints about potholes, trash collection, broken sidewalks, abandoned cars, slow police response time, police misconduct, and drug trafficking. The Council intervened more and more in individual cases, until it virtually administered the basic city services.

At that time the growth machine was riding high. Developers never met a canyon they could not fill, nor a commercial corner that could not benefit from a mini-mall, nor a boulevard that would not profit from a high-rise. They rarely met a City Council member or county supervisor whom they could not buy. When Planning Director Calvin Hamilton drafted a new master plan for the city, his department informally polled 50,000 Angelenos about their hopes and fears for the future. The overwhelming majority expressed fears about "the preservation of the single-family neighborhood."³¹

Nevertheless, developers and lobbyists increased their clout in City Hall. The City Council seemed more autocratic than ever and the tone of public discourse at Council meetings got nastier. (Added to this was the city-wide acrimony over public school integration.)

There was, however, in that era a nationwide upsurge of democracy that one scholar has called "the new populism of the 1970s."³² What stands out in L.A. in the 1970s and early 1980s is the increasing effectiveness of community-based associations in organizing themselves to exploit new environmental and preservation laws and to demand the enforcement of existing zoning and planning regulations.

Grassroots activity—involving homeowners associations, civic clubs, chambers of commerce, environmental organizations, tenant groups, and other associations—arose throughout the city. Some of these groups achieved notable victories:

- In the Santa Monica mountains, the Hillside Federation, representing scores of homeowner organizations and thousands of residents, went to court and forced the city to obey the provisions of the existing city plan and zoning laws, and to cease bowing repeatedly to the demands of land developers looking for exceptions. It won a major court decision forcing the city to revamp its entire handling of zoning and planning matters.
- In Carthay Circle, residents were able to utilize historic preservation regulations to protect their old Spanish-Revival homes.

tinguished congressional career. Roybal became the point man for various local battles, including the resistance to the freeways. Despite his best efforts, though, major arteries sliced up vital parts of Boyle Heights. Architectural historians David Gebhard and Robert Winter describe the Golden State Freeway as “the worst and most unbelievably thoughtless” freeway project of all.²³

The old neighborhood of Bunker Hill, established in the 1860s, had fallen on hard times a century later. It was totally eradicated when the Community Redevelopment Agency evicted the occupants, mostly older and white residents, and bulldozed the Victorian houses.²⁴ This classic disregard for both the residents and the architecture was cited by Jane Jacobs in her influential commentary, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.²⁵ The Bunker Hill disaster had one positive effect. It sparked the formation of a citywide movement for historic preservation, which would later come to the rescue of old neighborhoods. West of the Harbor Freeway, the Temple-Beaudry community had teemed with Mexican families in the 1930s and 1940s. It too was virtually razed, although the plans for new construction never materialized fully.

On Bunker Hill and elsewhere, urban renewal would eventually produce a glistening new downtown skyline with impressive skyscrapers and fine cultural attractions. But downtown, with a few exceptions, never attracted enough housing to restore it as an important residential area. Today’s downtown leaders are still attempting to undo the damage of the past by attracting 100,000 new residents.

There was enough discontent brewing in the outlying neighborhoods of L.A. during the next three decades to hear repeated outcries for secession and borough reform, two ideas that seem to have a symbiotic relationship.

Talk of secession arose in the San Fernando Valley in the 1940s and 1950s when the city failed to act promptly on matters relating to zoning, parking, traffic, high taxes, and the construction of public facilities. In those days, the Valley was seriously underrepresented in the City Council. Mayor Bowron responded by proposing to divide the city into five boroughs—San Fernando, Hollywood, West Los Angeles, Central, and Harbor. He had an ally in Vincent Thomas, an influential assemblyman from San Pedro.

The sentiment for secession arose also in Westwood in the 1960s.irate homeowners were having trouble fending off powerful developers intent on building high-rise apartments in their low-rise neighborhoods. In Pacific Palisades, homeowners proposed the same secession remedy as an answer to the inadequate level of police protection. In 1964, a City Council committee recommended a charter amendment to permit the establishment of boroughs. The full Council let it die, and the idea again fell dormant.²⁶

The twenty years from 1965 to 1985 brought astonishing advances in neighborhood empowerment. One change occurred when President Lyndon Johnson initiated the War on Poverty in 1965. Cities applying for federal funds were required to pledge that they would allow the "maximum feasible participation of the poor in their own affairs." This was a major advance in the concept of empowerment—but it met with stiff resistance.²⁷ In Los Angeles, for example, Mayor Sam Yorty regarded it as a ploy for radical African-American empowerment and staunchly refused to accept the federal funds. His refusal helped precipitate the Watts riot/rebellion.

Nevertheless, a year after the Watts disturbance, Yorty appointed a charter reform commission that supported neighborhood empowerment. This commission was chaired by Henry Reining, Jr., dean of University of Southern California's von KleinSmid Center of International and Public Affairs. It studied the extensive literature regarding the ongoing nationwide "urban crisis" and sought to learn why Angelenos felt so distant from their government as well as how to close the gap. They found that, while City Hall functionaries assumed that the government worked reasonably well, many constituents—especially those of minority racial background—felt otherwise.²⁸

Although the Reining team viewed the borough option favorably, it gave even stronger endorsement to establishing new neighborhood associations governed by elected boards. It also proposed establishing a new category of city official, a "neighborman." The corps neighborhoodmen would serve as latter-day precinct captains, working as liaisons between citizens and City Hall.²⁹ Unfortunately, the Reining commission created a storm of opposition in City Hall by suggesting that the powerfully connected Department of Water and Power relinquish some of its financial independence. It also made the fatal error of laboring behind closed doors for two years before issuing its report. The commission never gained credibility among the voters, who rejected the charter proposals not once but twice. This prescient document then disappeared from public consciousness for the next thirty years.

When Yorty felt less threatened by black power, he created, on paper at least, an elaborate plan for mayoral advisory councils. These were said to be ethnically balanced community advisory committees—one for each council district—to insure "a new and positive force for utilizing citizen participation in the decision-making process of city government."³⁰ Soon, individual City Council members followed suit with their own advisory groups, as did several city commissions and city agencies.