

UN-PLANNED: RACIAL GEOGRAPHIES AND NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISM ON
MILWAUKEE'S WEST SIDE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Professors Anne Bonds and Amanda Seligman

This thesis examines the history of the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) during the 1970s. Formed in 1971, the SPCA transitioned during its first decade from a grassroots human relations organization to a grant-funded, staffed economic development nonprofit. Through analyzing archival records, oral histories, and spatial data, this thesis recovers the influence of the human relations movement on the contemporary urban nonprofit sector.

Chapter 1 traces the origins of the SPCA to several endogenous spatial factors, including the neighborhood's housing stock, socioeconomic and ethnoreligious makeup, and previous history of integration attempts. While it is commonly believed that the threat of the planned Park West freeway provided the impetus for neighborhood activism in Sherman Park, this thesis argues that changes in school redistricting served as the immediate cause for the incorporation of the SPCA. This chapter also shows how the SPCA's founders quickly realized the drawbacks of a human relations-based strategy while trying to intervene in the neighborhood's public schools and housing market and began to search for different modes of activism in order to obtain more effective results.

Chapter 2 discusses the SPCA's fight against the Park West Freeway and explores how the organization leveraged the threat of the Park West to advance several "place-frames" about Sherman Park in the public imagination, creating an idea of the neighborhood that continues to

exist today. Through these “place-frames,” the SPCA successfully argued that it and similar organizations should have a greater say in the governance of their service areas, creating a role for “neighborhood nonprofits” within the city’s governing regime.

Chapter 3 shows how the SPCA during the mid-to-late 1970s combined elements of the human relations and economic development nonprofit models in order to develop several influential housing programs focused on promoting individual behavior change in order to combat structural inequality, disinvestment, and housing discrimination. These programs allowed the SPCA to evolve from a grassroots organization to a grant-funded social service agency, better represent and serve the interests an increasingly diverse community of neighborhood residents, and achieve financial sustainability in a difficult fiscal environment. However, this came at the cost of the ability to oppose the policy agendas of the actors to whom the organization depended on for funding and to advocate for systemic change.

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For my colleagues and teachers. We need you more than ever.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDBG	Community Development Block Grant
CDC	Community Development Corporation
DOJ	Federal Justice Department
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
GIS	Geographic Information Science
GMC	Greater Milwaukee Committee
HUD	Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development
MJC	Milwaukee Jewish Council
MMFHC	Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council
OOO	Organization of Organizations
PWRTF	Park West Redevelopment Task Force
RACM	Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee
RON	Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods Coalition
SEWRPC	Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
SPCA	Sherman Park Community Association
SPP	Sherman Park Plan
SPRC	Sherman Park Redevelopment Corporation
VAMA	Voluntary Affirmative Marketing Agreement
WAC	West Side Action Coalition
WAICO	Walnut Area Improvement Council
WCC	West Side Citizens Coalition

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“Democracy, in any active sense, begins and ends in the communities small enough for their members to meet face to face.”

—Lewis Mumford, as quoted in the first issue of the *Sherman Park News*.

Introduction: In the Shadow of Sherman Park

In March of 2024, staff from five Milwaukee nonprofit organizations presented a panel at the annual meeting of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition in Washington, D.C. The panelists, representing the Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods (RON) Coalition, discussed the coalition's annual housing stock surveys across its member organization's service areas. By training volunteers to use a Geographic Information Science (GIS) app called Regrid, the coalition collected data on over 35,000 properties in 2024, allowing for member organizations to better target their housing stock improvement programs to the homes in their service areas showing the most deterioration.¹ This effort has garnered RON millions of dollars in funding since the coalition's founding.

However, as Mabel Lamb, the executive director of the Sherman Park Community Coalition (SPCA), emphasized during the panel, RON's technology-centric information gathering has deep roots in Milwaukee's west side. The SPCA had, in fact, conducted housing stock surveys since the 1970s, albeit with pen and paper. Many other nonprofits working in disinvested neighborhoods had followed suit by the 1980s. So, while RON updated these techniques, the coalition's methodology was nearly a half-century in the making for Milwaukee's nonprofit sector.

This panel, rapturously received by conference attendees, illustrated the continuing impact of activism in the Sherman Park neighborhood on the city of Milwaukee. The SPCA has played a significant role in steering RON by sharing its surveying methods with coalition

¹ RON Coalition, *2024 Milwaukee Housing Conditions Report* (Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods, 2024); *RON Coalition, 2022 Milwaukee Housing Condition Report* (Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods, 2023). The RON coalition is made up of community development corporations (CDCs) operating in Milwaukee's disinvested neighborhoods. The program is a high-profile entity committed to community reinvestment and housing stock improvement.

members across decades. Furthermore, RON was formed with funds from a fair housing settlement won by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC), an organization that spun off from the SPCA in 1978. RON's current prominence in Milwaukee's housing and economic development landscape speaks to how Sherman Park towers over the city's nonprofit sector.

Originally a white and white-ethnic middle-class neighborhood with a large population of city, state, and federal government workers, the Sherman Park transitioned to being majority-Black by the end of the 1980s.² However, it has retained its image as a middle-class and politically active community on Milwaukee's north side. The demographics of the organization's staff and board today reflect the current racial makeup of its service area. But the SPCA's continued reliance on programming centering the needs of the neighborhood's dwindling population of homeowners while trying to control their behaviors and external appearances also demonstrates the lasting impact of the organization's white middle-class founders. The ideology of these founders was based in human relations theory.

This thesis recovers the impact of human relations ideologies on the housing and economic development nonprofit sector during its nascent years.³ It does so by examining the history of neighborhood activism in the racially transitioning neighborhood of Sherman Park during the long 1970s. This activism was catalyzed by the creation of the Sherman Park Community Association in 1971.

² Chelsea Wait, "Neighborhood Care: Structural Conditions, Class, and Aesthetics in Sherman Park, Milwaukee, WI, 1980-2020" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024), 63. Sherman Park, while located on Milwaukee's west side, is today understood to also be part of the city's north side, the area that houses the majority of Milwaukee's Black population.

³ While philanthropic foundations have been active in the US for over a century, the 501(c)3 designation dates to the 1954 Revenue Code. Internal Revenue Service, *Exempt Organizations Technical Guide* (Internal Revenue Service, 2024), 5-6.

The majority of the research for this thesis draws on the archival collections of the SPCA and its activists, as well as the many politicians and organizations that interfaced with the group, sometimes as allies and sometimes as opponents. This thesis also incorporates oral histories of the SPCA collected by UWM professor and oral historian Michael Gordon and his students during the 1990s. Gordon's oral histories lay bare many of the interpersonal dynamics and conflicts in the SPCA during its first decade that have become obscured in the archival record. I have supplemented these interviews with a few of my own. This thesis also makes use of Geographic Information Scientific (GIS) analysis. Examining contemporary and historic spatial data pertaining to Sherman Park's demographics and built environment contextualizes the qualitative data observed in the archive and on tape.

Through analyzing these data sources, this thesis argues that the SPCA, like many urban nonprofits led by middle-class whites, used human relations as the starting point for its programming. However, as the SPCA reacted to structural changes to the socioeconomic and political landscape of Milwaukee's west side, the SPCA's leaders began to place human relations in conversation with other approaches to organizing. These included Saul Alinsky's more confrontational philosophy as well as the neighborhood-anchored and service-oriented model pushed for by grant makers and many Sherman Park residents. The result was an organization that integrated elements from all of these approaches.

Compared to its first years of existence, the version of the SPCA that emerged by the end of the 1970s prioritized services to Sherman Park individuals while embracing a "color-blind" vision of integration. At the same time, the organization maintained a human relations-influenced emphasis on compelling individual behavior change in order to maintain the neighborhood's appearance and conformity to middle-class norms. This approach became embodied in the

organization's annual surveys and housing stock improvement program, as well as its fair housing testing program. Given the influence of these programs, this thesis argues that the human relations movement has played a larger role in the evolution of the contemporary urban housing and economic development nonprofits than scholars have previously recognized.

The majority of the literature on human relations analyzes the movement in the context of its postwar heyday. Rooted in the activism of middle-class reformers during the Progressive era, human relations theory arose from the experiences of Jewish and Catholic community leaders contending with the rise of nativism and antisemitism in the US in the lead-up to World War II.⁴ The first national human relations organization formed in 1947.⁵ Historians Stuart Svonkin, Abigail Perkiss, Lily Geismer, Tracy K'Meyer, and others have characterized human relations as a postwar liberal approach to inequality and discrimination that viewed racism as a psychological disorder. The remedies for this disorder that human relations activist championed stressed the importance of educating racist individuals to modify their behavior towards minority groups, the avoidance of public confrontation on political or racial issues, and the adherence to middle-class norms of respectability on the part of community activists.⁶ Gunnar Myrdal and other intellectual leaders of the movement criticized racial discrimination in America but found its remedy "in a

⁴ Stuart Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 25-27.

⁵ Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice*, 28.

⁶ Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice*, 108; Abigail Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors: Civil Rights, Liberalism, and Integration in Postwar Philadelphia* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 57; Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton University Press, 2014); 7; Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 13; Tracy K'Meyer, *To Live Peaceably Together: The American Friends Service Committee's Campaign for Open Housing* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); Russell Star-Lack, "Close to Home: Suburbanization, Residential Segregation, and Jewish-Black Relations in St. Louis Park and North Minneapolis, MN." *Journal of Urban History*. Ahead of print, August 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442241266230>.

small but persistent group of whites promoting individual change grounded in the historic ideals of American democracy.”⁷

Human relations’ emphasis on individual racist encounters especially resonated with American Jews’ postwar experiences of antisemitism, and as a result, a network of national and local Jewish organizations oriented towards this ideology, such as the American Jewish Council, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League, formed across the country during the 1950s. These groups became extremely influential in lobbying for the first wave of civil rights legislation such as state-level fair employment laws.⁸ To realize their vision, human relations activists collaborated with community groups, politicians, and business leaders to address racial and religious inequality at the individual level. An important aspect of this work, according to Perkiss, was the modeling of idealized forms of intergroup interactions, not only for the educational benefit of local communities but also to project a strong, harmonious image of domestic life to a global audience.⁹

The standards of behavior to which human relations activists aspired to conform centered around notions of middle-class respectability. According to Lily Geismer, Abigail Perkiss, and others, these norms emphasize “family-centered ideology,” domesticity, and the avoidance of behaviors or actors seen to be “dangerous” or “deviant” from middle-class values.¹⁰ Such behaviors included violent resistance of integration or any type of overly confrontational protest.¹¹ By effectively working with community leaders to discipline the behavior of

⁷ Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 18.

⁸ See Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice*, 93; Star-Lack, “Close to Home,” 3.

⁹ Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 36.

¹⁰ Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us*, 54-55; Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 58; Phyllis Palmer, *Living as Equals: How Three White Communities Struggled to Make interracial Connections during the Civil Rights Era* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 93-94.

¹¹ Lila Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 114-115, 133; Star-Lack, “Close to Home,” 9-12.

community members toward middle-class liberal norms, human relations activists believed that racial tensions and its ramifications, especially white flight, would become neutralized. In this way, human relations served as a tool for white and white-ethnic leaders to campaign for civil rights reforms that benefited their communities while “managing” relationships between their communities and communities of color when such relationships became strained by the realities of structural racism.¹²

The approach of Myrdal and other human relations theorists contrasted with the more direct strategy for protesting against racial discrimination developed contemporaneously by Ella Baker and the Black freedom movement.¹³ While Baker’s methodology also utilized liberal middle-class norms as part of the movement’s “politics of respectability” strategy, Black freedom activists thought of this strategy as a means to start conversations about drastic changes to discriminatory laws and politics.¹⁴ Unlike in human relations theory, enforcing individual conformity to these ideals was not an end in itself. Politics of respectability fell out of favor within the Black freedom movement in the mid-1960s as groups like CORE, SNCC, the Black Panthers, and, in Milwaukee, the NAACP Commandos embraced increasingly militant aesthetics and philosophies.¹⁵ This shift threw the differences in approaches between Black freedom and human relations activists into even greater relief and occasionally led to friction between their practitioners.¹⁶

¹² Star-Lack, “Close to Home,” 5-6.

¹³ Derek Handley, *Struggle for the City: Citizenship and Resistance in the Black Freedom Movement* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 90; Patricia S. Parker, *Ella Baker’s Catalytic Leadership* (University of California Press, 2020), 3-5.

¹⁴ Jeffrey D. Gonda, *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 115-120.

¹⁵ Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 137-140; Handley, *Struggle for the City*, 108; Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 180-189.

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 206-207; Star-Lack, “Close to Home,” 13-14.

Perkiss' monograph concerns the West Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia, a community that experienced demographic changes similar to Sherman Park, albeit about fifteen years earlier. Perkiss interprets the evolution of the West Mount Airy Neighbors Association, a similar entity to the SPCA, in the 1970s as a rejection of the human relations ideology that had the group had embraced since the mid-1950s.¹⁷ The history of the SPCA, however, challenges the assumption that community organizations summarily threw out human relations theory during this period of transition.

In addition to the human relations movement, another important influence on the outlook of the SPCA's founders was the more pragmatic community organizing model of Saul Alinsky. While active since the late 1930s, Alinsky's ideas, experienced a surge in popularity on Chicago's West Side and beyond beginning in the late-1960s, a surge that would eventually spread to Milwaukee. As documented by Carol Goodwin, Rebecca Marchiel, Beryl Satter, and Amanda Seligman, organizations in neighborhoods facing blockbusting and racial transition came to see Alinsky's strategies as effective means to call the attention of journalists and policymakers to the problems faced by their communities.¹⁸ This wave of activism culminated in the creation of a national community reinvestment movement led by Chicago West Side activist Gail Cincotta.

Alinsky's model shares commonalities with human relations theory, especially its emphasis on building and maintaining relationships with community and institutional leaders. Alinsky's strategy stressed the cultivation of relationships with community members as a way to

¹⁷ Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 129.

¹⁸ Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (Metropolitan Books, 2009); Rebecca K. Marchiel, *After Redlining: The Urban Reinvestment Movement in the Era of Financial Deregulation* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

both build support for aggressive actions and to trace the oppressive power dynamics internal and external to a given community. Once organizers identified those dynamics, Alinsky believed activists should resort to any means necessary for calling attention to and disrupting targeted power structures.¹⁹ In his view, grassroots “people’s organizations” that represented the interests of urban communities provided the best vehicles for doing so.²⁰ However, the optics necessitated by Alinsky’s commitment to public agitation flew in the face of the middle-class veneer valued by human relations. The SPCA’s founders, as a result, felt that they needed to navigate between what they perceived as the two extremes of each approach. All the historical studies of community organizations discussed above provide valuable insight into the ideological spectrum along which such organizations operated during the 1960s and 1970s. However, none of them locate the role of grant making in facilitating in these shifts.

The historical literature on the urban nonprofit sector is a small but growing corpus. Claire Dunning’s *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* is the first historical monograph to interrogate the sector as a whole.²¹ Dunning’s narrative is written in conversation with social scientific literature on nonprofit organizations. It examines how radical and confrontational Black-led organizations formed in Boston during the 1960s became disciplined through public and private grantmaking during the following three decades to focus on economic development as the sole remedy for structural inequality.²² *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* serves as call for researchers to examine similar

¹⁹ Mark Santow, *Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race: Community Organizing in the Postwar City* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 23-24.

²⁰ Santow, *Saul Alinsky and the Dilemmas of Race*, 19-20.

²¹ Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

²² Michael McQuarrie, “No Contest: Participatory Technologies and the Transformation of Urban Authority,” *Public Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 143-175; Michael McQuarrie, “Community Organizations in the Foreclosure Crisis: The Failure of Neoliberal Civil Society,” *Politics & Society* 41, no. 1 (2012): 73-101; Kathe Newman and Robert W. Lake, “Democracy, Bureaucracy and Difference in US Community Development Politics Since 1968,” *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 44-61; Deborah G. Martin, “Nonprofit Foundations and Grassroots Organizing: Reshaping Urban Governance,” *The Professional Geographer* 56, no 3 (2004): 394-405.

processes in a more diverse array of organizations and locales. This thesis takes up Dunning's charge and pieces together a different narrative in which grantmaking, while disciplining groups like the SPCA to some degree, also helped to facilitate such groups adopting more liberal views on race relations and integration, as well as more aggressive interventions in their communities

Nonprofit Neighborhoods' second contribution to the historical literature is to tie community-based organizations to the process of urban neighborhood formation. Again, Dunning is in conversation with social scientists who have studied this process in contemporary contexts.²³ Geographer Deborah Martin, among the most prominent theorists in this literature, has proposed the concept of "place-framing," in which neighborhood organizations utilize specific discursive visions of their community as a way to garner support for their policy agendas.²⁴ Such framing, while based on pre-existing ideas of a given neighborhood, also disseminate that vision, helping a community to reimagine itself. The SPCA successfully used this strategy as part of an anti-freeway campaign, popularizing the image of the Sherman Park neighborhood that endures to this day. What the organization's founders may not have intended, however, is for the SPCA, in turn, to be forced to accede to the demands of this new community, demands that often aligned with those of grant makers. This disciplining from the ground-up adds to the growing body of literature arguing that neoliberalism in American cities was not a phenomenon solely imposed from the top-down by national politicians.²⁵

Finally, this thesis incorporates the small but vital body of research previously conducted on Sherman Park. To date, the most authoritative historical work on the neighborhood is the late

²³ Deborah G. Martin, "Enacting Neighborhood," *Urban Geography* 24, no. 5 (Fall 2003): 361-385.

²⁴ Deborah G. Martin, "'Place-Framing' as Place-Making: Constituting a Neighborhood for Organizing and Activism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (2003): 730-750.

²⁵ See McQuarrie, "Community Organizations in the Foreclosure Crisis"; Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*, 17; Timothy P.R. Weaver, *Blazing the Neoliberal Trail: Urban Political Development in the United States and United Kingdom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 209; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Metropolitan Books, 2017), 306.

sociologist Juliet Saltman's 1990 monograph, *A Fragile Movement*, which examines neighborhood stabilization efforts across the country and contains a chapter on the SPCA.²⁶ Drawing mostly on the SPCA's administrative records before they were accessioned to UWM's archives, as well as interviews with the organization's members, Saltman discovered conflicts within the organization relating to race relations and class dynamics, as well as tension with other neighborhood-based organizations at the national level.²⁷ A 1998 article by SPCA member Ed Valent and sociologist Greg Squires provides a comprehensive overview of the neighborhood's demographics and geography from the late 1960s through the 1990s.²⁸ Valent and Squires call attention to the neighborhood's east-west divide, with the west side historically considered whiter and more affluent.²⁹ Deanna Schmidt's 2008 dissertation in Geography contains a chapter analyzing the SPCA's surveying and housing stock improvement programs in the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁰ While Schmidt does not explicitly discuss human relations, her analysis centers the cultural importance of homeownership in the neighborhood, an attitude stemming from the SPCA's middle-class origins that persists in the neighborhood to this day.³¹ Chelsea Waits' 2024 dissertation in Architecture documents a lasting impact of the SPCA's emphasis on serving middle-class residents: a neighborhood where the housing programs failed to serve its now majority-renter population.³²

The first chapter of this thesis examines the origins of the Sherman Park neighborhood and the SPCA, founded in 1971. Drawing on archival sources, oral histories, and Geographic

²⁶ Juliet Saltman, *A Fragile Movement: The Struggle for Neighborhood Revitalization* (Greenwood Press, 1990).

²⁷ Saltman, *A Fragile Movement*, 132-137.

²⁸ Edward Valent and Gregory Squires, "Chapter 6: Sherman Park, Milwaukee," *Cityscape* 4, no. 2 (1998): 105-130.

²⁹ Valent and Squires, "Sherman Park," 112.

³⁰ Deanna H. Schmidt, "The (Re)production of Social Space: Community, Homeownership, and Stability in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1970-1990" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008).

³¹ Schmidt, "The (Re)production of Social Space," 94; Chelsea Wait, multiple conversations with author, 2023-2024.

³² Wait, "Neighborhood Care," 97.

Information Science (GIS), I show how a small group of families faced with a set of perceived threats to their neighborhood turned to human relations theory to try to counter these threats. They were incentivized to do so by their economic, ethnoreligious, and spatial positions within the neighborhood. I then show how the group's early failures when relying on human relations strategies forced them to explore more confrontational modes of activism.

Chapter 2 discusses the SPCA's successful campaign to oppose two planned freeways in its service area in 1972. Faced with this new threat, the SPCA adopted a strategy closer to Alinsky's methods while retaining several facets of human relations organizing. They did so by participating in relatively mild actions like hand-delivering petitions to elected representatives, keeping a distance between their organization and more confrontation groups on the west side, and ensuring that the press portrayed the SPCA and its service area as a community of middle-class "experts" on the issues the organization campaigned. In the process, the SPCA discursively "place-framed" and popularized the neighborhood of Sherman Park in its own image for a metropolitan-wide audience. Doing so created a mandate for the SPCA and similar nonprofits to assume prominent roles in the governance of their respective service areas.

Chapter 3 focuses on the creation of the Sherman Park Plan (SPP), the SPCA's block grant-funded housing stock improvement program, as well as the organization's fair housing testing program, from 1972 to 1980. The SPP took root as part of a city-wide surge of interest in expanding housing rehabilitation programs from Milwaukee's Model Cities neighborhoods to white communities facing racial transition and disinvestment. What made the SPP successful compared to its contemporaries was its incorporation of human relations methods pertaining to information gathering and behavior change into a client service-based model. One of the clearest legacies of the SPCA's human relations roots, the SPP spurred conflict within the group as it

transitioned from a grassroots organization to a grant-funded and staffed social services agency. Today, nearly every housing stock improvement program in the city contains the SPP's DNA.

The SPCA's surveys also informed the group's efforts to "audit" the actions of Realtors operating in Sherman Park through fair housing testing, and the evidence the SPCA collected became the basis of the first fair housing lawsuit in the state of Wisconsin. While fair housing testing is rooted in human relations' focus on policing individual interactions in a free market, this lawsuit forced the SPCA to embrace a new view of integration that rejected the organization's founders' emphasis on placating the fears of Sherman Park's white residents. The success of the SPCA's fair housing efforts led the group's executive director, Fred Freiberg, to form a new organization focused solely on fair housing, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC), which remains active in the city to this day.

Sherman Park continues to function as a bellwether neighborhood for Milwaukee. When its residents speak, many in the city listen. For better or worse, this status is partly due to the SPCA's roots in the human relations movement. RON represents the latest manifestation of this influence. The coalition's most significant innovation has been to adapt the SPCA's surveying methodology for the digital age. These techniques have lent themselves well to a technological landscape where the governments increasingly rely on GIS systems to surveil and police cities and their residents.³³ Furthermore, the ability to easily disseminate data and data collection methods have made it much easier for the SPCA's peers to adopt these techniques. By telling this story, this thesis helps to illuminate the lasting impact of human relations on the nonprofit sector. While RON continues to amass praise for its work, the systemic causes of the deterioration and disinvestment it surveys and attempts to counter continue to fester.

³³ Brian Jordan Jefferson, "Computerizing Carceral Space: Coded Geographies of Criminalization and Capture in New York City," *Economy and Space* 50, no. 5 (2018): 969-988.

Chapter 1: Human Relations or Human Rights? The Origins of the Sherman Park

Community Association, 1920-1972

Introduction: “A Nice Place to Live”

John and Rita Conway moved to the west side of Milwaukee in 1953. The couple was drawn to the spacious and beautiful, yet affordable houses on Grant Boulevard, just south of a neighborhood park. “It was so roomy! It had a big solarium and a living room,” as well as enough bedrooms to house the couple’s seven children, Rita recalled in an oral history.¹ The couple’s Realtor expressed surprised, however, that the Conways opted for this listing over the properties they had viewed on the east side, a more affluent—yet denser— neighborhood physically separated from majority-Black Bronzeville by the Milwaukee River. He even argued against their decision by pointing out that John would have to drive into the sun commuting to and from his job at the A.O. Smith factory.² Perhaps he had an inkling about the changes the Conway’s neighborhood would soon experience.

In the following decades, the Conways would play a major role in organizing the group that would become the Sherman Park Community Association in 1970. The couple represented several of the socioeconomic qualities that would characterize the group’s original base. They were white, Catholic, educated (despite working a blue-collar job, John had attended teachers’ college), comfortably middle-class, liberal on racial issues, and lived in a group of blocks between Grant and Sherman Boulevards, just south of Sherman Park’s eponymous park.

¹ John Conway and Rita Conway, interview by Nicola Sherril, March 23, 1992, Sherman Park Community Association 1992 Oral History Project Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCAOH Records).

² John and Rita Conway interview, SPCAOH Records.

The half dozen couples who founded the SPCA were reacting to a series of shifts in Milwaukee's economy, politics, and racial demographics that began in the 1950s. Sherman Park had slowly begun integrating in 1956, but the process threatened to speed up after the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act and a municipal fair housing ordinance in Milwaukee. Changes to the neighborhood's racialized housing landscape were accompanied by changes to its well-regarded high school, Washington High. While many white homeowners throughout the west side reacted to these perceived threats by fleeing to the suburbs, the Conways and their friends did not. Instead, they organized.

Their decision, this chapter will argue, was not a direct response to the threats to the neighborhood posed by the Park West freeway or by blockbusters, as remembered in the public historical narrative of Sherman Park. Instead, it was catalyzed by several endogenous neighborhood dynamics. These included the unique nature of the homes along Grant Boulevard and their proximity to Washington High School, the shared Catholic faith of many of the homeowners who lived in this area, and the manner in which integration had occurred in Sherman Park during the 1950s and 1960s. All of these factors informed the SPCA's founders' belief that their neighborhood could become racially "stabilized" through a strategy based in human relations theory. The SPCA was originally created as the instrument through which these families could implement this mission. However, it soon became apparent that this approach would prove unsuccessful in stopping blockbusting, the resegregation of the neighborhood's schools, and white flight. A new strategy would be needed.

Covenants and Colonials: The Prehistory of Sherman Park, 1920-1956

The origins of Sherman Park are closely linked with Milwaukee's history of fraught race-relations. For the first three decades of the twentieth century, the city's German and Eastern European Jewish communities lived in separate neighborhoods.³ While German Jews were largely dispersed across the east side, Eastern Europeans settled in a small neighborhood known as Haymarket, bounded by Walnut Avenue to the north, Juneau Avenue to the south, Third Street to the east, and Eight Street to the west, considered the city's Jewish "ghetto."⁴ Peddlers and small business owners at first, the neighborhood's Jewish population began to enter the middle class in the 1920s and move north and west across the Thirty-First Street corridor towards an area recently annexed by the city that eventually become known as Sherman Park.⁵

³ John Gurda, *One People, Many Paths: A History of Jewish Milwaukee* (Jewish Museum Milwaukee, 2009), 45.

⁴ Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 60.

⁵ Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 45; Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 104; Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 108.

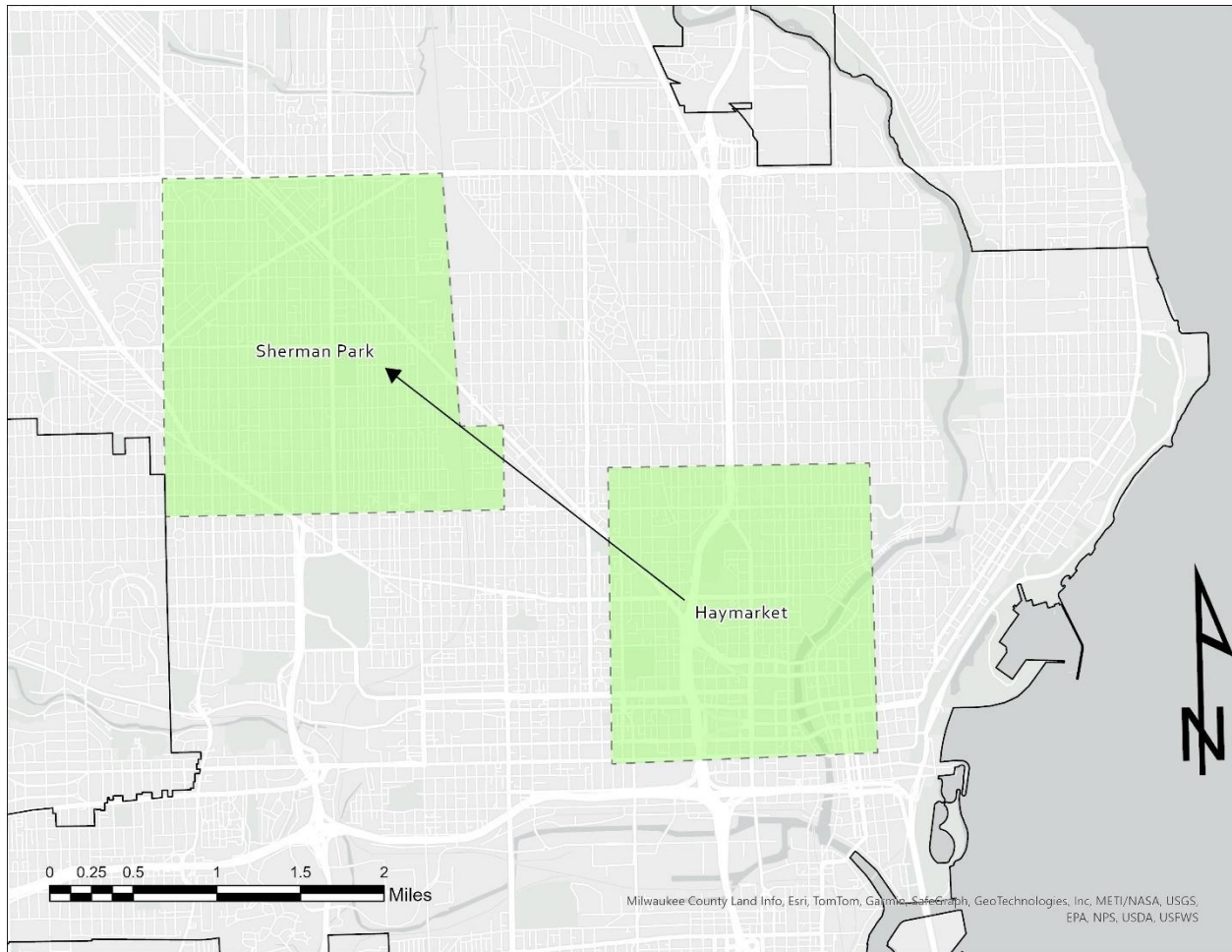


Figure 1. Map of Jewish prewar movement from Haymarket towards Sherman Park (Adapted from John Gurda, *One People, Many Paths: A History of Jewish Milwaukee* [Milwaukee: Jewish Museum Milwaukee, 2009], 109)

Historian Joe Trotter places the arrival Blacks in Haymarket at precisely this period.⁶

This implies that African Americans began gaining access to housing vacated by Jews at the beginning of the Jewish movement towards Sherman Park in the aftermath of World War I and the first Great Migration. Trotter describes African Americans as similarly dispersed throughout the Second and Sixth wards in a pattern mirroring that of Jews, further noting that Jews were one

⁶ Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (University of Illinois Press, 1985), 67.

of two white-ethnic groups who did not become more segregated from Blacks between World War I and 1920.⁷

Public historian John Gurda, echoing commonly held beliefs about the history of Milwaukee's Jewish community, disputes Trotter's chronology, writing that after Haymarket "became the heart of Milwaukee's African American community" only after Jews had completely left in the 1950s.⁸ Gurda attributes Jewish movement westward to a sociological theory called succession, in which Haymarket's Jewish population followed the route taken by previous waves of immigrants towards better housing stock. As they followed this route, a given population would become increasingly assimilated into white American cultural and economic life. But the presence of African Americans in Jewish neighborhoods before such movement began suggests its causes may have been more complex.⁹

To date, no extralegal resistance to pre-World War II Black settlement in Jewish neighborhoods has been documented. But one should note that Jewish institutions tended to move to the western portion of Sherman Park, which had become covered by racial covenants by the end of the 1920s, as shown in figures 2 and 3.¹⁰ This could mean that Jews moved explicitly to avoid the perceived threats to neighborhoods posed by Black in-migration. Furthermore, the movement of Jews to these covenanted properties suggests that even if Jews were not aware of these covenants, they could still benefit from them. The east and west divide in the

⁷ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 67.

⁸ Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 159.

⁹ For a discussion of the validity of succession in sociological thought, see Lila Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 49-50.

¹⁰ Mapping Racism and Resistance, *North Side Milwaukee and Wauwatosa Early Results*, September 13, 2023; Gurda, *One People, Many Paths*, 161; John M. McCarthy, *Making Milwaukee Mightier: Planning and the Politics of Growth 1910-1960* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 69-76; Frances Beverstock and Robert P. Stuckert, *Metropolitan Milwaukee Fact Book* (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1972), 229.

neighborhood, historically racialized, continues to play an active role in shaping Sherman Park's geography and politics to this day.

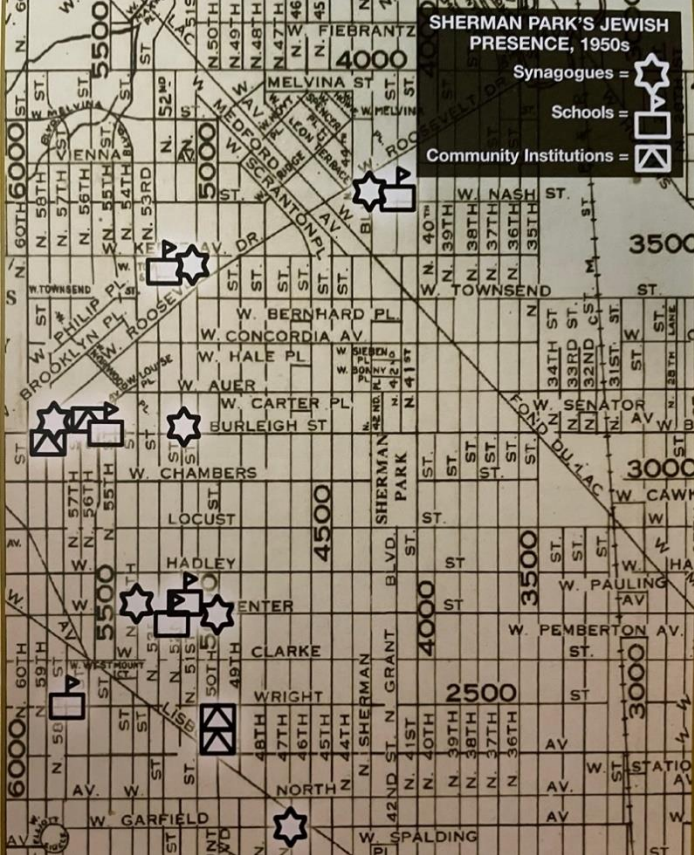


Figure 2. Map of Jewish institutions in Sherman Park, 1950 (John Gurda, *One People, Many Paths: A History of Jewish Milwaukee* [Milwaukee: Jewish Museum Milwaukee, 2009], 161)

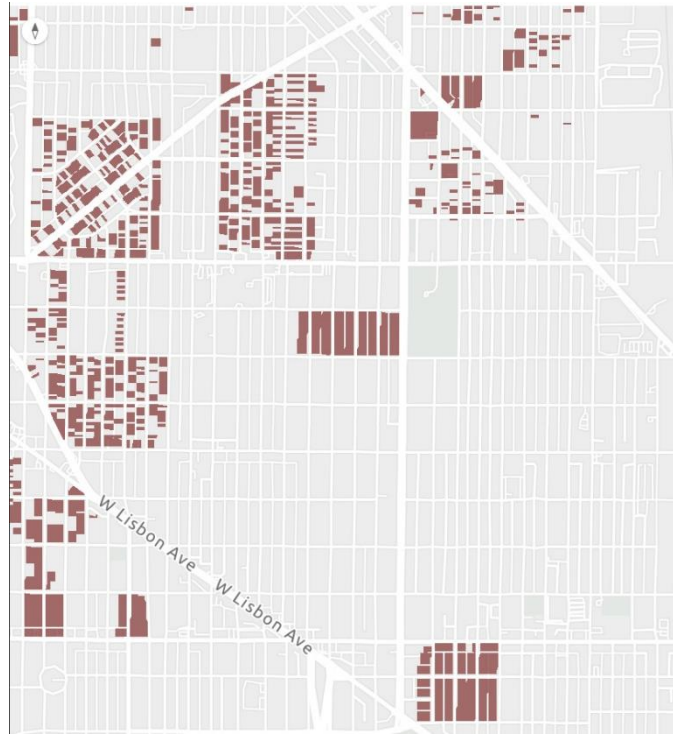


Figure 3. Map of housing covenants in Sherman Park (Mapping Racism and Resistance, 2025)

While the majority of the housing built in Sherman Park immediately after annexation comprised of bungalows, the housing along Grant Boulevard broke from this pattern.¹¹ As shown in figure 4, the architecture in this area (just south of the neighborhood’s titular park) mostly consisted of impressive Colonial or Tudor homes. This mirrors development patterns observed throughout American industrial cities during this period, in which larger homes intended for factory managers were surrounded by smaller homes intended for workers at the same facility.¹² Milwaukee’s Home Owner’s Loan Corporation assessments reflected the Grant Boulevard houses’ relative status in the neighborhood. The write up for the Sherman Park neighborhood

¹¹ Ace Backus, interview by Nicola Sherril, March 30, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

¹² Douglas W. Rae, *City: Urbanism and Its End* (Yale University Press, 2003), 127-136.

comments that “the area is occupied by a mixed substantial class of working people... [but] Sherman Park with Grant Boulevard leading into it from the south is favorable to the area.”¹³

While the role of industry had declined in Milwaukee by the end of the 1960s, this class hierarchy imbued into Sherman Park’s housing stock, as well as Grant’s relatively eastward location in the neighborhood, would help the street become a locus for neighborhood organizing.

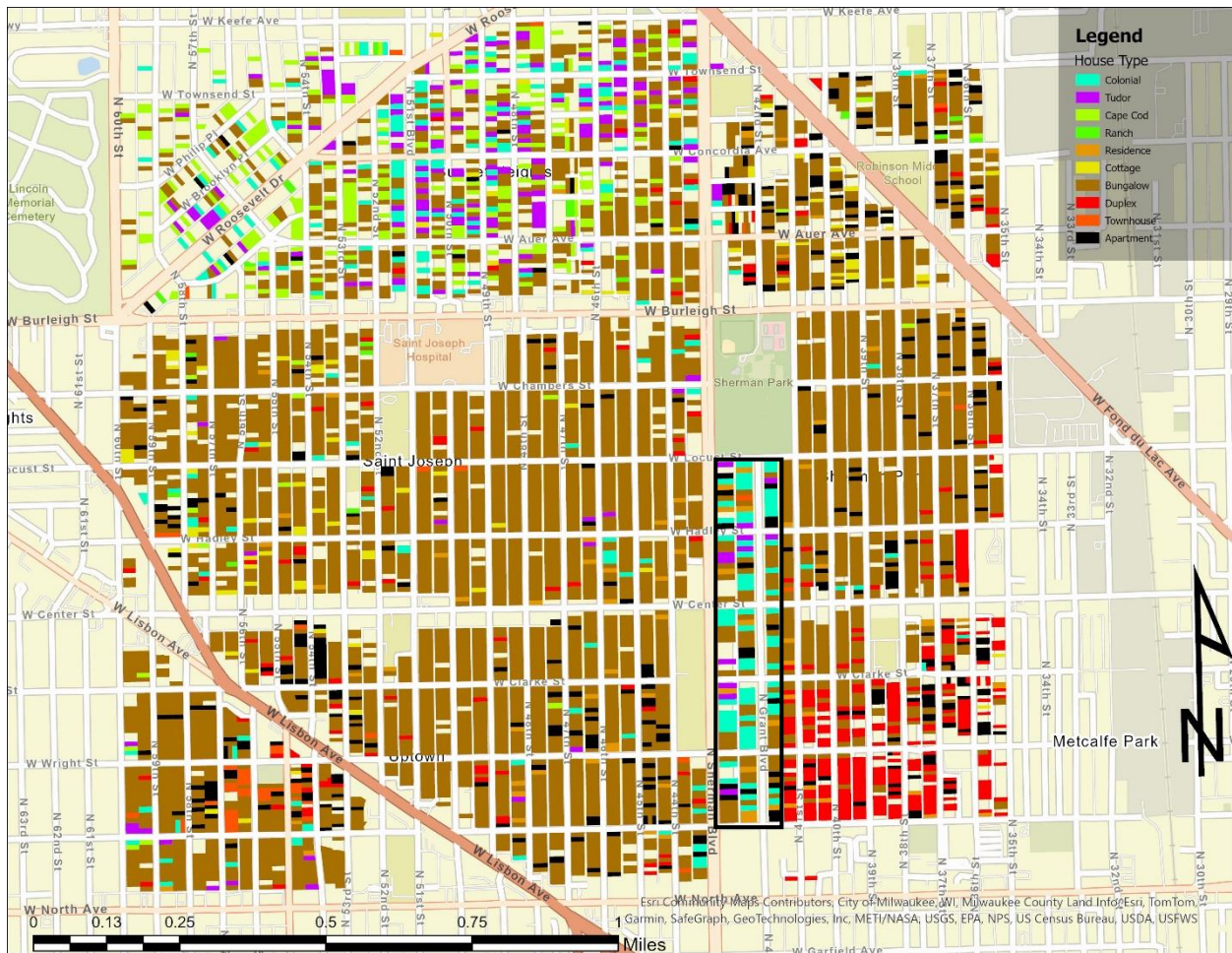


Figure 4. Map of housing architectural styles in the Sherman Park Community Association’s original service area (Data from the City of Milwaukee). The Grant Boulevard-area homes are delineated.

¹³ “Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” Edited by Robert K. Nelson and LaDale Winling, *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, Digital Scholarship Lab.

<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/map/MN/Minneapolis/context#loc=11/44.9726/-93.2631>

In November of 1956, a Black family attempted to purchase a home on the 300 block of Sherman Boulevard. Some of the surrounding Jewish homeowners “violently objected” to this turn of events and contacted the Milwaukee Jewish Council (MJC), the region’s primary Jewish human relations group, “in an effort to stop the sale of the home in question.” This speaks to the attitudes of at least a portion of Jewish Sherman Park residents towards Black homebuyers during this period as well as the role some in the community assumed that human relations ideology and actors would play in mediating this conflict. The MJC’s executive committee, however, “immediately agreed” that the organization “cannot participate in any action which would be discriminatory in nature.” Instead, they decided to convene a meeting between the organization’s director, the neighborhood’s residents, the Rabbi of Beth El (the synagogue to which the homeowners belonged), Myron Gordon (a Jewish judge serving on the Milwaukee County circuit court), and two additional executive committee members.¹⁴ While the details of how this situation resolved remain hazy, it does appear that the Black buyer successfully moved in with some assistance from the Urban League.¹⁵

This is the only instance of postwar resistance to integration to Sherman Park recorded in the archive, and additional sources show that several successful instances of integration occurred in the neighborhood in the fifteen years leading up to the formation of the SPCA. Indeed, the census tract in which the aforementioned incident occurred recorded fourteen Black individuals in 1960—the most in the neighborhood—likely meaning that two or three Black families moved

¹⁴ “Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting,” 16 November 1956, “Executive Committee, Minutes 1954-59,” Milwaukee Jewish Council Records, Jewish Museum Milwaukee. The parcel containing Beth El was protected by a covenant. Mapping Racism and Resistance.

¹⁵ Despite the minutes noting that the MJC’s executive director had filed a full report of the incident in the “Community Relations Committee File,” a search of said file produced no such documentation. However, there is a mention of a Black man moving into a house on the intersection of “Concordia and Sherman” (which includes the 3300 block of N Sherman Blvd) in a transcript of a telephone conversation cc-ed to the MJC. William V. Kelley to Wilbur C. Brucker, 8 August 1957, “Community Relations Committee, 1946-58,” MJC Records.

to the area between 1956 and 1960 (figure 5).¹⁶ This is notable because this tract is located in the center of the neighborhood, rather than on the eastern edge near Bronzeville. Furthermore, this tract had the same number of Black residents in the 1970 census (figure 6). Such data provides evidence that through some amount of organizing or just pure luck, these blocks had accommodated a small number of Black families while avoiding reaching a demographic “tipping point” that drove the majority of white families to flee. In the eyes of human relations activists during this period, integration in this tract would have been successfully “managed.”¹⁷

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Population by Race, 1960. Sherman Park as a whole (a larger region than the SPCA’s initial service area) housed somewhere between 30-40 Black residents in 1960.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Population by Race, 1970. An early report by the SPCA comments favorably on the fact that “some Blacks have lived in the community for as long as 15 years.” “Research Team on Population Demographics,” 1970, Box 1, Folder 8, Marilyn R. and Walter J. Johannsen Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Johannsen Papers), 1.

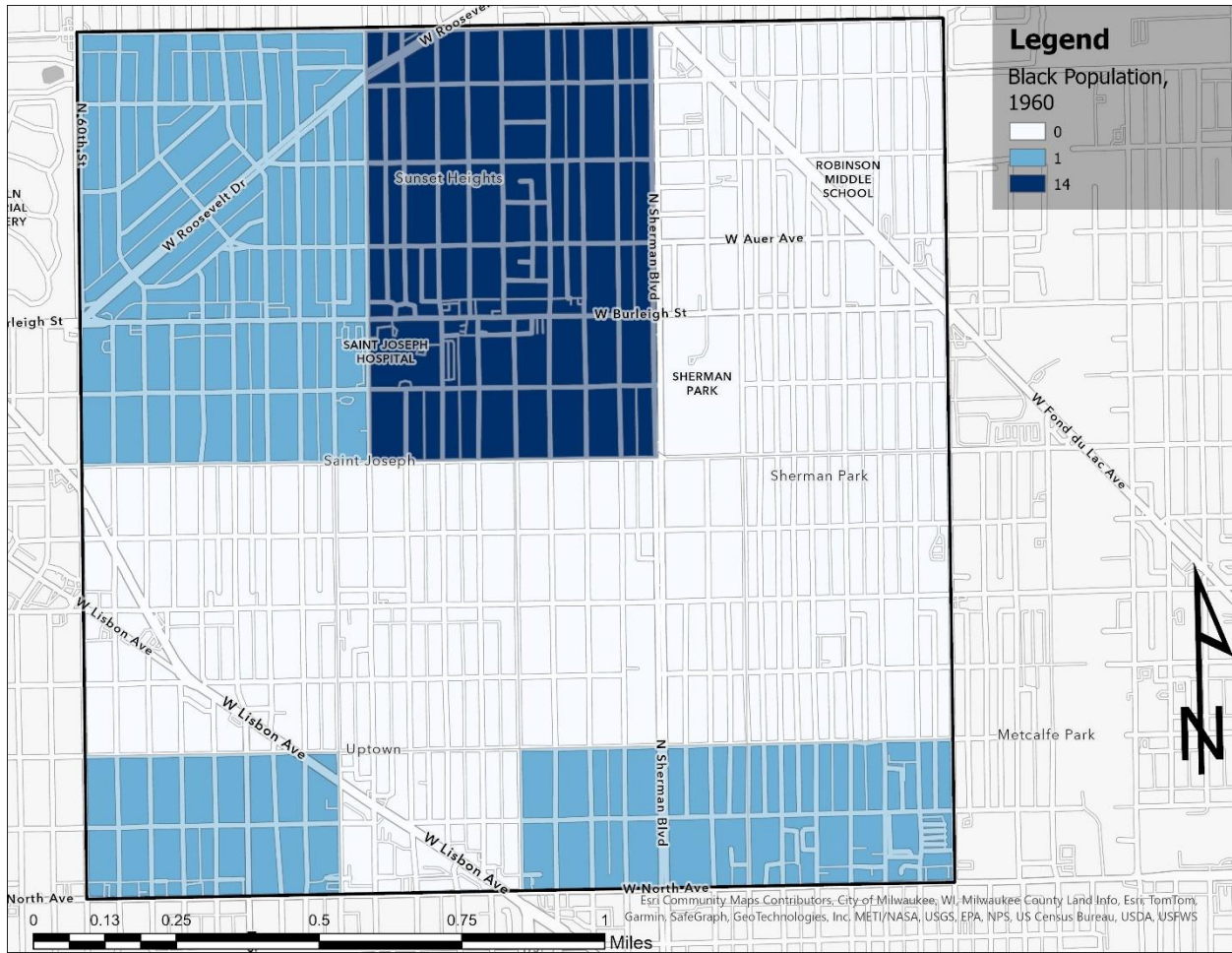


Figure 5. Map of the Black population in the SPCA's original service area by census tract, 1960 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population by Race)

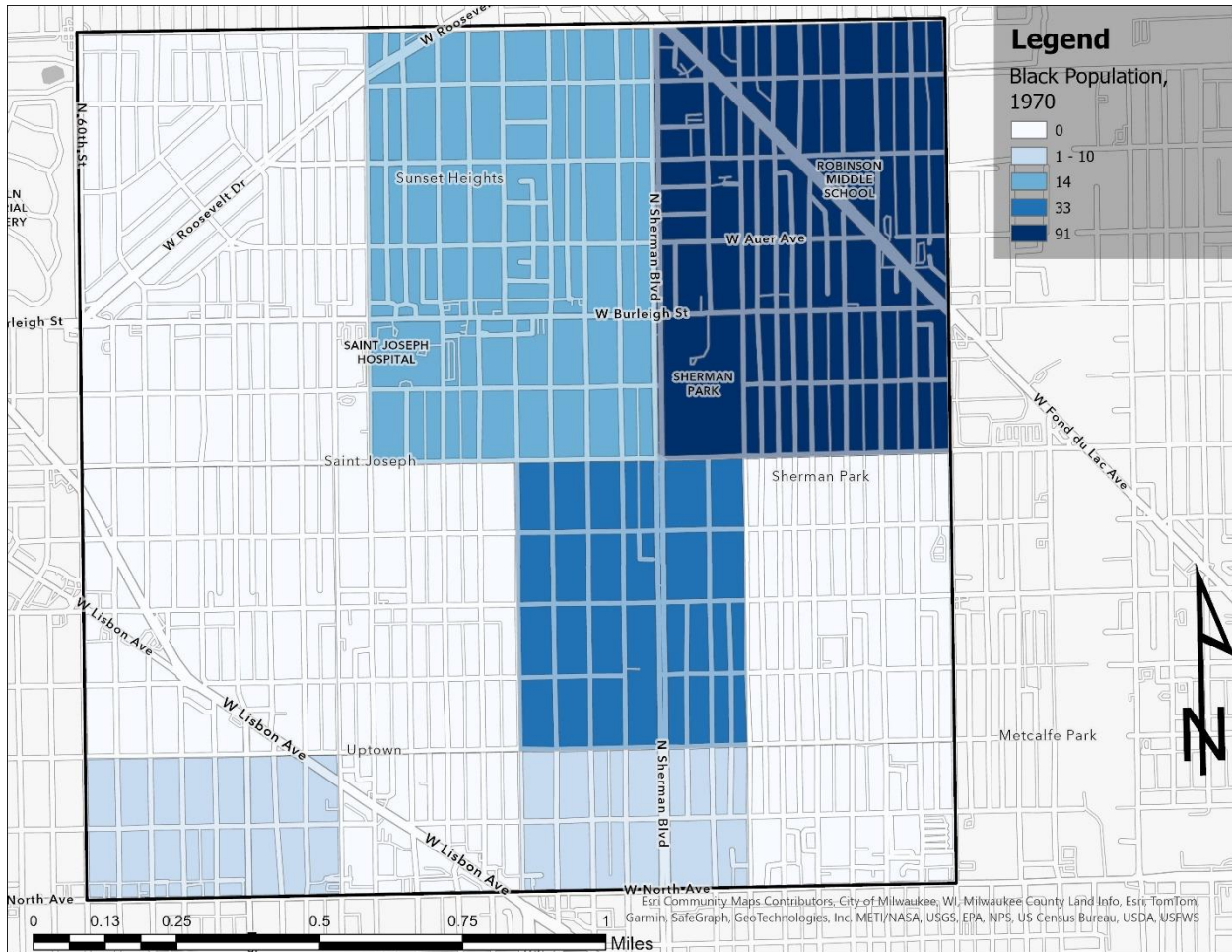


Figure 6. Map of the Black population in the SPCA's original service area by census tract, 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population by Race)

The historical record also suggests that the Black households who integrated this area were from the professional class and most likely not perceived as part of a larger migration out of Bronzeville, a phenomenon corroborated in oral histories discussing this period. The Conways, for instance, shared a story in a neighbor refused a Black couple's offer to purchase their home in cash.¹⁸ While the family in question did not succeed in purchasing this particular home, the Conways' story does imply that some of the Black families who wanted to move to the neighborhood may have had access to greater wealth than some white residents.

¹⁸ John and Rita Conway interview.

This early “integration” made an impression on many white residents in the community, including the families who founded the SPCA. “The concern was a Black family moving into the block,” said Rita Conway. “You'd hear about it at church goings, onto the other streets, that people were talking ‘about the Blacks,’ ... the neighborhood changing, and concern about the schools. Those were all things that got us concerned that we should have good integration.”¹⁹ “Good integration” served as the operative word for many fair housing organizations based in white neighborhoods throughout the 1960s. Historians like Abigail Perkiss have documented how liberal, affluent communities akin to Sherman Park tried to facilitate racial integration without economic integration, relying on human relations strategies that would encourage white homeowners not to cave to the pressure of blockbusters and panic selling.²⁰

It is possible that for the homeowners along Grant, the existence of areas within the neighborhood that had successfully accommodated a small number of middle-class African Americans residents without starting massive white flight provided a hopeful example of a sustainable model for integration. This would have been especially important to the SPCA’s founding families given that by 1970, the census tract containing Grant had the second highest Black population in the neighborhood (figure 6).

This underlying fear of a large increase in Black residents may have played into the SPCA’s early struggles recruiting Black members.²¹ Despite the SPCA founders’ concerns, however, the 1970 census data (figure 6) clearly shows that the neighborhood’s Black population

¹⁹ John and Rita Conway interview.

²⁰ Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 33.

²¹ Michael Kirkhorn, “Resistance Groups Form to Help Bolster Integration,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 16, 1972.

at this stage made up a small fraction of the area's total population, demonstrating once again the discursive power of race, disconnected from reality, to influence neighborhood perceptions.²²

The group that would become the SPCA may have begun meeting informally as early as 1965. The majority were parishioners at St. Catherine's church and belonged to the church's Social Concerns Committee. This group included Walter and Marilyn Johannsen, a psychologist and journalism-major-turned-homemaker, respectively, who had moved to Sherman Park in 1962. By the mid-1960s, this group had become concerned about race relations and demographic changes throughout the city. "It was very clear that there were racial problems developing there very quickly. Within the city, we had seen what happened in the Atkinson—Teutonia—Capital area, where the real estate people went in there and went door to door and scared the people to death," recounted Marilyn. "We felt that within our church, there should be some leadership from the pastor and some pointing out to people what obligations they had to the city."²³

The leadership at St. Catherine's did not agree. This may, in part, have had to do with the actions of James Groppi, a priest based out of St. Boniface's church in the heart of Bronzeville who played a major role in Milwaukee's school integration and fair housing campaigns between 1966 and 1968.²⁴ The archdiocese had always felt uncomfortable about Groppi's level of involvement in these protests, and local priests would have felt pressure not to engage on racial issues as a result.²⁵

²² Russell Star-Lack, "Close to Home: Suburbanization, Residential Segregation, and Jewish-Black Relations in St. Louis Park and North Minneapolis, MN." *Journal of Urban History*. Ahead of print, August 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442241266230>.

²³ Marilyn Johannsen and Walter Johannsen, interview by unidentified student, March 24, 1992, SPCAOH Records. The Atkinson, Teutonia, and Capital area is just northwest of Sherman Park's boundaries.

²⁴ See Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), 99.

²⁵ Samuel Cocar, "Weeping All the Way to Zion: Vatican II, Catholic Social Ethics, and the Black Freedom Struggle in Milwaukee" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022), 91-99.

But from the perspective of many congregants, something clearly needed to change. The passage of the national Fair Housing Act and Milwaukee's fair housing ordinance meant there existed very few mechanisms that could stand in the way of racial transition. Furthermore, Milwaukee's fair housing marches had empowered a cadre of young, white liberals to run for local office in the 1968 elections. Warren Braun, who became an alderman for a west side district in 1968, had known Groppi for years:

I knew Jim when he was in high school...and then when Jim got involved in [the marches], I was not really sure how I felt about the marching and things like that. And when the issue came up, I think what triggered it was the Alderman represented our area who was a racist. And we got together. He said, "we can't let this go on. They can't be represented like this." So, we all went out to find somebody to run for office, to run against him. And nobody found anybody. So, I said on the spur of the moment, I said, "I'll run..." And there wasn't a whole lot of enthusiasm because I wasn't involved in anything. I was not a community activist at all, but I ran and put together a campaign organization and won. And it was basically around the race question and the fair housing question. And there were a lot of candidates in 1968 who did that, who ran on this issue, who were emotionally involved with the fairness, or lack of it, of fair housing. And I was one of them.²⁶

Public officials like Braun would serve as valuable allies to the SPCA in the future, but in the short term, this surge of activism may have strengthened the persuasive power of blockbusters operating to the northeast of Sherman Park. Furthermore, this open support for fair housing activism by white liberals signaled that white neighborhoods could no longer violently resist integration and retain respectability.

The pressures of demographic change on the west side became compounded by the planned expansion of Milwaukee's freeway system on the west side. Mass opposition to this expansion in the city dates to the late-1960s, when the *Milwaukee Journal* published an article clearly showing that white neighborhoods would have to be demolished to complete the

²⁶ Warren Braun, interview by unidentified student, March 24, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission's (SEWRPC) expressway plan.²⁷

SEWRPC did not divulge the plan's exact routes until it tasked the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee (RACM) with exercising eminent domain, fueling panic and falling property values. In the late 1960s, the section of the system that commanded the most attention on the west side was the Stadium North, planned to run from the County Stadium (eventually replaced with American Family Field) up Lisbon Avenue to 68th Street and then north to the County border.²⁸ Constructing the full leg would have required the removal of thousands of homes on the west side, and opposition quickly mobilized, partly led by an Alinsky-style activist named Ted Seaver.²⁹ Simultaneously, between 1968 and 1969, RACM had purchased homes in a three-mile right of way from Hillside Terrace to Sherman Boulevard, parallel to North Avenue.³⁰ This route, called the Park Freeway West, or Park West, was a less significant component of the comprehensive plan, and it would take a few years until Park West eclipsed the Stadium North in prominence in Milwaukee's political discourse.

Neither blockbusting nor freeway expansion served as the direct catalyst for the formation of the Sherman Park Community Association. In April of 1970, the Milwaukee School Board announced a redistricting plan which directed Peckham Junior High (now Jackie Robinson), a majority Black school, to feed in Washington High School, the primary public high school for Sherman Park and located two blocks west of Grant.³¹ This came amidst a decades-

²⁷ Paul G. Hayes, *Master Planners: Fifty Years of Regional Planning in Southeast Wisconsin, 1960-2010* (Marquette University Press, 2010), 101.

²⁸ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

²⁹ Hayes, *Master Planners*, 104; Richard W. Cutler, *Greater Milwaukee's Growing Pains, 1950-2000: An Insider's View* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2001), 75-78; Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview.

³⁰ Paul H. Geenen, *Sherman Park: A Legacy of Diversity in Milwaukee* (The History Press, 2012), 21-22.

³¹ "Pupil Shift Recommended by Board," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 8, 1970.

long school integration campaign and lawsuit filed in 1965.³² Relations were already strained at Washington High; about 11% of the student body was Black before the redistricting, and the school's teachers would soon file a grievance against the school district regarding their work conditions and the greater perceived threat of violence they faced while teaching.³³ Now, the school would be fed by a majority white and majority Black school, meaning the student body would most likely become majority Black within a few years.

The Social Concerns Committee believed that this could spell the end of the neighborhood as they knew it. Washington High School had been well-regarded up to this point, and some on the committee may have thought this reputation had kept many of the neighborhood's Jewish families from moving to the suburbs.³⁴ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen have different interpretations of the Committee's reaction to these changes. Walter framed their concern around race relations in the student body: "the point was that these kids were now expected to go into Washington High School, never having had the experience of dealing with the other race, and getting along well over there." But according to Marilyn, "what happened was the people that were involved with these issues at St. Catherine's became very unhappy and felt somebody's got to deal with this, because it's not going to happen unless people really get involved and really study the issues and put pressure where it has to be put to prevent this from happening."³⁵ Marilyn expressed a more confrontational perspective than Walter, and this tension between promoting assimilatory integration and combating institutions the group viewed as harmful would shape the early years of the SPCA.

³² James K. Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation Shaped Its Schools* (Wisconsin Historical Society; 2015), 42; Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 101-102.

³³ "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," July 1972, Box 1, Folder 9 Johannsen Papers, 2.

³⁴ Geenen, *Sherman Park*, 51.

³⁵ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

Arresting the Exodus: The Early Years of the SPCA, 1970-1972

The early strategy that the SPCA adopted hewed closer to Walter's perspective and drew heavily from human relations theory. This framework, popular with liberal middle-class white communities that faced white flight during the 1950s and 1960s, viewed racism as a psychological disorder and prescribed education and outreach between Black and white individuals as means of cure. Doing so, human relations activists believed, would demonstrate to established white residents that Black arrivals were not a threat to the community and would help new Black residents assimilate to a middle-class neighborhood. If both communities could learn to coexist in this manner, the neighborhood could avoid white flight.³⁶

The first recorded meeting of the Sherman Park Community Association occurred on November 4, 1970.³⁷ Marilyn Johannsen missed that meeting but made it to every one after.³⁸ While the sociopolitical context of the neighborhood made it likely that some kind of stabilization effort would coalesce, several characteristics can help explain why the SPCA's founding members came from a single religious community and block group within the neighborhood. Gerald Gamm's argument in *Urban Exodus* contrasting the reaction of Jewish and

³⁶ Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice*, 108; Abigail Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors: Civil Rights, Liberalism, and Integration in Postwar Philadelphia* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 57; Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton University Press, 2014); 7; Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 13; Tracy K'Meyer, *To Live Peaceably Together: The American Friends Service Committee's Campaign for Open Housing* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); Star-Lack, "Close to Home." Human relations thought had been established in Milwaukee government and private organizational programs for several decades by this point. See Ariana Horn, "Paved with Good Intentions: The Rise and Fall of the 'Human Relations' Movement in Milwaukee, 1934-1980" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015), 5-6.

³⁷ "Minutes," 4 November 1970, Box 1, Folder 10, Johannsen Papers.

³⁸ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

Catholic communities to integration offers one explanation.³⁹ According to Gamm, Jews tended to leave a community early and with little resistance due to Jewish religious law and tradition easily permitting Jewish congregations to move.⁴⁰ By contrast, it is almost impossible to move a Catholic parish. As a result, according to Gamm, urban Catholics tended to stay in their neighborhoods and fight against demographic change, sometimes violently.⁴¹

No records exist of violent resistance to integration in Sherman Park, however, and the importance of observing middle-class norms for the SPCA is further emphasized by the fact that the majority of the organization's founders come from the large, prominent homes along Grant Boulevard (figure 4). While these homes telegraphed the status of their occupants relative to the rest of their neighborhood, their location in the eastern portion of the neighborhood put them at risk of depreciation if blockbusting ran its course. While everyone in the neighborhood had something to lose to impending ghettoization, the Catholic families along Grant arguably had more than most.

At least one Jewish family participated in the SPCA during its earliest period, but the group's Christian background seems to have hurt its outreach efforts to the rest of Sherman Park, at least in the eyes of its founders. According to Marilyn,

We tried to do [outreach] through public meetings, and the only place we could meet free was churches, and we didn't know it, but at the time, this made a barrier to the Jewish community. We're thinking in terms of where can we get a free place to meet? And we had several, like Pentecost Lutheran Church and Trinity Presbyterian Church, they let us use their hall free. We didn't think it through that carefully. We met where we had to meet, where we could meet. However, this eventually made it seem to be strictly a Christian organization.⁴²

³⁹ Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 131.

⁴⁰ Gamm, *Urban Exodus*, 136.

⁴¹ Gamm, *Urban Exodus*, 22.

⁴² Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

To the frustration of the SPCA's founders, the organization would continue to struggle recruiting Jewish members until the 1980s.

Two problems confronted the SPCA's founders during their first few meetings. The first was defining the group's neighborhood geography. Attuned to political dynamics, the organization decided to make its boundaries coextensive with the aldermanic ward containing Grant Boulevard.⁴³ Casting about for a name, the November meeting minutes record the group opting for a moniker based on a "permanent landmark," eventually settling on the large park that Grant Boulevard teed into.⁴⁴ It appears that the SPCA was not aware that "Sherman Park" had been used to refer to the park's surrounding vicinity during the 1920s, another transitional period for the neighborhood.⁴⁵ This suggests that discrete neighborhood identities arise when a community has fears about whether the neighborhood could undergo demographic changes related to race, class, or religion.

A 1971 survey by the SPCA divided Sherman Park into three zones, corresponding fairly closely with the level of racial integration across the neighborhood (figure 7).⁴⁶ Area A stretched from 35th Street ("the psychological boundary of the segregated inner city," according to the report) to Sherman.⁴⁷ Area B encompassed Sherman to 51st Street. Notably, Grant Boulevard lies just east of Area B, and the surveyors observed heavy blockbusting in this zone, as well as the highest level of awareness of the SPCA.⁴⁸ Area C covered 51st Street to 60th Street. This report gives us a clear picture of how the SPCA viewed its community during this period: as a

⁴³ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁴⁴ "Minutes," 4 November 1970; Juliet Saltman, *A Fragile Movement: The Struggle for Neighborhood Stabilization* (Greenwood Press, 1990), 130.

⁴⁵ Going forward, "Sherman Park" will continue to refer to the neighborhood of Sherman Park unless otherwise specified.

⁴⁶ "Housing Survey," November 1971, Box 1, Folder 12, Johannsen Papers, 1.

⁴⁷ "Housing Survey," 10.

⁴⁸ "Housing Survey," 12.

composite of racialized zones with their own demographics and challenges rather than as a singular whole.

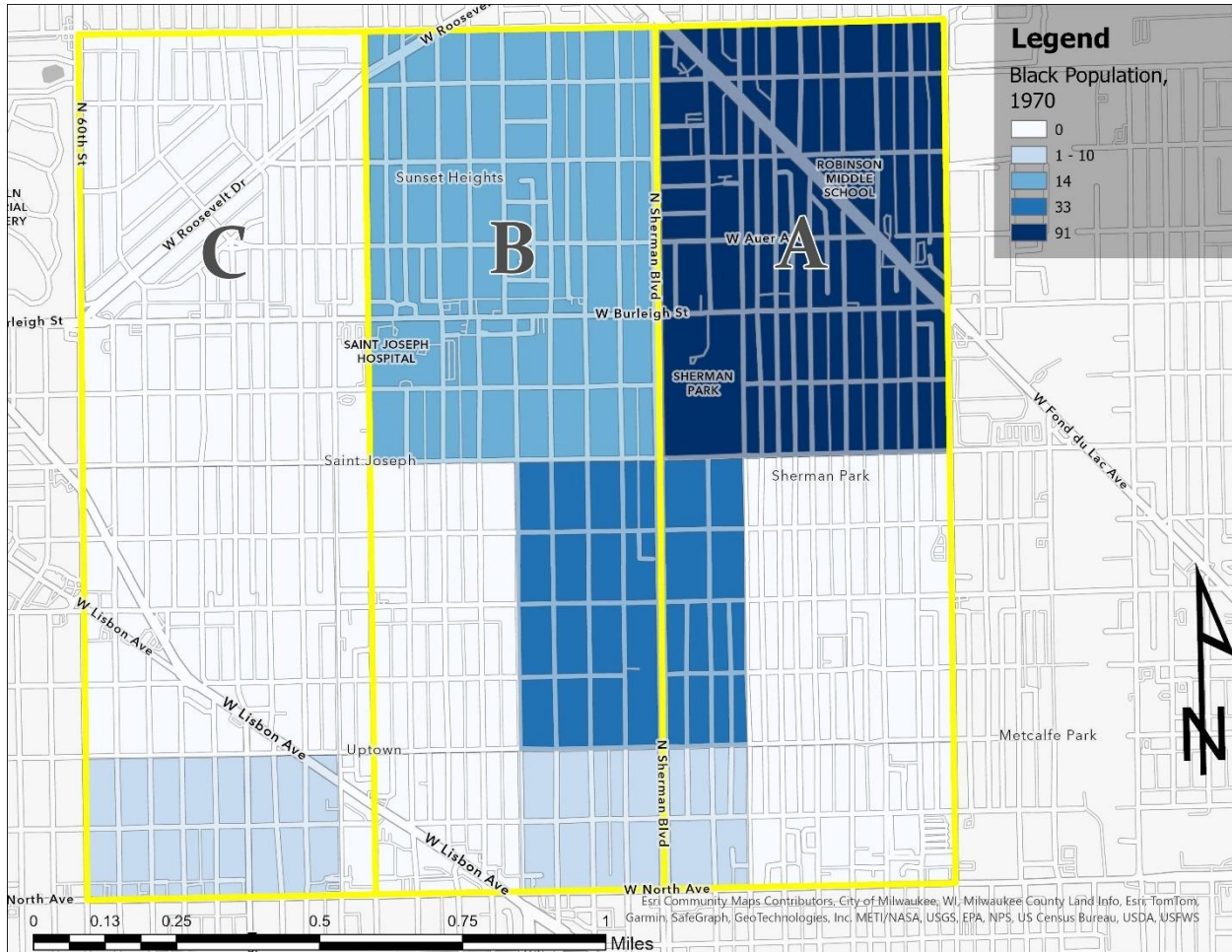


Figure 7. Map of the SPCA's service area zones circa 1971, as well as the Black population in the SPCA's original service area by census tract, 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population by Race)

The SPCA's second problem was deciding whether or not to incorporate as a nonprofit. The minutes from the group's March 1971 meeting show that the founders saw several disadvantages that could result from incorporation. These were, namely, the need to make general reports to the IRS for what the group assumed would be a very small operating budget and the fact that the federal government "frowns on major political activities," on the part of

nonprofits, such as lobbying. Nevertheless, the board voted in favor of incorporation that meeting, probably due to the members' belief that nonprofits "will tend to last" compared to more informal organizations.⁴⁹ This decision began the SPCA's journey down the slippery slope of becoming a grant-funded social services agency.

The SPCA's founding families' middle-class outlook informed the organization's original view of the Sherman Park community. A 1970 report on "population characteristics" reflected which qualities the SPCA did and did not value about the neighborhood and its residents. For instance, the report commented favorably on the fact that 15% of fathers in the community were "professional workers or equivalent" and that 45% of mothers did not have paid employment. Conversely, the SPCA saw as a negative the fact that almost 40% of mothers worked full-time and that students at Washington High "reflect a permissive society in their public conduct within the school as well as without:

- a. Dress
- b. Language
- c. Morals
- d. Respect
- e. A general apathy over 'study' and 'reading.'⁵⁰

The report's emphasis on "respectable" behaviors like stay-at-home mothering and students not using rough language demonstrates the SPCA's early interest in promoting an image for the neighborhood based on white middle-class standards of domesticity.

Even at this early stage, the SPCA paid close attention to the potential of the neighborhood's housing stock to deteriorate. While acknowledging that currently "no great degree of housing deterioration exists," the report notes that some is occurring in the area's

⁴⁹ "Minutes," 3 March 1971, Box 1, Folder 10, Johannsen Papers.

⁵⁰ "Research Team on Population Demographics," 8.

oldest and cheapest housing, most likely referring to the neighborhood's eastern third. "If permitted to continue, and when coupled with the fear of the Blacks moving into the area," the report goes on, "this could spread a bad image in the neighborhood."⁵¹ This emphasis on visual perception, especially as it related to the quality of housing stock, evokes the human relations-influenced open housing groups active during the prior decade as documented by Perkiss and others.⁵² Related to this emphasis of image pertaining to housing, the report also cited the spread of blockbusting and freeway expansion as additional factors stoking white fears of neighborhood decline.⁵³

The SPCA's analysis of its neighborhood's challenges led to organization forming two committees to address them: education and housing.⁵⁴ For the first decade of the organization's history, these committees, joined by another focusing on freeways within a year, would operate semi-autonomously as they worked to achieve their respective goals. This led to friction within the organization, especially once it recruited an operating staff.⁵⁵ However, in the first few years of their existence, these committees would discover the shortcomings of human relations-based goals and tactics and begin to evolve new ways of envisioning what progress could look like for the SPCA and Sherman Park.

⁵¹ "Research Team on Population Demographics," 2. It should be noted that the majority of Sherman Park's housing stock south of Burleigh Street, including the Grant Boulevard homes, was constructed between 1920 and 1930.

⁵² See Perkiss, *Making Good Neighbors*, 57; Star-Lack, "Close to Home," 8.

⁵³ Research Team on Population Demographics," 10.

⁵⁴ Geenen, *Sherman Park*, 23; Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁵⁵ William Malone, interview by unidentified student, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

“Certain Groups Benefit”: Education Activism, 1971-1972

The SPCA first reached out to Jerome Brandl, the principal at Washington High, in October of 1971. Their early relationship with Brandl was “testy,” but eventually the principal formed an advisory committee to address successfully integrating the school.⁵⁶ Efforts to resolve these issues relatively quietly, however, were torpedoed when a group of teachers at Washington High filed a grievance in December against the school district alleging that students had perpetrated twelve assaults on teachers with little action taken in the juvenile court system. The teachers demanded that the court process speed up and that ten substitutes be assigned to the high school so that some permanent teachers with knowledge of the student body could patrol the halls.⁵⁷ This led to the replacement of the advisory committee with a “cadre” of teachers to both find and consider solutions proposed by teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders, as well as to control messaging to the community.⁵⁸ These stakeholders included early SPCA members, many of whom had children enrolled in the district.

It was in this context that the SPCA authored one of its earliest public reports, in this case, concerning its recommendations for managing integration at Washington High. Many of these recommendations are grounded in human relations theory. The overall goal of the report was to create a “stable” environment where Black students could get along with their white peers and teachers.⁵⁹ To do so, the report authors recommended “in-service courses that are mandatory be instituted at Washington which will include aspects of teaching in an integrated setting.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “Sherman Park Community Association Proposal,” 2.

⁵⁷ “Judge Hears of Ills of High School,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 16, 1972.

⁵⁸ “Sherman Park Community Association Proposal,” 2.

⁵⁹ “Sherman Park Community Association Proposal,” 4.

⁶⁰ “Sherman Park Community Association Proposal,” 8.

Their proposals for directly trying to modify the behaviors of Black students included beefing up the school's truancy process so that the parents of students who missed class were promptly notified and habitual truants were identified for an individualized counseling program.⁶¹ Furthermore, the report requested students graduating from Peckham Junior High receive advanced counseling before enrolling at Washington High, and that administrators identify students with learning issues before the start of the school year.⁶² The SPCA also sided with Washington teachers in calling for increased hall monitoring.⁶³ The emphasis of these proposals was on ensuring that all parties act in a manner normative for a middle-class educational setting.

At the same time, much of the language accompanying this report betrayed the SPCA's displeasure at the processes Washington High's administration and the Milwaukee school district put in place to address these issues, indicating the group's drift towards a more confrontational focus on the systemic causes of the school's racial conflicts. The report authors professed empathy with students who felt like they "do not fit the mold as defined by some at Washington" and is "made to feel that he is someone who has to be controlled and tolerated," therefore having "no stake in the school."⁶⁴ These sentiments align with human relations thought emphasizing the need to assimilate African Americans into white society so that they do not feel alienated.

More aggressively, the report argued that "there has been virtually no effort on the part of the administration to assimilate these students at an early age and to insure them that they too have personal worth."⁶⁵ The authors go further, arguing that an equally important factor for Black student behavior amongst the causes of Washington High's challenges is "the segregation

⁶¹ "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," 7.

⁶² "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," 10.

⁶³ "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," 10-11.

⁶⁴ "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," 4.

⁶⁵ "Sherman Park Community Association Proposal," 5.

of students within the Milwaukee school system,” a condition from which “certain groups have benefitted economically.”⁶⁶ These statements, with “certain groups” most likely referring to blockbusters, demonstrate the SPCA’s growing awareness of structural racism’s effects on all corners of urban life. Seeing blockbusters work to turn Sherman Park into a racial ghetto, the SPCA began to connect the dots and develop a much deeper understanding of the factors influencing the changes occurring on the west side during this period. This more nuanced view on race relations may have led the SPCA to support the creation of a Black student organization at Washington High, ignoring the fears many white liberals had at the time about the spread of the Black Power movement.

The SPCA’s education committee would continue to broaden its critique of the causes of segregation in Milwaukee’s public schools. This led to the SPCA campaigning heavily during school board elections to elect candidates favorable to the education committee’s policy agenda. The SPCA’s success at electing school board representatives gave the education committee a large voice during the creation of Milwaukee’s court-ordered bussing integration program in 1975.⁶⁷ By then, the SPCA’s relationship with human relations theory had evolved, a process driven by its actions targeting blockbusting.

“Polite Little Games”: Early Housing Actions, 1971-1972

By April of 1971, blockbusters had begun operating in and around Grant Boulevard, leading the SPCA to put out a call for information about agents active in the area.⁶⁸ It was in this context that the organization conducted its first survey of homeowners in Sherman Park.

⁶⁶ “Sherman Park Community Association Proposal, 5.”

⁶⁷ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁶⁸ “Minutes,” 13 April 1971, Box 1, Folder 10, Johannsen Papers.

Surveying would become one of the SPCA's primary methods for collecting information and enforcing standards of behavior with regards to housing, but the December 1971 survey appears solely focused on the former goal.⁶⁹

In addition to dividing the neighborhood into its three sub-areas, the survey found a large proportion of elderly homeowners living in the neighborhood.⁷⁰ Indeed, Sherman Park had the highest share of senior citizens in the city by the middle of the decade.⁷¹ This remains a relatively common phenomenon in communities experiencing white flight, as families with young children leave for schools with fewer Black students, while older residents on fixed incomes often lack the resources to move.⁷² For the SPCA, however, the main concern regarding this group of homeowners was that they lacked the resources to maintain their properties. But this does not appear to have been the seniors' primary concern. Instead, the survey found that older residents were most concerned with rising assessments and taxes.⁷³

Despite this finding, it does not seem like the organization took any action on this issue. What the SPCA did do, however, was actively lobby for Realtors operating in the city to sign and abide by a code of ethics that would regulate their conduct in racially transitioning neighborhoods.⁷⁴ Open housing groups operating during the 1960s shared these objectives,

⁶⁹ "Housing Survey." See Deanna Schmidt, "The (Re)production of Social Space: Community, Homeownership, and Stability, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1970–1990" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008), 99-105.

⁷⁰ "Housing Survey," 2.

⁷¹ "Minutes," 14 November 1974, Box 1, Folder 18, Sherman Park Community Association Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCA Records).

⁷² See Rachel Woldoff, *White Flight/Black Flight: The Dynamics of Racial Change in an American Neighborhood* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 37.

⁷³ "Housing Survey," 11.

⁷⁴ "Real Estate Agreement," undated, Box 1, Folder 11, Johannsen Papers. The SPCA had about 300 members during this period. Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview.

exemplifying the human relations movement's emphasis on regulating individual behavior rather than targeting the underpinnings of the real estate market, itself.⁷⁵

In order to work toward these goals, a group of SPCA members met with Robert Reitman, the vice president of the Milwaukee Board of Realtors, in March of 1972. It did not go according to plan. At first, the group were informed that the scheduled meeting had not been confirmed, which they perceived as an attempt to "put us on the defensive." When the meeting began, Reitman demonstrated a "condescending attitude," and pushed back on the delegation's description of the blockbusting taking place in Sherman Park. Once the members started citing surveys by the SPCA and other groups, however, he seemed to take them more seriously. Nevertheless, he informed the party that the city's Realtors would prefer not to sign such an agreement, offering instead to circulate some of the SPCA's material if he approved of it.⁷⁶

The SPCA came away from this meeting with the understanding that Realtors would not willingly change their practices. The organization's May 1972 minutes show its members beginning to discuss trying to enlist other actors to stop blockbusting, namely the city or the County.⁷⁷ These conversations eventually coalesced into a campaign for an ordinance banning "for sale" signs, a tactic adopted by multiple fair housing and neighborhood stabilization groups during the previous few years.⁷⁸ The Milwaukee ordinance received a furious backlash in the press from local Realtors. One Lawrence E. Antonovich, the president of a Wauwatosa-based realty firm, wrote to the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in January of 1973 directly addressed to the SPCA arguing that a ban would unjustly penalize the entire industry and that voluntary cooperation

⁷⁵ Perkiss, *Making Good Neighborhoods*, 36-37; Geismer, *Don't Blame Us*; 45-57; Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*, 112; Star-Lack, "Close to Home," 8-9; K'Meyer, *To Live Peaceably Together*, 93.

⁷⁶ "Meeting with Robert Reitman," 20 March 1972, Box 1, Folder 11, Johannsen Papers.

⁷⁷ "Minutes," 10 May 1972, Box 1, Folder 10, Johannsen Papers.

⁷⁸ "News Release," 2 November 1972, Box 1, Folder 11, Johannsen Papers.

would prove much more effective.⁷⁹ This led to a furious response three days later from Marilyn recounting the SPCA's attempts to do just that by meeting with Reitman. According to her recollection,

Mr. Reitman was alternately condescending, haughty and self-righteous in denying even the slightest possibility of illegal activity on the part of member realtors. He informed us that no Realtor of integrity would even talk to us about the [ethics] agreement because we were insulting every one of them with the proposal. He made it clear that playing polite little games with the Board of Realtors was a dead end. It then became necessary to look elsewhere for help in solving an intolerable problem that has already destroyed entire neighborhoods in the city... If you feel so strongly that this should have been done voluntarily, why don't you ask Mr. Reitman... why he was so uncooperative when we approached him for exactly that purpose? I'd be very interested in his answer.⁸⁰

Marilyn's response shows how in a little over a year after the SPCA's incorporation, the group had gone from relying on human relations theory and tactics to viewing those same tactics as "polite little games." In an article published in the SPCA's newsletter addressed to Reitman, the group made this transformation explicit: "You taught us that politeness would get us nowhere. Getting tough seems to work like a charm, however."⁸¹

Indeed, the organization's literature shows its members beginning to pay greater attention to the structural factors underlying blockbusting, most notably redlining, and looking for more active ways to intervene in these processes.⁸² Its early investigations on blockbusters also identified a habitual bad actor operating in Sherman Park: Keske Realty.⁸³ A few years later, the organization would mobilize against Keske and several of its peer firms in ways that its members could never have foreseen when they decided to incorporate as a nonprofit.

⁷⁹ Lawrence E. Antonovich, "Wrong Track," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 16 January 1973.

⁸⁰ Marilyn Johannsen to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 19, 1973, Box 1, Folder 11, Johannsen Papers.

⁸¹ "Board of Realtors Critical of Northwest Side Citizens' Action in Protecting Area," *Sherman Park News*, February 1973, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁸² "Announcement," undated, box 1, folder 11, Johannsen Papers.

⁸³ "Minutes," 10 May 1972.

Conclusion: Transcending Human Relations

While several factors led to the formation of the Sherman Park Community Association, a few stand out. First are neighborhood-level factors. Beginning in the late 1960s, the sustainability of white communities on Milwaukee's west side came under threat from blockbusting, freeway expansion, and school rezoning. This last threat catalyzed the formation of the SPCA, but the group had an awareness of blockbusting, and to a lesser extent freeways, from its inception. There were also individual-level factors. The seven families who founded the SPCA were mostly Catholics and therefore more at risk of losing their religious community than the neighborhood's Jews, who could and did take their congregations with them when they eventually left Sherman Park. They also resided in large houses between Grant and Sherman Boulevards and could see how racial transition, if left on its own, would affect their immediate surroundings in the next few years.

The middle-class orientation of these founding families meant that when looking for solutions to address the crises they saw in the neighborhood's education and housing landscape, they first turned to human relations theory. Where the history of the SPCA diverges from that of many other white, middle-class integrationist groups relates to the organization's members beginning to see the practical limits of trying to convince school board members, administrators, and Realtors to voluntarily go against the socioeconomic factors influencing them to make decisions the SPCA believed detrimental to the neighborhood. As a result, the SPCA would jettison many aspects of its human relations ideology as the decade continued. However, it would still hold on to a few key elements from the movement as it evolved—most importantly, a respectable middle-class image and approach to political confrontation, as well as a belief in individual behavior change as a remedy for systemic problems.

Chapter 2: “The Park West and What It Means to Us”: Freeway Opposition and Placemaking in Sherman Park, 1966-1977

Introduction: Planting the Neighborhood

In the summer of 1973, Milwaukeeans were treated to a strange, yet seemingly innocuous sight on the Sherman Park neighborhood’s southern border (figure 8). On a half block of cleared land, just north of North Avenue between 40th and 41st streets, sprouted “tomatoes, green peppers, corn, lettuce, spinach, beans, carrots, squash, celery, radishes, and cabbage.”¹ The land, formerly blocks of bungalows, had been cleared for a freeway that would never come.

¹ Marilyn Johannsen, “City Farmers Sow Crops on Empty Freeway Land,” *Sherman Park News*, September 1973, box 6, folder 1, Sherman Park Community Association Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCA Records); “Gardeners to Use Freeway Land,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 1, 1973.

Cutting through a morass of red tape, the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA), in partnership with David Peckarsky, a UWM architecture student and future aid to congressman Henry S. Reuss, had leased this land from the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission to plant gardens. In the process, they helped start a tradition of community gardening on Milwaukee's west side that continues to this day.²

But the gardeners' goals were anything but innocuous. Remembering this action decades later, SPCA member Marilyn Johannsen recounted:

What we had to do was go to the Freeway Commission... and convince them that we were these fine, upstanding citizens that only wanted to grow vegetables on the freeway land. And so, I dressed up and put on my little pearl earrings and looked real proper and very... un-rabble-rousing... But it was a way of thumbing our nose at the County and at the Freeway Commission to say, "you know, it doesn't have to be this way, there are other things that we can do, and we're thinking about other things to do, and don't take anything for granted [that] you're going to get your stupid freeways."³

This action, tempering Alinsky-style organizing tactics with a middle-class sheen based in human relations theory, epitomized the SPCA's role in the decade-long fight to stop the construction of two freeways on Milwaukee's west side between 1968 and 1977.

In this chapter, I examine how the SPCA mobilized its imagination and framing of the Sherman Park neighborhood as racially integrated, middle-class, and threatened by external forces as part of this struggle. In the process, the organization's vision of its neighborhood came to dominate the region's discourse, to the point that other narratives of the west side and the

² See the work of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School. "The Cherry Street Community Garden," *Picturing Milwaukee, Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School*, 2022, <https://blefieldschool2023.weebly.com/the-cherry-street-community-garden.html>.

³ Marilyn Johannsen and Walter Johannsen, interview by unidentified student, March 24, 1992, Sherman Park Community Association 1992 Oral History Project Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCAOH Records).

city's freeway revolt became sidelined. This has led to the SPCA's history obscuring the impact of several more confrontational actors in bringing freeway expansion in Milwaukee to a halt.

While the SPCA is the organization most often credited with defeating Milwaukee's freeways, the group only began playing an active role in the anti-freeway coalition in March of 1972, almost two years after the most pivotal battle against freeway expansion in Milwaukee was won by its opponents.⁴ The anti-freeway coalition comprised of many unlikely allies, including a variety of grassroots organizations, congressman Henry Reuss, and mayor Henry Maier (whose support momentarily fractured the city's growth machine). These actors contributed just as much, if not more, than the SPCA in the fight against freeways in Milwaukee.

In the wake of the city's freeway revolt, the SPCA would assume an essential role among its allies as the "reasonable" grassroots group with whom politicians, planners, policymakers, and the media could partner and negotiate. The coming years and decades would see national and local politicians and policymakers seeking the SPCA's support for their initiatives, leading to the group becoming perceived as the leader in the city's burgeoning neighborhood movement. This role dramatically raised the profile of the SPCA—as well as the neighborhood movement more broadly—in Milwaukee and also led to the group becoming inextricably linked in the public eye with one of the freeways it fought: the Park West.

The SPCA, in turn, leveraged the menace of freeway construction through the neighborhood to discursively imagine and enact the community of Sherman Park in its own image as a form of placemaking. To do so, it adopted a set of geography-based organizing

⁴ See Paul Geenen, *Sherman Park: A Legacy of Diversity in Milwaukee* (The History Press, 2012), 39-43; Edward Valent and Gregory Squires, "Chapter 6: Sherman Park, Milwaukee," *Cityscape* 4, no. 2 (1998): 105-130; Richard W. Cutler, *Greater Milwaukee's Growing Pains, 1950-2000: An Insider's View* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2001), 143.

strategies called “place-framing” by geographer Deborah Martin.⁵ The place-frame of Sherman Park articulated by the SPCA envisioned the neighborhood a racially integrated, middle class, politically active, but fragile community based on the organization’s postwar liberalism and human relations foundations. In advancing this frame to facilitate anti-freeway activism on Milwaukee’s west side, the SPCA expanded the freeway debate into one over who had the right to govern in a given neighborhood. According to the SPCA, this role, traditionally played by elected officials and unelected government bureaucrats, should instead be played by neighborhood-based activists and organizations. Such a mandate should especially apply to Sherman Park, according to the SPCA, as, in the group’s framing of its neighborhood, the neighborhood boasted a large population of educated middle-class residents and civil servants committed to racial integration. The success of this argument would lead to the SPCA becoming a prominent model for emerging local “neighborhood nonprofits” assuming government roles in the following years and decades, and the group’s vision of its neighborhood as diverse, liberal, middle-class, and politically engaged remains influential within Milwaukee to this day.⁶

⁵ Deborah G. Martin, “‘Place-Framing’ as Place-Making: Constituting a Neighborhood for Organizing and Activism,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (2003): 730-750.

⁶ See Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

“No One Has the Right”: Milwaukee’s Freeway Revolt, 1966-1971

Planning for Milwaukee’s freeway system began as early as 1946, however construction did not start until the late 1950s.⁷ In 1960, the authority for freeway planning and construction was given to the newly-created Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC), which, along with the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors and the County Expressway Commission, would become the chief targets of the city’s freeway opposition.⁸ The North-South freeway, or I-43, served as the backbone of the planned system. As in most other American cities, the North-South freeway ripped through the heart of Milwaukee’s primary African American neighborhood of Bronzeville. As outlined by Derek Handley, resistance against this freeway by Bronzeville activists manifested through campaigns against education and housing discrimination in the mid-to-late 1960s.⁹ This led to Milwaukee’s anti-freeway movement becoming perceived as a force distinct from the Black Freedom movement, a distinction upheld in the historiography of the “freeway revolt” until relatively recently. In the past two decades, Eric Avila, Derek Handley, and others have documented how nonwhite populations resisted freeway expansion and urban renewal through unique modes of activism that often escaped the notice of white communities and leaders.¹⁰ Somewhat ironically, these kinds of actions, including the freedom schools organized by the Milwaukee United School

⁷ For a detailed discussion of Milwaukee’s freeway construction, see Gregory Dickenson, “Through Highways: Construction of the Expressway System in Milwaukee County, 1946-1977” (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015).

⁸ Dickenson, “Through Highways,” 142.

⁹ Derek Handley, *Struggle for the City: Citizenship and Resistance in the Black Freedom Movement* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 100.

¹⁰ Handley, *Struggle for the City*, 6-7; Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 2; Douwe Schipper, “Somebody Else’s Fight”: Local Dynamics in the Baltimore Highway Revolt, *Journal of Urban History* 51, no. 1 (January 2025): 162-182; Kyle Shelton, “Building a Better Houston: Highways, Neighborhoods, and Infrastructural Citizenship in the 1970s,” *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 3 (May 2017): 421-444.

Integration Committee and the NAACP Commandos' 1968 housing marches, inspired the SPCA's founders to organize.¹¹

The first explicit attempt to fight freeway construction in the region came in 1966 from a lawyer named Malcolm Whyte. Whyte had concerns about a freeway planned to run along the shore of Lake Michigan.¹² In the course of a massive letter-writing campaign, Whyte reached out to Reuss, an act that may have initiated the congressman's about-face from supporting the County's freeway plan to becoming one its highest-profile opponents.¹³ However, the opposition to the "Lake" freeway remained confined to a small, affluent group of residents who lived in the city's lakeside neighborhoods.

Whyte and other activists at this time may have felt emboldened by a growing concern throughout the city about who could face displacement in the next wave of freeway expansion after the completion of I-43. SEWRPC and the County were very cagey about the exact routes of the area's master plan, and detailed maps had only begun appearing in the city's newspapers in 1966.¹⁴ This created a climate of fear and uncertainty among Milwaukee's white population, which up to this point had largely been spared the worst consequences of freeway construction.

A much broader anti-freeway movement formed in 1968 under the leadership of Ted Seaver, an Alinsky-trained activist who founded and led the Milwaukee Tenants Union.¹⁵ While ostensibly covering the entire city, the Tenants Union was run through the War on Poverty-funded South Side Inner City Development Project (for which Seaver served as the assistant

¹¹ Handley, *Struggle for the City*, 100. See Chapter 1.

¹² Dickenson, "Through Highways," 157-158.

¹³ Malcolm Whyte to Henry S. Reuss, 9 June 1966, box 15, folder 13, Henry S. Reuss Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Reuss Papers); Mordecai Lee, interview by unidentified student, April 1, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

¹⁴ Paul G. Hayes, *Master Planners: Fifty Years of Regional Planning in Southeast Wisconsin* (Marquette University Press, 2010), 101.

¹⁵ "Public Conference," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 11, 1969.

director).¹⁶ Milwaukee's freeway opposition in its first few years was seen largely as a south side phenomenon due to Seaver's prominence.

Freeway builders regarded Seaver and his confrontational strategy as their most formidable adversary. Harvey Shebesta, an engineer with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, had this to say about Seaver's tactics:

The members of the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission were prominent citizens from industry, commerce, and the professions. When confronted at their meetings with the likes of Ted Seaver and his entourage of women, occasionally including their babies, the commissioners were ill-prepared to respond except as the gentlemen they were. In their board meetings etc., they had never encountered such interruptions. As a result, Seaver and his crowd could easily disrupt commission meetings. When he attended meetings, he was dressed sloppily with his shirt tail hanging outside his trousers, i.e. he was dressed to fit the part of representing his 'poor' who were being forced from their homes, etc.¹⁷

The disruption of public meetings exemplified Alinsky's organizing tactics, and it would be adapted to suit a variety of contexts by neighborhood groups in the coming decade.

By 1970, Seaver had gained a powerful ally to his cause in Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier. Mostly remembered today as an opponent of Black civil rights activism in Milwaukee, Maier saw the dangers posed by unchecked freeway expansion relatively early, and he actively collaborated with both Seaver and Alderwoman Vel Phillips, Milwaukee's first Black alderman, to oppose the County.¹⁸ Several potential explanations exist for why Maier, a consummate political pragmatist, adopted this position. First, Maier's core constituency was based on the south side, a largely white and working-class area at the time, so he would have been receptive to

¹⁶ "County Freeway Panel to Aid Evicted Tenants," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 21, 1969.

¹⁷ Richard W. Cutler, *Greater Milwaukee's Growing Pains, 1950-2000: An Insider's View* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2001), 77.

¹⁸ Memo, 29 April 1970, box 159, folder 11, Henry W. Maier Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Maier Papers); Dickenson, "Through Highways," 163.

a movement originating in that region of the city.¹⁹ Second, pursuing the freeway issue gave Maier an opportunity to grandstand against the County, one of his favored strategies to distract from his record on civil rights.²⁰ Finally, and most importantly, Maier—first elected in 1960—had observed firsthand that the majority of housing demolished to make way for the I-43 had not been replaced, eroding the city’s tax base.²¹ So, while it appeared that Maier broke from Milwaukee’s governing regime, especially the business-led Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC), their disagreement over freeways centered on how to measure growth, rather than the need for growth itself. The GMC believed that freeways would increase traffic and patronage of downtown businesses.²² Maier, however, must have felt that this increased commercial activity would have negatively impacted the growth that he believed his core constituency cared most about: the appreciation of their property values and increased access to public goods.

Perhaps because of his concern about assessments, Maier’s earliest efforts to halt freeway construction focused on getting the County and the state to commit to provide housing for those facing displacement before breaking ground on a given project. And to his credit, Maier did not focus solely on the displacement threatening his south side base. In July of 1968, Maier received a letter from a resident in the area of what would become Sherman Park. It stated that she was forced to move to make way for a freeway but did not receive relocation assistance because the County Expressway Commission refused to accept her utility bills as proof of residence and had only provided her with one referral for replacement housing.²³ Maier and his aides expressed

¹⁹ Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 40.

²⁰ Jones, *The Selma of the North*, 117.

²¹ Kenneth Fry to Henry Maier, 1 December 1971, box 12, folder 7, Maier Papers.

²² George Watts, interview by Trevor Jones, February 22, 1996, SPCAOH Records.

²³ Henry Maier to Robert Johnson, 25 July 1968, box 78, folder 34, Maier Papers.

sympathy, with one advising Maier to send the letter “publicly to the Expressway Commission and demand answers.”²⁴ While Maier did write to the Commission on behalf of this constituent, it is not clear if he made his letter public. Nevertheless, this correspondence represents the earliest instance of protest against the Park West freeway.

Until the spring of 1972, the Park West expressway was an afterthought to the city’s freeway proponents and opponents, alike. SEWRPC’s 1967 freeway master plan, the last iteration created, envisioned two freeways for Milwaukee’s west side (figure 8). The first was the Park West freeway, which would connect the area to I-43 and the lakefront. The second was the Stadium North, which would run from the County Stadium (today occupied by American Family Field) to North and Sherman, where it would connect with the Park West and continue north up 60th Street, and later 68th, to the northern County border.

The Stadium North freeway, if constructed as planned, would have proven exponentially more destructive to the west side than the Park West. Perhaps because of concerns over the potential backlash to the Stadium North, SEWRPC and the County prioritized the construction of the Park West, using eminent domain to seize the right of way needed for the freeway in 1968 before revealing the final route for the Stadium North.²⁵ RACM acquired 1,333 properties for the Park West (figure 9).²⁶

²⁴ Memo, 11 July 1968, box 78, folder 34, Maier Papers.

²⁵ Paul H. Geenen, *Sherman Park: A Legacy of Diversity in Milwaukee* (The History Press, 2012), 21-22. Public interest in the Stadium North route dates to at least 1967. H.G.K., “Final Decision on Freeway Routes,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 28, 1967.

²⁶ “Firm Will Study the Use of Interchange Land,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 19, 1968.



Figure 9. Aerial view of the Park West right of way (Park West Redevelopment Task Force Records, Undated)

Nevertheless, the County Expressway Commission could not contain the uproar when SEWRPC released the planned route for the Stadium North to the public in March of 1969. The reaction was immediate. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, “six County supervisors and about 10 members of the Milwaukee Tenants Union—who brought about as many small, noisy children—attended” the next Commission meeting to protest the plan.”²⁷ Alderman Mark Ryan, who represented the ward containing Sherman Park, reported receiving over 450 form letters

²⁷ “Freeway Plans Run into Stormy Criticism,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 26, 1969.

against the Stadium North from his constituents.²⁸ This opposition may have been coordinated by the Voice of Concerned Citizens, a newly formed group dedicated to opposing the Stadium Freeway and another planned route on the east side.²⁹ Hearings held at library branches regarding the proposed freeways had such high attendance that librarians distributed tickets.³⁰

Over the next year, conflicts over the Stadium North intensified in a series of community meetings and other actions. In one entertaining example, Voice of Concerned Citizens picketed an information center set up by the County about the freeway and rewrote a hymn called “Jesus Loves Me” to be sung by a children’s chorus with the following lyrics:

Daddy loves me, mommy too,
When they are not fighting you.
Give us mommy and daddy back
Stop the freeways in their tracks.
Please, no more freeways (repeated three times).
We want our parents back.³¹

The climax of the Stadium North fight was an eight and a half hour hearing held at Custer High School on July 9, 1970. The school’s auditorium could hold 1,500 people; 2000 attended, including 600 construction workers wearing hard hats who booed anti-freeway witnesses. At one point, a brawl almost broke out when a woman was accidentally struck by sign brought by one of the workers (the man later apologized). A 74-year-old Sherman Park resident and Russian Jewish immigrant who had lost his tire supply business to the I-43 wept when the moderators did not allow him to “interrupt the [two hour-long] agenda of engineers and consultants to speak against freeways.” Given time to speak later, he described his experiences of displacement:

²⁸ Ald. Ryan Opposes 2 Freeway Routes,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 31, 1969.

²⁹ “New Group Forms to Thwart Parkway,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 12, 1969. The route for the Bay Freeway, which would have run through Shorewood and Glendale and then cut west along Hampton Boulevard, was announced at the same time and also garnered fierce opposition.

³⁰ “250 Jam Freeway Hearing,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 29, 1969.

³¹ “Hymn Revised Into ‘Freeway Blues,’” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 18, 1970.

They ruined my health. They ruined my business... My father told me to go to America where all men are free, and your home is your castle, and no one has the right to open your door. I had a place for 47 years. Come the year they said I should leave the place, they came to lay down the check and I had to get out. I'm not speaking for myself. I'm speaking for the United States of America. The Germans, the Poles on the South Side—these are the people who work hard and those are the people who save penny by penny. No one has the right to come and take your home or business.³²

While this articulation of the displacement caused by freeway construction is clearly whitewashed, it accurately captures the attitudes of many on the west side confronted with the threat of losing their homes.

The July hearing rendered further freeway expansion in Milwaukee untenable for regional and state officials.³³ Shortly after the hearing, County Executive John Doyne called for an end to freeway planning, with one exception: the “gap closure” between the Fond du Lac freeway and the Park West along the Stadium North route.³⁴ However, the optics of exercising eminent domain to seize the right of way for this leg made the likelihood of doing so virtually impossible. Furthermore, Maier began vetoing every Common Council resolution proposed to support the construction of additional freeways. The war had been won. Almost.

While an unofficial stoppage to freeway construction prevailed through the rest of 1970 and into 1971, the County never passed a resolution mandating a halt to planning or construction. In fact, such a resolution failed in April 1971.³⁵ Only after this action, in a climate of rising fear of a resurgence in freeway construction, did the SPCA enter the fray.

³² Paul G. Hayes, “‘Hard Hats’ Jam Hall to Back X-Way,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 10, 1970.

³³ Hayes, *Master Planners*, 105.

³⁴ “Halt Plans for X-Ways, Doyne Asks,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 5, 1970.

³⁵ “Supervisors Fail to Kill X-Way Ban,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 20, 1971.

“The Great Wall of China”: The SPCA and the Stadium North, 1971-1972

Marilyn Johannsen had studied journalism in college, and she put those skills to use for the SPCA even before the group officially incorporated. February 1971 saw the publication of the first edition of the *Sherman Park News*, a monthly (and occasionally bi-monthly) newsletter publicizing the activities of the SPCA as well as any other news concerning the organization’s service area.³⁶

This publication served several functions. First, Johannsen intended it to counter misinformation about the neighborhood the SPCA believed Realtors and blockbusters disseminated.³⁷ In the process of doing so, the *Sherman Park News* spread a positive and attractive image of the Sherman Park community, serving as an early example of the neighborhood boosterism that would come to define urban politics in neoliberal America.³⁸ But even more fundamentally, the *Sherman Park News*, by running a variety of articles and columns highlighting interesting individuals, businesses, and organizations, represented one of the earliest efforts to establish a cohesive identity for this neighborhood.

As historian Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities*, newspapers played an essential role in facilitating the sense of shared identity essential for nationalism, partly through ensuring that everyone in a bounded entity accessed the same set of information.³⁹ The dynamics at play in the distribution of the *Sherman Park News* were similar, albeit at a much smaller scale. Another element often utilized in the creation of a shared identity that Anderson discusses is the

³⁶ *Sherman Park News*, February 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

³⁷ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

³⁸ Kathe Newman and Robert Lake, Democracy, Bureaucracy and Difference in US Community Development Politics since 1968, *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (February 2006): 44-61.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Verso, 2016), 33-35.

leveraging of an outside threat to a given community.⁴⁰ The SPCA, through the *Sherman Park News*, also tried to leverage threats to Sherman Park in order to imagine its neighborhood according to the SPCA's goals and values. Its first attempt to do so was with freeways.

In the June-July 1971 issue of the *Sherman Park News*, Walter Johannsen published an article critical of freeways generally given their drain on the city's tax base, the city's declining population, and the lack of assistance for those displaced, and finally calling for more public hearings.⁴¹ Writing in response to the defeat of measures cutting off funding for the Stadium North in the County Board of Supervisors and the State Assembly, Johannsen refuted the claims of a report by the Expressway Commission in favor of freeway expansion.⁴² He also made sure to stress that the freeway "would go right through the Fifth Ward" and discussed successful freeway revolts in San Francisco and Tennessee, urging neighborhood residents to contact their representatives in order to force public hearings.⁴³

Johannsen used a number of placemaking strategies to try to encourage Sherman Park's residents to become active on this issue. First, the name, "Sherman Park," for the neighborhood would have been unfamiliar to most readers at the time, the SPCA had intentionally set their boundaries to be coterminous with Milwaukee's Fifth Ward.⁴⁴ As a result, linking the Stadium North to the Fifth Ward acted as what Geographer Deborah Martin calls a "diagnostic" neighborhood place-frame, imagining the freeway as geographically-specific external threat to the community.⁴⁵ This is further emphasized by his use of the word, "through," to describe the

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 95-97.

⁴¹ Walter Johannsen, "Expressway to Have Great Impact on Fifth Ward Future," *Sherman Park News*, June-July 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁴² "Maier Says Bucks Belong Downtown," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 14, 2024; "Assembly Won't Kill Extension of X-Way," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 9, 2024.

⁴³ Johannsen, "Expressway to Have Great Impact on Fifth Ward Future."

⁴⁴ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview. Also see Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Martin, "Place-Framing as Placemaking," 741.

geographic relationship between the Stadium North and Sherman Park, implying that the freeway, and its planners, only related to Sherman Park an obstacle to pass, not to serve. Johannsen's article also served as "motivational" place-framing, directly calling on individuals in the community to act on the freeway issue by campaigning for and attending public hearings on the Stadium North proposal.⁴⁶

While relatively unaggressive on freeways compared to later rhetoric and actions, Johannsen's article established that the Sherman Park community had a stake in the freeways imposed on the neighborhood from outside its borders. Nevertheless, this article did not indicate a shift in the SPCA's priorities. The Stadium North would not come in the organization's minutes until the end of 1971.⁴⁷ Reflecting on writing the piece decades later, Johannsen admitted that at the time, he "didn't know much" about the freeway debates in Milwaukee. Therefore, the SPCA's engagement with freeways could have easily ended with this article.⁴⁸

What changed everything was a call Johannsen received regarding the article two days after its publication. The call came from William Redmond, the then-chairman of the State Highway Commission, who harangued Johannsen over his "slanted and inaccurate" analysis.⁴⁹ That an article published in the fifth issue of a neighborhood newsletter reached and provoked a response from a state official speaks to how defensive the state and County were concerning freeways following nearly three years of continuous protest from Milwaukeeans. It also speaks to the status of Sherman Park, which housed many public sector employees and elected officials.

⁴⁶ Martin, "Place-Framing as Placemaking," 736.

⁴⁷ Minutes, 10 November 1971, box 1, folder 10, Marilyn R. and Walter J. Johannsen Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Johannsen Papers).

⁴⁸ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁴⁹ "June Expressway Article Draws Response from Madison," *Sherman Park News*, July-August, 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records; Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

These officials included Martin J. Schreiber, recently inaugurated as Wisconsin's Lieutenant Governor in January.⁵⁰

Johannsen, according to his oral history, was somewhat chastened by the call and realized that he should do more research before critiquing the freeway system. So, he reached out to a contact at Milwaukee's Department of Transportation to let him into the department's office during Monday mornings in order to look over the documentation about the area's plans.⁵¹ It was through these visits that he discovered that the Stadium North could extend beyond the Fond du Lac freeway all the way through the west side to the County border. Johannsen, and eventually the SPCA, had two major concerns about this route. The first was the threat that freeway construction would depreciate the home values of the remaining residents, leading to a drop in city revenue.⁵² This concern aligned with Maier's. Their second fear was that the Stadium North would act as a "Great Wall of China," stopping any further Black expansion westward.⁵³ Johannsen framed this outcome as antithetical to the SPCA's "integrationist" goals, but what he leaves unspoken is that Sherman Park would have been on the Black side of "Great Wall" (figure 1). Such a scenario would have killed any hope for a continuing white presence in the neighborhood, as the community's remaining white families would have almost certainly moved west of the Stadium North.

Johannsen viewed his discovery as a major find, but as discussed in the prior section, the extended route of the Stadium North had been public knowledge, as well as a major political controversy, for over two years. This demonstrates the disconnect of the SPCA's founders from

⁵⁰ "Congratulations," *Sherman Park News*, February 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records; "Neighborhood Nuggets," *Sherman Park News*, May 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁵¹ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁵² Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

⁵³ Marilyn and Walter Johannsen interview.

the freeway conflicts up to this point. Furthermore, Maier, Doyne, and Governor Patrick Lucey did what the Assembly and County Board could not and brokered an agreement in the summer of 1971 halting all work on freeways not already under construction.⁵⁴ While the County would continue to make noise and the occasional procedural maneuver to try to restart the process, it had become virtually impossible to build to the full Stadium North by mid-1971.

If the SPCA's founders understood these political dynamics, it made no difference to them, and the Stadium North would become one of the primary foci of the *Sherman Park News* through mid-1972. In response to the Expressway Commission approving the Stadium North plans, Johannsen published an article delving deeper into the relocation process. By laying out in gory detail the choices that neighborhood residents could confront if their properties fell in the path of the freeway, the article provided actionable information and impressed to the reader that the exercise of eminent domain was a very real possibility in the future. This article, as a result, provided a much stronger motivational place-frame for encouraging neighborhood action than Johannsen's first article, as the imagery hammered home that regardless of race, class, or gender, all residents residing in the SPCA's service area might have to contend with displacement through eminent domain to make way for the Stadium North solely based on where they reside. Given the SPCA's view of Sherman Park as a culturally and racially diverse neighborhood, appealing to shared geography was one of the few ways the organization could mobilize its readers while remaining true to its mission. Additionally, by incorporating into the article interviews of officials such as the Chief of the Right of Way Section of the Wisconsin Division

⁵⁴ Henry Maier to Supervisor Joseph M. Hutsteiner, 23 September 1971, box 79, folder 6, Maier Papers.

of Highways, the *Sherman Park News*, and the SPCA by extension, presented as a quasi-official channel between the government and the neighborhood's residents.⁵⁵

The November article also continued to imagine the Sherman Park community as one under threat from external forces. Johannsen discussed at length the role of appraisers in deciding the prices offered for the properties of residents forced to relocate, implying that these appraisers might devalue the neighborhood. Going further, the article painted an idyllic picture of a diverse community and its commerce as something that freeway expansion would destroy:

We are apprehensive, for example, about the shops on Lisbon Ave. that would have to be relocated. They add such a particularly desirable dimension to the neighborhood, and many of them depend on local patronage... What about elderly residents, and families with many children? Will they be able to find equivalent housing?

Using this imagery, Johannsen argued that the quality of life in Sherman Park was something that cannot be found anywhere else and would be permanently erased by the Stadium North. At the end of the article, he encouraged readers to share this issue of the *Sherman Park News* "with your friends and neighbors to help ease the confusion over the freeway."⁵⁶

Beyond increasingly confrontational language over freeways, the SPCA prepared for bigger actions behind the scenes. The County Board approved the Stadium North plans by a large margin in late November.⁵⁷ Perhaps in response, the December issue of the *Sherman Park News* reported seven organizations, including the Milwaukee Tenants Union and the Voice of Concerned Citizens, had met in Brookfield to coordinate their activities with respect to opposing

⁵⁵ Walter Johannsen, "Sherman Park Community Association Investigates Future Freeway Construction and Your Rights under the Law," *Sherman Park News*, November 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁵⁶ Johannsen, "Sherman Park Community Association Investigates Future Freeway Construction and Your Rights under the Law."

⁵⁷ Walter Johannsen, "New Expressway Developments Reported," *Sherman Park News*, December 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records. Reacting to the news, the December issue of the *Sherman Park News* stated that "the extension is a sure thing, but it certainly increases the likelihood that it will be built," recognizing that this vote was largely symbolic, especially in light of the moratorium on freeway construction.

freeway expansion.⁵⁸ The article took pains to state that the SPCA attended the meeting only as an observer had not yet taken an official position on freeways, perhaps trying to establish distance between it and the more combative groups at the meeting. This would have aligned with the SPCA's grounding in human relations strategies that privileged cooperation over confrontation.

Despite these dynamics, the SPCA's November minutes reveal that its Expressway Committee, chaired by Johannsen, had begun strategizing on how to best oppose further construction.⁵⁹ The group believed that the County and the state government would always support freeways over the concerns of bounded urban communities. As a result, they felt the best course of action was "to fight in in Washington" using a tool called an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).⁶⁰ Mandated by the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, the EIS required that governments consider the negative effects on communities by federally-funded freeway construction.⁶¹ Citizens groups could also submit EIS's, providing anti-freeway activists a way to amplify their objections to a given project and circumvent the authority of local pro-highway officials.

In February of 1972, the SPCA officially adopted a position opposing the Stadium North. Their statement, published in the *Sherman Park News* and sent to elected officials, argued that the benefits to region-wide transportation "would be offset by serious disruption in the life style of the SHERMAN PARK COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION [sic] neighborhood."⁶² Once again,

⁵⁸ William Nichol, "Anti-Freeway Groups Meet to Plan," *Sherman Park News*, December 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁵⁹ Minutes, 10 November 1971.

⁶⁰ Minutes, 10 November 1971.

⁶¹ Shelton, "Building a Better Houston," 427.

⁶² Walter Johannsen, "S.P.C.A. Opposes Freeways Pending Urban Environmental Study," *Sherman Park News*, February 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

the organization's critique of freeways is tied to a positive vision of the Sherman Park neighborhood's unique "life style." The statement's use of the name, "the Sherman Park Community Association neighborhood," for their service area, instead of the later-adopted and simpler Sherman Park, also pointed to the recent creation of the neighborhood's identity. The SPCA demanded a "sophisticated environmental impact study," sufficient suitable replacement housing," and "a watchdog committee of citizens residing in the area be appointed by these officials from a list submitted by the SHERMAN PARK COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION to oversee the implementation of this agreement."⁶³ The calls for neighborhood oversight appealed to the SPCA's self-image as a group of middle-class professionals who could go toe-to-toe with government bureaucrats during conversations concerning freeway and environmental policy.⁶⁴ It also introduced a claim the group would expand on throughout the decade that neighborhood groups should have a permanent and officially sanctioned role in urban governance.

The SPCA followed up this statement with articles discussing the pros and cons of the Stadium North. The organization expanded on these arguments in a 15-page booklet published by Johannsen. In May, the SPCA took its first action against freeways by founding the West Side Citizens Coalition (WCC), a group of west side organizations opposed to the Stadium North (figure 10). The WCC acted quickly, filing a lawsuit seeking an injunction against the letting of contracts for a freeway project announced weeks earlier. But the route in question was not the Stadium North; it was the Park West. Despite the Park West's relative unimportance to Milwaukee's planned freeway system, the route would play an outsized role in bringing the SPCA's framing of Sherman Park to a regional audience.

⁶³ Walter Johannsen, "S.P.C.A. Opposes Freeways Pending Urban Environmental Study."

⁶⁴ This turn was mirrored by freeway revolts across the country. Schipper, "Somebody Else's Fight," 172-173.

scheduled for completion by 1972 but now pushed back to 1984 as freeway construction ground to a halt. Brannan now proposed finishing the route by 1974.⁶⁵

The Park West was, in effect, the last card freeway proponents had left to play. The route for this freeway was, with one exception, the only remaining undeveloped right of way under the control of the Expressway Commission.⁶⁶ This meant that if the Commission and SEWRPC wanted to build anything in the immediate future without exercising eminent domain, it would have to be on this right of way. As institutions created with the primary purpose of constructing Milwaukee's freeway system, it is very possible that these bodies feared that halting this work would have led to the loss of the project's remaining political momentum.

The Park West route lay on the southern boundary of Sherman Park (figure 8), but the SPCA felt nowhere near as concerned about its potential impact as it did about the Stadium North. In the organization's view, the biggest direct threat posed by the Park West was the increase of traffic on Sherman Boulevard, where freeway would end.⁶⁷ In fact, both sides of the freeway debate openly recognized that the Park West would play a virtually useless role in the planned expressway system without the Stadium North.⁶⁸ For the SPCA, this was the real danger of constructing the route. Walter Johannsen and the organization feared that the County would leverage the existence a completed, yet useless, Park West to finally acquire the right of way for the Stadium North.⁶⁹ As discussed in prior sections, the odds of this happening would have been extremely slim even if the Park West had been built. Furthermore, federal transportation policy

⁶⁵ Jerry Wilkerson, "Lake Freeway May be Put Off," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 26, 1972.

⁶⁶ The Airport Spur is an exception to this statement. Dickenson, "Through Highways," 165; Cutler, *Milwaukee's Growing Pains*, 89-90, 94.

⁶⁷ Walter Johannsen, "SPCA Joins West Side Citizens' Coalition to Fight Park Freeway," *Sherman Park News*, July 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁶⁸ Memo from Ted Seaver to Henry Maier, 26 January 1972, box 79, folder 7, Maier Papers.

⁶⁹ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview.

had shifted against freeways by the mid-1970s, and it would have proven almost impossible for the state or the County to have secured funding for a project as destructive as the Stadium North.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the SPCA was not willing to take this chance. The actions of Brannan, who gave little notice to the public that he aimed to begin letting contracts for construction in the summer, compounded the group's fears.⁷¹

The WCC's lawsuit, which argued that construction should be delayed until the completion of an EIS, landed in the federal court of Judge John Reynolds, the same jurist who decided Milwaukee's school desegregation case. Mostly favorable towards community activists, Reynolds immediately restrained the letting of construction contracts for the Park West. Coterminously, Maier vetoed a motion passed by the Common Council to begin plumbing work along the route.⁷² Ryan Sattler, an SPCA board member, gave a statement to the *Milwaukee Journal* regarding the group's actions and portraying the Park West area as growing, thriving, and under threat by the freeway:

Unfortunately, it is too late to compensate the thousands of people, businessmen, included, who were forced out to accommodate this 10-lane, \$75 million monstrosity. It is not too late, however, to think of the many residents who have bought homes here in the last few years and who will have to live and suffer with this freeway.⁷³

The metropolitan-wide interest in the Park West case allowed the SPCA to make the same arguments about its area of service as a cohesive neighborhood the group had made to community members to a much larger audience.

⁷⁰ Raymond A. Mohl, "The Interstates and the Cities: The U.S. Department of Transportation and the Freeway Revolt, 1966-1973," *Journal of Policy History* 20, no. 2 (April 2008): 193-266.

⁷¹ "County Speed-Up on Park Freeway to be Fought in Court," *Sherman Park News*, June 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁷² Johannsen, "SPCA Joins West Side Citizens' Coalition to Fight Park Freeway."

⁷³ "Coalition Opposes Park X-Way West," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 25, 1972.

While Reynolds deliberated during the summer of 1972, the WCC took Alinsky-style actions in order to make its case to the broader public. The most prominent of these actions related to a petition campaign. County Executive Doyne had remarked during a televised interview in early June that the opposition to the Park West consisted only of “a handful of misinformed dissidents.”⁷⁴ In response, the WCC obtained roughly 3000 signatures for a petition against the Park West in five days. “Approximately seventy west and northwest side citizens” then hand-delivered the petition to Doyne’s office on June 16th.⁷⁵ Doyne was not in his office, so the group approached Supervisor Lawrence Timmerman, whose district covered much of the west side. The petitioners asked Timmerman for a public hearing on the Park West and requested that he publicly oppose the freeway. He did so, after which the demonstrators “applauded and went home.”⁷⁶

The *Milwaukee Journal*, which generally supported freeway construction during this period, attempted to portray this incident as much more volatile. According to its narrative, “about 100 residents of the inner-city area stormed into the County Board quarters.”⁷⁷ The *Journal’s* use of “inner-city” and “stormed” to describe the origin and action of the protesters was anti-Black, nothing suggests that more than a handful of Black individuals were involved with the WCC at this point. Timmerman, himself, stated that he had been blindsided by the group’s visit (although the WCC had given notice of their intended demonstration to the *Journal* the previous day) and “was opposed to the tactics being used by the group” to compel his

⁷⁴ Johannsen, “SPCA Joins West Side Citizens’ Coalition to Fight Park Freeway.”

⁷⁵ Marilyn Johannsen, “Citizens Present Petitions, Learn about ‘People Power,’” *Sherman Park News*, July 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁷⁶ Johannsen, “Citizens Present Petitions, Learn about ‘People Power.’”

⁷⁷ “100 from Core Decry Freeway,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 16, 1972.

opposition to the Park West.⁷⁸ Timmerman's discomfort but eventual compliance with the WCC signaled a shift in Milwaukee's politics towards the priorities and organizational tactics of neighborhood organizations.

This demonstration was in line with Saul Alinsky's methods for stirring up public interest in issues that concerned community groups by any means necessary. However, hand-delivering a petition to an elected official *en masse* is a relatively mild action most likely chosen because it reflected the SPCA and WCC's middle-class sensibilities.⁷⁹ Walter Johannsen reflected on the SPCA's relationship to Alinsky-style organizing two decades after this incident:

I think the smartest thing we ever did was say, "this is not our style. We are prim, and proper, and middle class, and we're not going to engage in this kind of thing," and I think that's one of the reasons we're surviving. Anytime the organizers tried to push us in the direction of radical kinds of activity, we spurned it and we did it our own slow kind of way.⁸⁰

Johannsen's *a priori* generalizations about the SPCA mirrored the organization's unilateral imagining of the Sherman Park neighborhood as a middle-class community. According to Martin's model of neighborhood place-framing, the "slow," respectable solutions to Sherman Park's external threats advocated for by the SPCA, such as oversight of freeway planning by neighborhood "experts," constitute a "prognostic" frame.⁸¹ In this construction, Sherman Park's large population of educated residents and civil servants provide the neighborhood with a unique capacity to govern itself without the need to resort to overly confrontational and "unseemly" organizing strategies. While the distance carefully plotted by the SPCA between itself and its

⁷⁸ "Petition Will Oppose Park Freeway West," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 15, 1972; "100 from Core Decry Freeway."

⁷⁹ Carole Goodwin, *The Oak Park Strategy: Community Control of Racial Change* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), 185.

⁸⁰ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview. The SPCA anticipated that this injunction would be permanent as early as 1973. "March General Meeting Highlighted SPCA Work of Past Year," *Sherman Park News*, April 1973, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁸¹ Martin "Place-Framing as Placemaking," 743.

more confrontational and less-affluent peer organizations was lost on the *Journal* in the aftermath of the WCC's petition campaign, Johannsen recognized that such distancing gave the organization unique pull with city leaders in succeeding years.

On July 20, Judge Reynolds ruled in favor of the WCC and halted work on the Park West until an official environmental impact statement was submitted and accepted.⁸² While this decision officially only froze construction for two years at most, it effectively snuffed out any remaining hope of the route ever getting built. Due to the inflationary climate of the 1970s, every year opponents could delay Park West made the route a significantly more expensive proposition, and its overall unimportance for the region's freeway system meant that even its backers were lukewarm on building it.⁸³ Furthermore, Milwaukee's freeway revolt had begun to influence the city's electoral politics, as candidates like Betty Voss, the spokeswoman for the WCC, were elected to municipal and state office.⁸⁴ For all these reasons, support for freeways like Park West cratered at virtually every level of government.

The WCC's judicial campaign gave neighborhood groups like the SPCA a level of legitimacy and authority in the public eye that they had not experienced previously. Days before Reynold's ruling, the *Milwaukee Journal* published an article on grassroots groups and "a rising spirit of resistance in residential districts north and west of the inner city," delineating the west side as distinct from the "inner city," unlike in its coverage of the WCC's petition campaign a month earlier.⁸⁵ The *Journal* recognized a fundamental shift in the city's politics: "When a west side volunteer organizer, the wife a hospital chemist, begins to sound like Saul Alinsky, the late

⁸² Walter Johannsen, "Judge Reynolds Grants Injunction Halting Park Freeway Pending Study," *Sherman Park News*, September 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁸³ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview.

⁸⁴ Voss served as an alderwoman.

⁸⁵ Michael Kirkhorn, "Resistance Groups Form to Help Bolster Integration," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 16, 1972.

radical organizer, something is happening.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, the article imposes the SPCA’s image as middle-class and committed to integration onto a broader range of west side organizations, some of which, like the Midtown Neighborhood Association, predated the SPCA. The article also contains one of the earliest published maps of the Sherman Park, outlined as the SPCA’s service area (figure 10).

Despite the WCC’s lawsuit essentially killing the Park West, the highway remained a highly controversial topic in metropolitan Milwaukee until the end of the decade. This debate, however, did not center on the route itself. It really concerned the question of who should exercise what political scientist Clarence Stone termed “power to,” or the ability to implement urban policy.⁸⁷ In the case of the Park West, the dilemma at hand was whether unelected officials had the right to build a freeway over land they legally possessed, according to a master transportation plan drawn up with little to no input or oversight from the neighborhoods facing displacement. But as more and more officials turned against freeway expansion, both locally and nationally, the question shifted to what the Park West right of way should be used for instead, and who got to decide.

One of the climactic moments for the freeway debate was a televised hearing organized by Henry Reuss during November of 1972. Reuss held these hearing as a reaction to the formation of a supposedly grassroots group in support of the Park West’s completion. While this movement, organized and supported by the Greater Milwaukee Committee, would soon fizzle out, it made enough noise to concern both Reuss and Maier.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Kirkhorn, “Resistance Groups Form to Help Bolster Integration.”

⁸⁷ Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (University Press of Kansas, 1989), 6-9.

⁸⁸ Memorandum, 10 November 1972, box 136, folder 25, Maier Papers; Kenneth Fry to Henry Reuss, 10 November 1972, box 12, folder 12, Reuss Papers. In a humorous example of the mismatched strength in the commitment of the

Offering the opportunity for activists and officials to air their views on freeway expansion, these hearings offered one of the clearest articulations of the arguments of both sides of the Park West debate. Speaking in support of the freeway, George J. Pazik, the chairman of the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission, appealed to the benefit the completed freeway plan would bring to the entire region: “The Park Freeway and Spur were determined to be in accord with the objectives of the regional plan and to be considerate of the balanced social economic and environmental systems.” This plan had been “carefully and rationally developed.”⁸⁹ And finally, he argued that since construction had already started, it should be completed.⁹⁰ These arguments were typical of postwar freeway proponents, relying on the perceived status and expertise of government bureaucrats to make decisions that would collectively benefit a given region regardless of the concerns of any community within that region.⁹¹ Essentially, the status of these officials entitled them to execute their plan regardless of public opposition.

Testifying on behalf of the SPCA, Walter Johannsen spent very little time on the Park West and instead attacked the freeway master plan, itself. Discussing County officials’ growth projections, an underlying rationale for continued freeway construction, Johannsen argued that this growth would not equally benefit suburban and urban residents, differentiating these two communities.⁹² Going further, Johannsen criticized officials for only conducting a “windshield type survey” of the Stadium North impact area, implying that neighborhoods deserved a much

two sides, freeway proponents, including Robert Brannon, failed to show up to a scheduled debate in 1974. “Freeway Debate Kaput!” *Sherman Park News*, December 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

⁸⁹ Testimony of George J. Pazik, 13 November 1972, box 8, folder 24, Reuss Papers, 3.

⁹⁰ Testimony of George J. Pazik, 9.

⁹¹ See discussion of master narrative in Handley, *Struggle for the City*, 7-15.

⁹² Walter Johannsen, Testimony before Congressman Henry S. Reuss, 12 November 1972, box 8, folder 24, Reuss Papers, 4-5.

greater voice in routine planning processes than they currently had. Finally, he turned to discussing the west side, critiquing planners for basing their assumption that the area had the stability to weather the construction of the Stadium North off of data collected in 1963.⁹³ In describing the current condition of SPCA's service area, Johannsen portrayed his neighborhood as attractive and diverse, but fragile:

What are the facts about the area's characteristics? For one thing, it contains a high percentage of elderly with an obviously high mortality rate. For another, it is currently assaulted by real estate brokers fostering panic-selling practices... The western section of the Park Freeway impact area has seen a startling dramatic increase in the percentage of absentee landlordism in just the last few years. The neighborhoods, despite their attractiveness, are far from stable.⁹⁴

Given this lack of "stability," Johannsen implied that SEWRPC and the County would destroy the integration that the SPCA worked to facilitate. In the face of this threat, the SPCA and groups like it had a moral duty to defend their neighborhoods from these officials, even if doing so meant becoming directly involved in the governance of their neighborhoods. But unlike Johannsen's earlier articles in the *Sherman Park News*, intended to circulate within the SPCA's service area, his statements at Reuss' hearing mobilized the SPCA's framing of its neighborhood for a metropolitan-wide audience. To this viewership, Johannsen presented as an eloquent advocate for a respectable community with as much expertise on the Stadium North and Park West than the freeways' unelected proponents, if not more so. Such a performance undermined the legitimacy of a political system that denied self-governance to neighborhoods like Sherman Park.

The SPCA and WCC codified and expanded on this position in January of 1973 with the publication of "The Park West and What it Means to Us," a document intended to serve as the

⁹³ Johannsen, Testimony before Congressman Henry S. Reuss, 4.

⁹⁴ Johannsen, Testimony before Congressman Henry S. Reuss, 4-5.

coalition's "citizen EIS," further extending the neighborhood movement's performance of governance.⁹⁵ In it, the coalition articulated familiar arguments about the freeway's potential threat to local merchants and the area's housing stock. It also described the project's threat towards the community's children:

Our children play in glass and trash-littered lots while land is converted into asphalt parking lots and concrete freeways... Washington Park is the only park on the west side, and it is not very accessible to most people. We need neighborhood parks, swimming pools, tennis courts, baseball diamonds and green, growing things.⁹⁶

This vision of a vibrant, universally appealing west side was constructed as antithetical to freeways, suggesting that the WCC and SPCA had the better vision for the west side than the bureaucrats currently in power, a further articulation of prognostic place-framing. It also suggested a new, more community-centric definition of what urban growth could look like. According to the WCC, growth should be planned for and assessed at the neighborhood-level. The types of public goods and amenities the coalition advocated for, such as baseball fields and swimming pools, would most likely help to raise property values on the west side. But equally importantly, they would help to facilitate and maintain a sense of neighborhood identity. At the same time, these goods also emphasize leisure, a middle-class ideal in line with the SPCA's construction of Sherman Park.

Finally, in describing the threat of all freeways, including the Stadium North, to a diverse west side, the report stated:

Instead of offering new life or revitalization, the Park West Freeway will join three other expressway links to form a concrete cordon around the dying central city. The unfortunate remnant left behind in this "concentration camp," – the old, the poor and the minorities – will surely be set aside from the rest of society... These unnatural barriers or boundaries would not only be used for racial segregation but for segregation of all the

⁹⁵ "The Park West and What it Means to Us," January 1973, box 3, folder 26, Park West Redevelopment Task Force Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter PWRTF Records).

⁹⁶ "The Park West and What it Means to Us," 15.

exploited and forgotten people that society does not want to deal with. Living on the “wrong side of the tracks” would clearly come to mean living on the wrong side of the expressway.⁹⁷

While not every neighborhood on the west side would have been on “the wrong side of the tracks” of the Stadium North, Sherman Park would have, reflecting the leadership and fears of the SPCA’s freeway committee in the WCC. The success of the WCC’s actions and rhetoric over the previous year was demonstrated by the group’s invitation to meet with Governor Lucey the same month they published this report.⁹⁸

In the region’s public discourse, the Park West controversy went a long way toward the imagining of Sherman Park. Reflecting on the SPCA’s actions over the past year at the organization’s 1973 general meeting held in March, president Peter Mazurek highlighted how the group’s activism had created a cohesive identity for the neighborhood:

If there has been one single overall accomplishment by the SPCA up until this point, I’d have to say that in some way, we’ve managed to give this neighborhood its identity as the Sherman Park Area. A sense of place can only be created by those who live in that place, not by the so-called urban planners and developers and realtors and lenders.⁹⁹

Explicitly citing Jane Jacobs and Malcolm X, Mazurek articulated a vision for American cities where “neighborhoods will take on an individual flavor because people will come to realize the value of diversity” and provide “meeting rooms, craft centers, child-care centers, and tot-lots” and where “diversity and visual order will be encouraged and demanded by citizens.”¹⁰⁰ As with many other imagined communities, the threat to the SPCA’s service area posed by bureaucrats, Realtors, and developers allowed the organization to enact its own vision of the community it

⁹⁷ “The Park West and What it Means to Us,” 16.

⁹⁸ “Freeway Critics Put Their Case before Lucey,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 18, 1973.

⁹⁹ “March General Meeting Highlighted SPCA Work of Past Year.”

¹⁰⁰ “March General Meeting Highlighted SPCA Work of Past Year.”

wanted to create.¹⁰¹ The Stadium North and Park West provided picture-perfect foils for the SPCA's diagnostic and motivational place-framing of its service area. They gave weight to the organization's prognostically-framed place-based solutions to these problems. The SPCA's emphasis of racial and cultural diversity, as well as community participation, still defines Sherman Park's image.

The Park West issue continued to foment over the next four years, especially during election season. While the priorities of the SPCA shifted to housing, the organization routinely sent representatives to public hearings and debates concerning freeways, as well as making symbolic protests such as Marilyn Johannsen's community garden project, cementing the regional perception of the group as Milwaukee's foremost freeway opponent. The group's middle-class image made it an attractive partner for politicians. Reuss actively favored the WCC over a rival anti-freeway coalition and directly incorporated the SPCA into his plans for the cleared Park West right of way.¹⁰²

The SPCA's founders, always sensitive to optics, made sure that when the SPCA attended hearings, it also signaled its legitimacy as *the* representative organization for its service area. However, it was not always clear that the group, which had about 300 members for an area of 30,000 residents, actually had this authority. Recounted Marilyn Johannsen,

We were very small, and nobody knew how small we were. [But] we were very vocal, and we could summon up bodies if we had to summon up bodies for a hearing or for a public appearance or press conference. We had a lot of leverage. We had people in the association that knew how to put the pressure on. So, we had an impact far beyond our small size. Nobody knew our numbers. It was a well-kept secret.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ An article in the *Milwaukee Journal* from this period explicitly questioned if the SPCA's idea of the neighborhood community was a fiction. "Neighborhood Group Walks Narrow Path," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 16, 1973.

¹⁰² Mordecai Lee to Henry S. Reuss, 22 April 1976, box 15, folder 19, Reuss Papers.

¹⁰³ Walter and Marilyn Johannsen interview.

This political charade proved extremely effective, as elected officials like Warren Braun still believed that the SPCA expressed the majority opinion on freeways for west side residents almost two decades later.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: Imagining Sherman Park

How lopsided the Park West fight, and freeway expansion more generally, had become by the mid-1970s is demonstrated by the fact that in two consecutive elections (1974 and 1976), referenda in support of continuing freeways generally and the Park West specifically won clear majorities throughout metropolitan Milwaukee.¹⁰⁵ These victories made no difference. Inflation, the withdrawal of federal support for freeway construction, and the rise of the neighborhood movement had ensured that the death of the “expert-based” transportation planning paradigm that had dominated every level of government since World War II. In 1977, Martin Schreiber, now governor, acceded to the political reality and de-mapped the Park West from Wisconsin’s freeway system plan.¹⁰⁶

A month before the 1976 freeway referendum, Reuss released a report outlining his vision for the redevelopment of the Park West right of way.¹⁰⁷ The report called for the construction of a “satellite downtown,” complete with a government office building, an industrial park, and housing replacing what RACM had leveled in 1968 and 1969. Maier backed Reuss,

¹⁰⁴ Warren Braun, interview by unidentified student, April 8, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

¹⁰⁵ “Reuss Involvement in Park Freeway West Referendum,” 14 October 1974, box 15, folder 19, Reuss Papers; Walter Johannsen, “What You Didn’t Read about the Freeway Vote,” *Sherman Park News*, December 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

¹⁰⁶ Schreiber was never a strong opponent of the Park West, probably because of his need to appeal to a state-wide constituency. This led to friction between him and West Side freeway opponents. David Carley to Park West Redevelopment Task Force Members, box 1, folder 35, PWRTF Records

¹⁰⁷ “Meeting with HSR,” 15 October 1977, box 15, folder 19, Reuss Papers.

although he was privately skeptical of the project's feasibility.¹⁰⁸ To implement Reuss' vision, Reuss and Maier formed the Park West Redevelopment Task Force (PWRTF), one of the earliest examples of a community-based planning body in the region. Led for most of its existence by David Hoeh, a city planner and former campaign staffer for George McGovern, the PWRTF worked with private developers and community groups like the SPCA to plan for the redevelopment of the cleared parcels. However, the limited funding available restricted the development solely to the housing element of Reuss' vision. But the city threw out this more limited plan in 1982 in favor a proposal by local developers with connections to Maier.

Today, much of the Park West right of way still stands vacant, a symbolic representation memorializing a series of tectonic shifts in the city's policies and politics (figure 11).¹⁰⁹ The Park West battle proves less significant for what it prevented than what it created: a space in urban politics and discourse for neighborhood groups to assert control over the governance of their service areas and become part of the municipal governing regime. Going forward, politicians were just as likely to listen to the concerns of nonprofit organizations and neighborhood activists as the concerns of labor unions, who had uniformly supported freeway construction. More specifically, the debate over the Park West brought the SPCA into the public eye, and as a result, played a large role in creating the Sherman Park community in the region's political imagination. Many new nonprofits would emulate the SPCA's organizational model in the coming decades, even as the SPCA underwent radical transformations in its structure and approach. While the parcels cultivated by Marilyn Johannsen and the other SPCA families have mostly filled in,

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum, 19 November 1976, box 136, folder 26, Maier Papers.

¹⁰⁹ Handley, *Struggle for the City*, 52; Chelsea Wait, "Neighborhood Care: Structural Conditions, Class, and Aesthetics in Sherman Park, Milwaukee, WI, 1980-2020" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024), 64.

Alice's Garden (figure 11), a large community garden located southeast of Sherman Park in the Park West right of way and founded in the same political moment, continues to bear fruit.

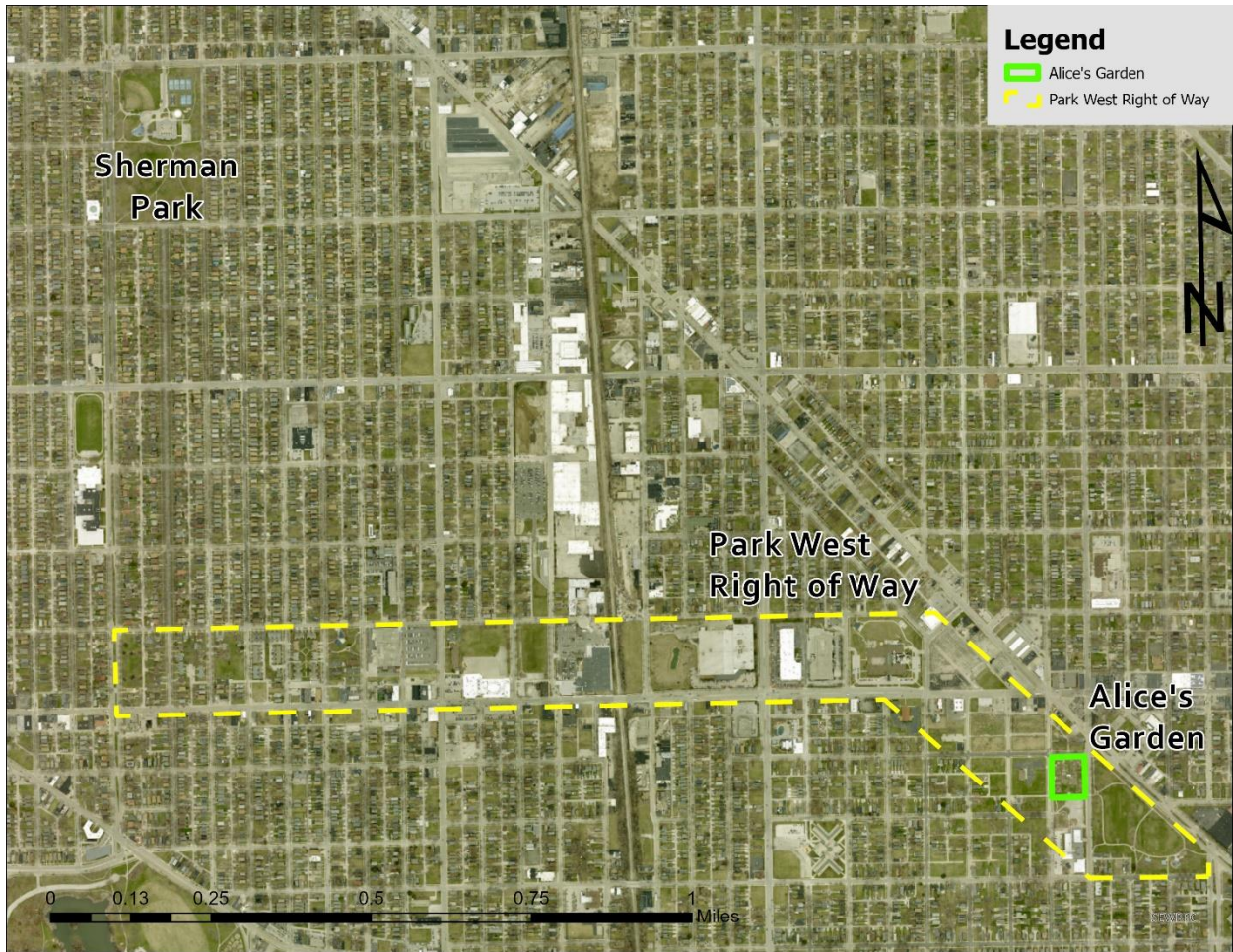


Figure 11. Imagery map of the current Park West right of way (Map by Russell Star-Lack)

Chapter 3: Making Good Clients: The Sherman Park Community Association's Housing Programming, 1972-1980

Introduction: Holding the Line?

Lawrence Harwell, the executive director of Milwaukee's influential War on Poverty coalition Organization of Organizations (OOO), understood the difficulties of forging multiracial alliances from the ground up. Speaking with the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1973, he summed up the dilemma faced by the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) and its peers with a single question: "How do you get Blacks to join the organization and not be alienated?"¹ George Pazik, a white former leader of a neighborhood stabilization group on Milwaukee's north side, was more direct: "these neighborhood organizations may be dedicated to integration, but subconsciously, some people are saying Blacks are bad, at least they are bad for the neighborhood in large numbers."² The question of how to appeal to Black residents hung over white-led organizations like the SPCA that used human relations methods to "stabilize" integrating neighborhoods by trying to retain white households and limit the number of Black families moving in. While the SPCA had created Sherman Park in the public's collective imagination, the organization did not address the needs of everyone in the neighborhood equally.

The SPCA's leaders understood that their organization only partially served their community. Speaking to the *Journal* in April of 1973, Peter Mazurek, the group's president, outlined the tightrope he felt the group needed to walk: "If we talk about stability, Blacks think we are trying to keep them out. If we talk about integration, we make some whites nervous. They

¹ Michael Kirkhorn, "Resistance Groups Form to Help Bolster Integration," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 16, 1972.

² Kirkhorn, "Resistance Groups Form to Help Bolster Integration." Pazik's former organization, the Northtown Planning and Development Council, was described by the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1971 as "an organization of business and civic leaders who decided... to see what could be done about the [north side's] deterioration. "Business Leader Calls for Nonprofit Agency to do the Planning for Redevelopment," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 28, 1961.

think we are trying to bring Blacks in.” But the group’s strategy at the time, as described by the *Journal*, clearly privileged the concerns of white residents: “The group wants to give the people already [residing in the neighborhood] some measure of control over who enters and leaves the area. It attempts to exercise this control by influencing the conditions that influence people’s decisions about moving out – *particularly decisions of whites to move out.*”³ This emphasis on appealing to a white, middle-class constituency over the wants and needs of nonwhite residents speaks to how embedded many elements of human relations ideology had become within the SPCA.

But by the end of 1970s, this approach was lampooned within the SPCA itself. Carol Holton, who served as the group’s president from 1976 to 1978, recounted an inside joke between her and Fred Freiberg, the SPCA’s first executive director, during their respective tenures with the organization:

We used to have a joke, Fred Freiberg and I. I said, “Fred, could we just stop running, all this is ridiculous running around? How about we just get the cheerleaders to stand out on Sherman Boulevard and cheer, “hold that line?” And we used to laugh hysterically when we were absolutely overwhelmed. And he would laugh and say, “stop it, you're not allowed to talk like that!” And it was like, he knew I wasn't serious.⁴

Holton’s anecdote speaks to rapid changes within the SPCA and its service area during the mid-to-late 1970s. During this period, the SPCA transitioned from a grassroots volunteer-run entity to a grant-funded, staffed organization. This transformation was linked to a shift in the neighborhood’s locus of activism away from the Grant Avenue families that had founded the organization and towards a more racially and economically heterogenous group. Having

³ “Neighborhood Group Walks Narrow Path,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 16, 1973. Italics added.

⁴ Carol Holton, interviewed by Mark Shelstad, April 6, 1992, Sherman Park Community Association 1992 Oral History Project Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCA Records).

established the Sherman Park neighborhood in the minds of its residents, the neighborhood now recreated the SPCA in turn.

The SPCA's changing membership and staff drew from several models to chart the entity's course during this period. Even as the organization evolved, however, human relations remained one of the most important touchstones for the group. Rather than pursuing campaigns that would impact the neighborhood collectively, such as halting the Park West Freeway and passing a "for sale" sign ban, the programs that the SPCA developed in the mid-1970s focused on modifying individual behavior to effect larger change. The SPCA's housing programs carried the assumptions and techniques from the human relations' approach to housing and racial disparities. These included the beliefs that individual behavior is capable of being changed, especially when activists can pair information gathering with outreach and advocacy, that advocacy should appeal to middle class standards of decency, and that a free housing market with rational actors would alleviate racial inequality and segregation.⁵

Prompted by a need to find a sustainable model for the organization, the SPCA also incorporated ideas from the burgeoning economic development nonprofit sector, as well as from civil rights law and urban policy. Chief among these contributions was its focus on responding to the needs of residents, or "participants," within the boundaries of its service area, now essentialized as the Sherman Park neighborhood.⁶ Mirroring the language of the Fair Housing Act and the post-1968 fair housing movement, the group embraced a "color-blind" view of

⁵ While human relations groups often took actions that seemingly went against the idea of a free housing market, such as attempting to limit the growth of a neighborhood's Black population, such actions were usually taken with the understanding that white residents would eventually learn to act "rationally" and not flee to a segregated neighborhood after coexisting with a small population of Black neighbors. "Close to Home: Suburbanization, Residential Segregation, and Jewish-Black Relations in St. Louis Park and North Minneapolis, MN." *Journal of Urban History*. Ahead of print, August 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442241266230>.

⁶ Ryan Sattler, "Update: The Sherman Park Plan," *Sherman Park News*, September 1977, box 1, folder 3, Sherman Park Community Association Records, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter SPCA Records).

integration centered on complete freedom choice in the housing market. This contrasted with human relations methods that attempted to limit the number of Black families integrating into a white neighborhood. The SPCA, building on its Park West campaign, also demonstrated an increased willingness to aggressively govern its service area by enforcing laws and ordinances it deemed necessary for maintaining the neighborhood's quality of life. Finally, the organization, like many similar "neighborhood nonprofits" during this period, became dependent on grant support for its operating budget, staff, and programming.

The SPCA's successful housing programs demonstrated that the group's human relations foundation translated quite well to the "neighborhood nonprofit" model. The group had relied on information gathering as a way to assess the attitudes of Sherman Park residents on housing and integration since its founding. In the mid-1970s, the organization adapted this technique into a tool to enforce middle class standards of housing maintenance. The SPCA's staff and membership believed that doing so would encourage continued investment by financial institutions in the neighborhood in the context of a race-blind housing market.

These activities evolved into the Sherman Park Plan (SPP), the organization's signature grant-funded housing stock improvement program. In lockstep with the development of the SPP, the group also surveilled and tested the practices of Milwaukee's Realtors and real estate dealers, again with the expectation that their behavior should conform to liberal ideals of a race-blind housing market. The organization's metropolitan-wide investigation of housing discrimination became the basis for the first fair housing lawsuit in the state of Wisconsin.

The SPCA's programming and activities during this period transformed the organization in the eyes of the neighborhood's Black residents into an entity that could represent their interests. This became essential to the organization's long-term survival as Sherman Park's

Black population exponentially increased over the following three decades. Black participation in the organization increased beginning in the late-1970s and early-1980s, leading the group to shed its original white middle-class image; Today, the SPCA's staff and board are majority Black, reflecting Sherman Park's current demographics. But while both housing initiatives proved successful in the eyes of funders and policymakers, the changes necessary for the organization to implement these programs nearly ripped the SPCA apart and led to the birth of two new organizations: the Sherman Park Redevelopment Corporation and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC).

Sherman Park's history during this period is essential for understanding the influence of human relations thought on Milwaukee's contemporary housing and economic development programs. This chapter makes several contributions to the historiography of human relations and the urban nonprofit sector. First, it connects the programs of early nonprofits like the SPCA to the priorities of the human relations movement. In doing so, it provides an example of what historian Claire Dunning describes as "neoliberalism by default," in which actors on the ground adopted neoliberal policies as a response to "a set of fiscal, social, and political pressures" that developed during the postwar period.⁷ For the SPCA, formed by white, middle-class activists, human relations theory counted among these pressures, even as the organization strove to transcend this ideology.

This chapter also foregrounds the role of seed grants from larger nonprofits that allowed for grassroots organizations to begin hiring staff in anticipation of community development block grant (CDBG) funding. In Milwaukee, the United Way and the Urban League played key

⁷ Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 17.

roles in facilitating this transition for the SPCA and MMFHC, respectively. It was only because of the United Way that the SPCA developed the capacity to design economic development programs eligible for block grant funding.

While local factors primarily drove the evolution of the SPCA during this period, changes in federal urban and civil rights policy allowed the organization's housing programs to become viable and sustainable. The community development block grant let local politicians allocate funds previously reserved for urban renewal to organizations across the city. Similarly, the Federal Justice Department (DOJ) played an essential role in making fair housing testing admissible as evidence for fair housing lawsuits in Wisconsin. As a result, this chapter argues that the creation of Milwaukee's urban economic development sector is best understood as a convergence of the interests of policymakers and neighborhood activists around a set of programs that "neighborhood nonprofits" like the SPCA could implement.

Despite the accolades the SPCA received for its work on housing during the mid to late 1970s, by structuring the organization around these programs, the organization lost the ability to contest systemic inequalities and policies that continued to harm disinvested neighborhoods like Sherman Park. As a grant-funded organization, the SPCA now depended on elected officials for funding and part of Milwaukee's governing regime. MMFHC, like the rest of the contemporary fair housing movement, takes a more oppositional stance against discriminatory housing providers, public or private. But with exceptions, it can only do so in the context of judicial and administrative advocacy on behalf of its clients.⁸

⁸ Beginning in the 1990s, MMFHC, like its peer organizations, began to conduct systemic investigations of discrimination in the housing market relying on the disparate impact standard. However, the majority of the complaints it handles remain those submitted by individuals. Carla Wertheim, interview by Russell Star-Lack, January 25, 2024.

The SPCA's housing programs may have slowed down the neighborhood's disinvestment and racial transition in the short term, but not in the long term. Today, Sherman Park is 11% white and nearly 80% Black.⁹ As in many majority-minority neighborhoods, its housing market suffered through the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis and has not fully recovered. The SPCA's programming continues to focus on serving Sherman Park homeowners, a dwindling portion of the neighborhood's population.¹⁰ The inability of the SPCA to arrest disinvestment and resegregation in its service area connects to its neighborhood-based geographic footprint and its continued embrace of programs that do not address structural inequalities in Milwaukee's housing market. But the archival record demonstrates that the SPCA's incorporation of human relations theory into programs supported by public and private grant makers was prompted as much by pressure from funders as from pressure from the organization's constituents and staff pushing back against the priorities of its Grant Avenue-based founders. These dynamics resulted in an organization that attempted to fight the effects of disinvestment through information gathering and modifying individual behavior to encourage economic development and investment. The true legacy of the SPCA is not the integrated community envisioned by the organization's founders but the many grant-dependent nonprofits and CDCs established across the city that continue to implement programs based on the Sherman Park Plan to this day.

⁹ *Sherman Park Neighborhood Data Portrait* (Data You Can Use, 2024).

¹⁰ Chelsea Wait, "Neighborhood Care: Structural Conditions, Class, and Aesthetics in Sherman Park, Milwaukee, WI, 1980-2020" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024).

Seeding the Block Grant: Changes in Sherman Park and the SPCA, 1972-1974

“Yes, this is a changing neighborhood,” trumpeted a January 1973 front-page editorial in the *Sherman Park News*. But this change, it qualified, is not “the sort of change being rumored,” namely white flight. Instead, the authors observed, many new families on their block were young and “have moved here from suburban or northwest side homes with... the expectation of living in a racially integrated neighborhood.” Indeed, “the overwhelming general characteristic of the people moving into this neighborhood seems to be their appreciation of the old-fashioned benefits of well-built houses, reasonably priced.” Despite this positive assessment, however, the article does note that “perhaps to some of the older residents some of these couples appear to be quite different in their dress, hair styles or religious practices,” but adds that “closer acquaintance reveals, however, that the new couples have a great deal in common with their older neighbors.”¹¹

This article, while triumphantly aligned with the SPCA’s vision of the neighborhood, does betray the authors’ fear, or at least awareness of others’ fears, of unchecked integration with poor African Americans moving west from Bronzeville. But even through its authors deflected this narrative, demographic data shows that Sherman Park underwent substantial demographic changes in the first half of the 1970s. A special 1975 census commissioned by the city showed that Sherman Park lost roughly 3800 individuals (or 7.7% of its population) between 1970 and 1975, nearly as many as it lost between 1960 and 1970.¹² Meanwhile, the neighborhood’s Black

¹¹ Dick and Sue Destache, “Changes’ Taking Place in Neighborhood are Actually Signs of Improving Health,” *Sherman Park News*, January 1973, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

¹² “Census Update, City of Milwaukee, 1975,” 1975, box 6, folder 35, Henry S. Reuss Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Reuss Papers), 3. For this report, Sherman Park’s southern border is defined as Vliet Street, which is about three quarters of a mile south of the SPCA’s southern boundary (North Avenue) for its service area at this time. The census’ other boundaries align with the SPCA’s.

population increased from 176 in 1970 individuals to 3073 (or 6.6% of the neighborhood's population) in 1975.¹³ This level of Black integration (substantial but not enough to prompt mass white flight) was most likely what the SPCA's founders envisioned as their ideal. Indeed, oral histories reflect many residents' belief that the mid-1970s constituted Sherman Park's "golden age."¹⁴

But even the SPCA had to acknowledge some negative developments as well. The June 1974 issue of the *Sherman Park News* included a list of safety tips from the Milwaukee Police Department, perhaps speaking to fears about rising crime rates.¹⁵ Even more concerning to the SPCA, participation in the organization seemed to be flagging. The same issue of the *Sherman Park News* contained an article commenting that recent meetings had averaged only 50 attendees, down from past years where engagement had been driven by hot button issues like the Park West freeway.¹⁶ At the same time, the SPCA struggled to garner participation from the neighborhood's newer residents, Black and white, who perceived the organization as white and middle-class, and as a result not sharing their priorities or interests.¹⁷ Furthermore, blockbusting continued in the neighborhood, unaffected by the for-sale sign ban for which the SPCA had lobbied, as the city did not enforce it.¹⁸ The organization, like many of its peers on the west side, became increasingly concerned about the growing reluctance on the part of lenders to issue mortgages in the area, which they saw as tied to deteriorating housing stock and ongoing

¹³ "Census Update," 15-16.

¹⁴ August Backus, interview by Nicola Sherril, March 30, 1992, SPCAOH Records; Edward Valent and Teresa Valent interview. It should be noted that the Valent's acknowledge this belief without subscribing to it themselves.

¹⁵ "Safety Tips from Police Dept.," *Sherman Park News*, June 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

¹⁶ Ryan Sattler, "Now is the Time!" *Sherman Park News*, July 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCAOH Records.

¹⁷ Carol Holton interview; August Backus interview; William Malone, interview by unknown student, 1992.

¹⁸ "Sign Ban Not Pushed, Group Says," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 16, 1973.

blockbusting. But as many west side groups found in the mid-1970s, no philanthropic support existed for nonprofit organizations in most neighborhoods to directly address disinvestment.¹⁹

This changed in late 1974, when United Community Services, the forerunner to United Way, announced a program of three-year starter grants that would transform west side community organizations.²⁰ The SPCA received its first grant from United Way—for \$13,279—in March of 1975.²¹ In July, the organization leased its first office space and hired its first staff member, a planner from Denver named Harriet Rosen.²² From this point on, the SPCA no longer depended solely on its membership for support.

August “Ace” Backus, an activist who had helped to found multiple west side community organizations, and had also worked with the SPCA as a board and staff member for over two decades, recounted United Way’s rationale for starting this program:

If we don't invite you, all of you who are active with the groups, we will have no credibility, because we have denied you, and denied you over the years. And most neighborhood groups have stopped asking, but we finally realized that the neighborhood groups are terribly important to the survival of the city, and we have got to fund you.

One reason funders like United Way may have “finally realized” the importance of neighborhood groups to the city in 1974 was the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. This act, through its community development block grant (CDBG) program, empowered local officials to disburse funding previously used for urban renewal to

¹⁹ For example, the SPCA appealed to its membership for donations in order to rent office space. Minutes, 9 September 1974, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records. The need for an office was contentious at the time within the organization. Marilyn and Walter Johanssen interview. The one exception was in Milwaukee’s Model Cities areas, which did receive federal support for housing stock improvement initiatives. See Niles Niemuth, “Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee’s African American Community: 1960-1980” (MA thesis University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014).

²⁰ For clarity, United Community Services will be referred to as United Way going forward.

²¹ “SPCA May Receive \$13,270,” *Sherman Park News*, March 1975, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

²² “SPCA Opens New Office,” *Sherman Park News*, July 1975, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records; “SPCA Hires Coordinator,” *Sherman Park News*, July 1975, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

private organizations for large-scale economic development activities. Furthermore, the West Side Citizens Coalition's Park West campaign discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the work of War on Poverty groups like the Organization of Organizations (OOO) and the Walnut Area Improvement Council (WAICO), had increased the profile and legitimacy of nonprofit and neighborhood-based organizations as administrators of public policy and programs.²³

As a result, United Way's seed grant program emerged from a convergence of the interests of community organizations and public and private funders. While the War on Poverty and Model Cities programs had funded multiple nonprofit organizations in the city, most local grassroots organizations did not have large professional staffs. This could pose an issue, if, as the Maier administration anticipated, the participation of community organizations would prove essential to the planning and implementation of block grant-funded activities.²⁴ It therefore became imperative for Milwaukee's nonprofit sector to expand its capacity as quickly as possible to carry out such programs, something that local private grant makers would have recognized as a significant challenge for volunteer-run organizations. However, as Backus indicated, neighborhood groups had unsuccessfully requested grant funding from organizations like United Way for years, complicating the narrative found in the historiography and social scientific

²³ See Mark Braun, *Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor: Poverty Representation in Milwaukee's Community Action Programs, 1964-1972* (Lexington Books, 2001). What separates the Park West fight from OOO's earlier campaign for representation in Milwaukee's Model Cities program was WCC's distinct emphasis on neighborhood and place. OOO's argument for representation was based on the ideal of citizenship, as well as the organization representing the people served by the Model Cities program. Braun, *Social Change and Empowerment of the Poor*, 134-139.

²⁴ "Recommendation of Citizen Participation Structure for Bloc Grant Transition Planning," undated, box 118, folder 15, Henry W. Maier Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Maier Papers). Maier's administration initially envisioned "a city-wide system of community councils" based on neighborhood geographies that would direct these programs. It was not uncommon for United Way to align their funding with the priorities of city leaders in Milwaukee. Braun, *Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor*, 103.

literature on the early nonprofit sector that the grant-funded model for nonprofits was solely imposed from the top down.²⁵

As Sherman Park's racial geography began to shift, so did the infrastructure on which the SPCA relied for support. A decrease in member engagement with the SPCA as issues like the Park West freeway receded in urgency led the group's leaders to look for new avenues to sustain the organization. The organization also began to realize that ordinances and regulations it believed essential to maintaining the "stability" of the community, such as Milwaukee's "for sale" sign ban and housing code, were not adequately enforced. To address these issues and meet the needs of their changing neighborhood, the SPCA's leaders recognized that their organization would need to evolve as well.

Prominent local officials and organizations such as Maier and United Way began to reenvision the city's urban renewal and economic development policy, prompted by the creation of the community development block grant and the rise of the neighborhood movement. The success of this new model hinged on nonprofits like the SPCA becoming willing and able to administer large federal grants for economic development programs within minimal support or oversight from government officials. This convergence of interests on the part of the SPCA and the city's governing regime led to the organization's first grant from United Way, allowing the SPCA to begin building the capacity necessary to successfully implement block grant programs. While this grant was relatively small, it marked a significant step in the SPCA's transformation

²⁵ Michael McQuarrie, "Community Organizations in the Foreclosure Crisis: The Failure of Neoliberal Civil Society," *Politics & Society* 41, no. 1 (2012): 73-101; Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*, 17; Timothy P.R. Weaver, *Blazing the Neoliberal Trail: Urban Political Development in the United States and United Kingdom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 209; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Metropolitan Books, 2017), 65-72.

from a grassroots organization into a “neighborhood nonprofit” focused on serving clients rather than advocating against freeway expansion or other citywide issues.

Teardrops Over the Survey Reports: The Sherman Park Plan, 1974-1977

The SPCA had long expressed concern with the links between housing stock and neighborhood quality. Peter Mazurek, the SPCA’s then-president, published an editorial in the *Sherman Park News* in October of 1972 stating:

Winston Churchill once said that men build houses but houses shape men. I’d like to expand on that statement by substituting the word neighborhoods for houses... What is it about our neighborhood, or our home, or our apartment that makes it a good or bad (perhaps comfortable or uncomfortable are better words) place in which to live?²⁶

This focus on appearance resonated with the organization’s roots in human relations theory, which stressed conformity to middle-class norms and aesthetics as a way to manage race relations. If houses shaped men, then maintaining a neighborhood full of ideal residents also entailed maintaining the neighborhood’s ideal housing stock. Furthermore, many of the SPCA’s original founders took pride in their homes, which stood out in architectural style from the bungalows that made up the majority of the neighborhood’s housing. So, it seems likely that they wanted to preserve this sense pride, a sense that could become threatened by “blight.”²⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, the organization had expressed concerns as early as December of 1971 that elderly homeowners lacked the resources to maintain their properties, even though residents did share this concern to the same extent at the time.

²⁶ Peter Mazurek, “From the President’s Corner,” *Sherman Park News*, October 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

²⁷ While this terminology had fallen out of use by this point, Chapter 1 discusses how Black movement into the eastern section of Sherman Park was perceived by white residents as a “contagion.”

The SPCA's primary tool for contending with housing issues was, and continues to be, information gathering. The organization conducted its first survey of its service area in 1970 and its first explicitly on housing in 1971. Both surveys focused primarily on the views and attitudes of the area's residents toward racial integration, as well as the extent to which they had received solicitation from blockbusters.²⁸ The SPCA's next two surveys occurred in late 1973 in cooperation with West Side Action Coalition (WAC), a group of west side nonprofits advocating for community reinvestment.²⁹ Less intensive than its prior counterparts, the SPCA's housing committee mailed out questionnaires to its membership asking about their experiences with both Realtors and lenders. This attempt at studying redlining, over a year before the passage of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, helped to undergird WAC's claim that at least 70 lenders were withdrawing from the west side.³⁰ However, this would be the last time the SPCA focused on collecting information about lender activities.

In October of 1974, the SPCA announced a new initiative to gather information about housing in the neighborhood for the purpose of encouraging home maintenance:

Residents and visitors agree that homes in the Sherman Park area are some of the finest in the city... The Housing Committee feels a strong sense of responsibility to keep things just this way. As a precaution, we decided to evaluate potential housing deterioration in the Sherman Park area. The committee members will audit the neighborhood monthly, checking for eyesores and will take the needed action to correct housing code violations.³¹

²⁸ Mrs. Pat Redding, "Housing Survey Termed Success by S.P.C.A. Housing Chairman," *Sherman Park News*, December 1971, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

²⁹ "Housing Committee Questions 'Red Lining' Practices," *Sherman Park News*, November 1973, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

³⁰ "City, Lenders, Fight Redlining," *Milwaukee Journal*, September 6, 1974.

³¹ "Housing Report," *Sherman Park News*, October 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records. The committee also distributed informational leaflets on proper home upkeep. "Housing Committee Leaflets Provide Checklist," *Sherman Park News*, November 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

Perhaps spurred by the link drawn by the reinvestment movement between home maintenance and redlining, this survey marked the first time the SPCA empirically investigated housing stock quality in its service area. The language of the announcement again appealed to human relations' emphasis on behavior modification and the curation of appearance for external audiences. While positively framed, the use of the word "precaution" may reflect growing concerns of housing stock deterioration partly related to HUD's homesteading program, as discussed by historian Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor.³² Despite these concerns, the SPCA's survey found only 15 homes with the "worst conditions."³³ While the SPCA did not publicly announce the location of these properties, the organization's minutes indicate that 12 of these properties were between Grant Boulevard and 35th Street, highlighting the organization's continued fears of neighborhood deterioration starting in the east due to racial turnover.³⁴ The SPCA then attempted to arrange a meeting with the city's housing inspector, indicating that they were attempting to step further into a governance role in the neighborhood by aiding his department. However, the committee did not find the city fully cooperative in this matter.³⁵

When the organization hired Harriet Rosen in 1975, it gained the capacity to expand its survey in scope and detail, filling in a role it believed the city's code enforcement neglected.³⁶ As outlined by geographer Deanna Schmidt, this process became systematized; under the direction of staff, volunteers would fill out a form recording specific code violations.³⁷ Increasingly firm letters were then sent to violators warning them of the consequences of not maintaining their

³² Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019); "Can it Happen Here?" *Sherman Park News*, June 1975, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records; Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

³³ "Housing Report: 15 Neglected Homes," *Sherman Park News*, November 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.
³⁴ Minutes, 10 October 1974.

³⁵ Minutes, 7 October 1975, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records.

³⁶ Schmidt, 100; "Housing Upkeep Program," *Sherman Park News*, July 1975, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

³⁷ Schmidt, 100.

property and referring them to “home maintenance professionals.”³⁸ Ed Valent, a longtime member of the SPCA’s housing committee, described the complexities of coordinating 60 to 100 volunteers to each survey a block of a neighborhood and record maintenance problems house by house:

We had people take, be trained by people from building inspection to look at the checklist of what you would look at if you were a building inspector on the outside of a house. You'd look at peeling paint, and falling bricks, and broken windows, and no storms, and gutter thing, and things like this, real obvious kind of things.³⁹

The SPCA treated its volunteers as deputized building inspectors and expected that the data they produced would be actionable when reported to the city. The *Sherman Park News* clearly laid out the rationale for this form of surveillance:

Residents of Sherman Park are interested in making it the best that it can be. The beauty and variety of the old houses in our area contributes much to our community. To lose that through neglect or indifference would be a tragedy.⁴⁰

Again, the influence of human relations theory connecting appearance, as well as the appropriate behavior of community residents, to the idea of a successful neighborhood is clear. While the SPCA was not willing to publicly force lenders to keep writing mortgages as the neighborhood’s Black population continued to grow, it was willing to try to convince neighborhood residents to maintain what the organization saw as the most valuable qualities of the area’s properties. And as the organization embraced its nonprofit model and a growing mandate to govern its service area, it also became comfortable with enforcing the city’s housing code in order to compel the maintenance of Sherman Park’s housing stock. Doing so, the SPCA’s leaders believed, would encourage more affluent white residents to remain in the neighborhood, attract community-

³⁸ Schmidt, 100.

³⁹ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

⁴⁰ “Housing Upkeep Program.”

minded new arrivals, and facilitate continued investment in the neighborhood on the part of lenders.⁴¹ Such an approach may have also appealed to Sherman Park's new Black middle-class residents, some of whom had participated in the Civil Rights Movement and, as a result, adhered to respectability politics.⁴² In a socioeconomic climate where urban communities were facing redlining and disinvestment, as well as incentives to promote their neighborhoods in order to compete for funding opportunities, this idea found new life.

Sherman Park residents did not always take kindly to the SPCA's increasingly aggressive enforcement of maintenance standards. The 1976 survey identified 200 properties in the eastern third the neighborhood that were not up to code and were subsequently sent letters.⁴³ The housing committee reported about 80% of the calls received from the property owners who received letters were positive, meaning 20% were negative.⁴⁴ The negative calls could be very difficult conversations. According to Backus,

The kinds of tragic things that, that bubbled to the surface were phone calls from people with quavery voices, or letters in very spidery handwriting saying, in essence, "Until George died seven years ago, this place was the show place on the block. But George did die seven years ago, and I'm diabetic, and I've gone blind. Good old diabetic retinopathy and the circulation was bad, so they've cut off my right leg, just about at the knee. And it's really hard to get up the ladder... when you're blind and have only one leg." ... There were teardrops all over our survey reports.⁴⁵

It became apparent to the organization that while many violators were absentee landlords who had no interest in maintaining their properties unless legally compelled to, many more simply lacked the resources, human or financial, to do so. This finding became the basis of the SPCA's interest in facilitating the housing stock improvement services it believed necessary to keep

⁴¹ Cecil Sutphen, interview by William Clark, 27 February 1996, SPCAOH Records.

⁴² Cecil Sutphen, interview by William Clark, 27 February 1996, SPCAOH Records.

⁴³ Minutes, 9 June 1976, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records.

⁴⁴ Minutes, 24 June 1976, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records.

⁴⁵ August Backus interview.

Sherman Park healthy, an interest that would lead to the creation of the organization's most influential program.

Home rehabilitation programs had operated in Milwaukee for nearly a decade prior to the advent of the Sherman Park Plan. According to Backus, "Back in the sixties, we were forever screaming about the terrible housing stock provided by the slumlords for poor families."⁴⁶ And the city had listened, at least to a degree. Niles Niemuth documented how the city's Model City's program provided grants in the Walnut Area Improvement Council (WAICO) area for homeowners to bring their homes up to code.⁴⁷ WAC had also campaigned for tax subsidies for homeowners who made certain improvements, garnering support from local officials.⁴⁸ As a result, housing activists across the city seemed to have reached a consensus that their constituents needed rehabilitation programs.

When the city held its first public hearing on the block grant, many participants, including Peter Mazurek of the SPCA, emphasized the need for the city to fund housing stock rehabilitation programs.⁴⁹ One of the first organizations to receive block grant funds for this purpose was the Harambee Revitalization Project, founded by Reuben Harpole and one of the city's earliest community development corporations (CDC).⁵⁰ Building on this model, the SPCA submitted a \$400,000 proposal to the city's Community Development Agency, the body responsible for distributing block grant funds, "to begin a comprehensive program of housing

⁴⁶ August Backus interview.

⁴⁷ Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community," 19.

⁴⁸ "Assessments Relief Gains Maier Pledge," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 19, 1973.

⁴⁹ Eileen Hammer, "200 Advise City on \$13 Million Spending," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 7, 1975.

⁵⁰ Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community," 81.

maintenance and rehabilitation” for next summer.⁵¹ This program became the Sherman Park Plan (SPP).

Several features of the Sherman Park Plan distinguished it from these earlier efforts. First and foremost, the program’s service area encompassed a community that was neither majority-Black nor perceived as working-class. This fit a broader pattern of the city beginning to divert economic development dollars and policies away from Bronzeville to a much wider array of neighborhoods during this period in order to prevent further deterioration rather than treat existing decay.⁵² An article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* directly refers to the SPP as a “scaled down version of the model cities program” within the SPCA’s geography.⁵³

Second, the SPP incorporated the SPCA’s detailed housing stock surveys. The Harambee Revitalization Project had also organized door to door surveys, but it appears like these surveys were focused on a variety of issues beyond housing maintenance and relied primarily on in-person interviews, rather than looking directly for code violations.⁵⁴ In a fiscal environment where neighborhood-based organizations had limited resources to spend, the SPCA’s surveying techniques and knowledge of its service area’s housing stock, developed over a half-decade of practice, allowed it to pinpoint the homes that would most benefit from its block grant funding. And as discussed earlier, the group used the act of the surveying as an additional method to encourage homeowners to make maintain their properties, whether or not they ended up participating in the SPP.

⁵¹ “AFL-CIO Joins SPCA on Housing Proposal,” *Sherman Park News*, November 1976, box 6, folder 2.

⁵² Skip Seager and Sharon Seager interview; Deanna Schmidt, “Urban Triage: Saving the Savable Neighbourhoods in Milwaukee,” *Planning Perspectives* 26, no. 4 (2011): 569-589.

⁵³ Jan Gottfredsen and Ira Jean Hadnot, “Calls Bring Helping Hands,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 23, 1977.

⁵⁴ Niemuth, “Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee’s African American Community,” 81.

Finally, the program also served as professional development for aspiring Black tradesman. Two thirds of the grant award funded the salaries of 23 workers of various levels of experience.⁵⁵ As a result of all these features, the program became one of the city's flagship examples of successful block grant funding and inspired other organizations across the city to launch similar programs.⁵⁶

The SPCA trumpeted the SPP as a milestone in local community-controlled economic development policy, downplaying the role of government in dictating the types of programs they would fund. Ryan Sattler, speaking with the *Sentinel*, stated that “this is our chance to show the city and County governments that ordinary people can take charge of the money to get something done without a lot of red tape.”⁵⁷ Sattler's language implied that the SPCA maintained the oppositional stance to elected leaders it had adopted during its freeway and education fights. Many scholars of the nonprofit and grant making sectors, however, disagree with Sattler's assertion.⁵⁸

Growing from a budget of less than \$20,000 to one of \$400,000 also posed many administrative challenges to an organization with a staff of about three full time employees in the late 1970s.⁵⁹ According to Ed Valent,

We were shocked when the city said, “okay, we'll give you the money for this.” And so, the Sherman Park Plan came into existence at the same time that United Way was just barely funding the organization. And all of a sudden, we have this Sherman Park Plan

⁵⁵ August Backus interview; Gottfredsen and Hadnot, “Calls Bring Helping Hands.”

⁵⁶ The SPP's most well-known peer was ESHAC. Conversations with Bethany Sanchez.

⁵⁷ Gottfredsen and Hadnot, “Calls Bring Helping Hands.”

⁵⁸ Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*, 15; Michael McQuarrie, “No Contest: Participatory Technologies and the Transformation of Urban Authority,” *Public Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 143-175; McQuarrie, “Community Organizations in the Foreclosure Crisis,” 75; Kathe Newman and Robert W. Lake, “Democracy, Bureaucracy and Difference in US Community Development Politics Since 1968,” *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 44-61; Deborah G. Martin, “Nonprofit Foundations and Grassroots Organizing: Reshaping Urban Governance,” *The Professional Geographer* 56, no 3 (2004): 394-405.

⁵⁹ \$400,000 in 1977 equates to over \$2 million today.

with a zillion employees, it must have been a dozen anyway, and this little staff, and... the Sherman Park Plan committee.⁶⁰

Carol Holton, who served as president of the organization during the early years of the SPP, was even more explicit:

The massive housing rehab program that just had so many fucking zeros on its budget, that I was scared to death. At which point, my husband came in and said, “Are you looking at this stuff carefully? Do you realize how much money is involved here? Now, you can't be doing this unless...” because suddenly SPCA was big money. And there was a lot of rehab money that had come in, and one person couldn't stay on top of it... It was scary. It was a lot of money. And I didn't deal with a lot of money. I was a social worker with young children in blue jeans.⁶¹

To effectively manage such a large program and avoid any accounting issues that could get the organization shut down, the SPCA eventually spun the Sherman Park Plan off into a separate CDC called the Sherman Park Redevelopment Corporation (SPRC). The SPCA continued to conduct surveys, but would then hand the data off to the SPRC to act on. This reorganization most likely saved the SPCA from collapse during the 1980s, unlike many of its peers who, purposefully or unintentionally, mismanaged funds.⁶²

The Sherman Park Plan enabled the SPCA to fuse many of its old approaches and methods for “neighborhood stabilization” grounded in human relations theory with newer counterparts it adopted from the burgeoning economic development nonprofit sector. The most significant human relations elements the SPCA incorporated into the SPP included its use of information gathering, not only to pinpoint the most “problematic” homes that needed attention, but also to try to persuade homeowners to adopt behaviors the group believed beneficial for the neighborhood as a whole and that would ultimately enable the housing market to function

⁶⁰ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

⁶¹ Carol Holton interview.

⁶² Bethany Sanchez, interview by Russell Star-Lack, April 8, 2024.

normally in the neighborhood. But unlike human relations groups during the 1960s, the SPCA did not stop at education and persuasion. As the group began to receive block grant funding and cemented its status as the representative organization for Sherman Park, it resorted to more aggressive measures to obtain the behaviors it wanted from its residents, using the carrot of its housing stock improvement program and the stick of directly reporting code violators to the city. The SPP demonstrates how human relations organizations may be able to adapt to the social service-oriented nonprofit model with little-to-no coercion needed on the part of grant makers. The SPCA would try a similar approach adapting human relations strategies to compel the types of behavior it wanted from Realtors operating in its service area.

**“The SPCA Proves It”: *Sherman Park Community Association v. Wauwatosa Realty Co.*,
1972-1981**

Fred Freiberg was the SPCA’s second hire. Joining the organization in April of 1976 as its housing coordinator, Freiberg was in the process of completing his BA at a Michigan-based alternative college. He described himself to the *Sherman Park News* as “deeply committed to voluntary associations that enable citizens to speak and act on issues in our public life.”⁶³ Carol Holton, who served as president during most of Freiberg’s tenure, remembered him as passionate, idealistic, and constantly fighting the constraints of the nonprofit sector during this period: “Fred, to me was this poor guy in his early 20s who should have been born 20 years before. Because, he had all of the community organizer stuff that he wanted to do that had great difficulty in being able to do at the time, because getting support was real hard.”⁶⁴ Despite the

⁶³ “From the Staff,” *Sherman Park News*, April 1976, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

⁶⁴ Carol Holton interview.

lack of funding opportunities for community organizing, Freiberg's commitment to the SPCA's principles breathed new life into the organization and led him to quickly become its first executive director. Under his leadership, the organization would find new ways to challenge the discriminatory actions of Realtors and blockbusters.

The inciting incident for Freiberg's most significant contribution to the SPCA occurred shortly after his hiring in 1976. According to Freiberg, Ryan Sattler, the president immediately before Holton, had spoken at a lunch for the Milwaukee Board of Realtors. In keeping with a human relations approach, Sattler explained the existence of racial steering (purposefully directing buyers to segregated neighborhoods based on their race) and blockbusting in Milwaukee, attempting to educate his audience about their obligations under the Fair Housing Act. During his speech, "the realtors started a chant, and actually drowned him out from speaking and said, 'prove it, prove it, prove it' [regarding the existence of racial steering]. So, Ryan came back to [Freiberg], and he said, 'that's what you're gonna do. You're gonna prove it.' And that we did."⁶⁵

Sattler's charge to Freiberg ignited a fire that been sparking since the SPCA's founding. After the organization's early frustrating experiences trying to ensure Realtors observed fair housing law, it never stopped looking at the Realtors with suspicion. As mentioned in earlier sections, the SPCA's housing committee was very concerned that the city of Milwaukee did not enforce the "for-sale" sign sale ordinance for which the group had successfully campaigned. Furthermore, a similar ban in New Jersey was challenged and eventually struck down by the

⁶⁵ Fred Freiberg, interview by Russell Star-Lack, February 10, 2024. Some SPCA members claim that Sattler, an executive at Kohl's, was forcibly ejected from this event. August Backus interview; Ed Valent and Terry Valent interview.

Supreme Court in 1977, rendering Milwaukee's ordinance unenforceable.⁶⁶ Federal regulators in the early to mid-1970s were similarly ineffective. The chief policy instrument the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) relied on for regulating the real estate market was the Voluntary Affirmative Marketing Agreement (VAMA), based on the same principles that informed the voluntary agreement the SPCA had attempted to get Milwaukee's Realtors to endorse. Bill Tisdale, the longtime executive director of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC), articulated the fair housing movement's critique of VAMAs with a single question: "what is the point of signing something saying you're going to do something that you're required to do?"⁶⁷ These developments meant that less than a decade after its passage, the Fair Housing Act was effectively toothless.

Realtors, as a result, openly flouted fair housing law. Recognizing this fact, the national fair housing movement began to revive in the early-1970s, exploring new methods to compel compliance with the Fair Housing Act.⁶⁸ In June of 1972, the SPCA sent delegates to a convention sponsored by National Neighbors.⁶⁹ Formed in 1969 at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, National Neighbors specialized in helping integrating neighborhoods maintain their integration, albeit the same white-centered and human relations-influenced definition of integration discussed in Chapter 1.⁷⁰ This approach towards fair housing aligned perfectly with the SPCA's, and National Neighbors played a significant role in evolving the SPCA's fair housing program from surveying towards fair housing testing.

⁶⁶ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

⁶⁷ Bill Tisdale, interview by Russell Star-Lack, February 17, 2024.

⁶⁸ See Ashley Nicole Nelson, "A Movement Divided: How the Fair Housing Movement Succumbed to White Supremacy, 1950-2010" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2020) for a historical overview and analysis of the national post-1968 fair housing movement.

⁶⁹ "Learn about National Neighbors: Brotherhood, Determination and Hard Work," *Sherman Park News*, September 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁷⁰ Nelson, "A Movement Divided," 181-182.

National Neighbors was one of the earliest groups to advocate for the development of fair housing testing programs administered by private organizations.⁷¹ A fair housing test for racial discrimination in homebuying entails multiple volunteers of different races but with matching credentials, such as incomes and credit scores, and housing preferences. The testers contact a Realtor or realty firm and record if the treatment or information they receive differs. If the testers report a difference in treatment, the test can become evidence for a lawsuit. While testing has proven an effective method of enforcing fair housing, it is still rooted in the human relations theory employed by many fair housing groups in the 1960s and early-1970s. The goal of testing is to monitor and regulate individual interactions in a supposedly-free housing market and was advocated for by human relations-influenced fair housing councils during the 1960s.⁷² Given that tests must control for the tester's credentials, this strategy cannot help economically disenfranchised populations gain access to housing they could not already afford.

Perhaps because of Realtors' fears about how fair housing testing could threaten their businesses or reputations, Wisconsin's 1965 fair housing law banned testing throughout the state. It is possible that National Neighbors raised this issue with the SPCA, because in October of 1972, not long after the beginning of National Neighbors' and the SPCA's relationship, attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) met with the SPCA "to discuss possible leads for future legal action on local violations of federal fair housing legislation," referring to the state fair housing law.⁷³ According to Freiberg, the SPCA had initiated this contact with the DOJ.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Nelson, "A Movement Divided," 181-182.

⁷² See Tracy K'Meyer, *To Live Peaceably Together: The American Friends Service Committee's Campaign for Open Housing* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 68-84.

⁷³ "Justice Dept. Lawyers Consult SPCA Housing Committee," *Sherman Park News*, November 1972, box 6, folder 1, SPCA Records.

⁷⁴ Fred Freiberg interview. The DOJ may have been especially receptive to the SPCA's overtures due to Milwaukee's high profile school desegregation lawsuit. See James K. Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation Shaped Its Schools* (Wisconsin Historical Society; 2015); Jones, *The Selma of the North*.

It took several more years, but the DOJ challenged Wisconsin's law in 1974, around the time that the SPCA hosted Jean Milgram, National Neighbors' executive director.⁷⁵ In the report of her visit, Milgram recommended that the SPCA "scrutinize" all Realtor activity in its service area.⁷⁶ While the SPCA had tracked the activities of Realtors and blockbusters through surveys since the group's inception, it was during the DOJ's case that it began to prepare for its first fair housing tests (referred to at the time as "auditing") in the state with the expectation that the DOJ's challenge would eventually succeed.⁷⁷ Wisconsin's testing case was decided in favor of the DOJ in July of 1975, setting the stage for aggressive legal action over fair housing in the coming years.⁷⁸ Under Frieberg's direction, the SPCA ramped up testing in the neighborhood during the spring of 1976.⁷⁹ The organization's early findings documented what they already knew: Realtors on the west side actively discriminated on the basis of race, and equally important to the SPCA, against the neighborhood of Sherman Park.

Testers identified four firms active on the west side that practiced racial steering: Wauwatosa, Relocation, Towne, and Keske (a firm that the SPCA had monitored since 1972). The HUD fair housing administrative complaint eventually filed by the SPCA against these firms reveals the results of many of these early tests. Frieberg's first testers, Ed and Terry Valent, an interracial couple, and Mary and Raymond Kremer, a white couple, attended two open houses just north of the SPCA's service area, one organized by Towne and the other by Keske. At the Towne open house, located on 39th Street in a census tract that was 54% Black in 1980, the

⁷⁵ "Wisconsin Faces Civil Suit," *Sherman Park News*, April 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records; "National Neighbors Visit Sherman Park," *Sherman Park News*, June 1974, box 6, folder 2, SPCA Records.

⁷⁶ "National Neighbors Visit Sherman Park."

⁷⁷ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

⁷⁸ Minutes, 9 September 1974, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records; "Fair Housing Ordered," *Sherman Park News*, July 1975, box 6, folder 3, SPCA Records.

⁷⁹ Ed Valent and Chris Squires, "Chapter 6: Sherman Park, Milwaukee," *Cityscape* 4, no. 2 (1998): 123.

Realtor told the Kremers “that they might not like the neighborhood because Black families lived on either side of the house and also across the street.” He did tell them, however, “that the house would be good income-producing property,” meaning that the couple could profitably rent it to Black tenants, assuming a white couple would not want to occupy a house in a largely Black area. Conversely, the same Realtor told the Valents later that day that the house was “a good starter home” and asked for their financial information.⁸⁰

The tests quickly expanded beyond the west side, however. Between mid-March and mid-April, testers visited seven office locations across the metropolitan area belonging to all four firms under investigation posing as potential homebuyers with no stated locational preferences. When the Kremers and the Valents visited the suburban Wauwatosa office of Wauwatosa Realty on March 28, the Kremers were asked “if they objected to living in the City of Milwaukee” and “if they minded living with Blacks.” They were then told that “integrated areas were not holding their prices” compared to segregated areas and given listing for four homes in “predominantly white areas,” as well as offered listings on the white south side. The Valents, on the other hand, were asked “why they chose this particular office (in Wauwatosa) to look for a home” and then given a listing book bounded by Holton Street on the east, encompassing most of the Black north side. They were also “told several times not to consider a home over their stated \$30,000 price range.”⁸¹ This conversation reflected the assumption on the part of the Realtor that a mixed-race couple should only look for homes in neighborhoods with significant populations of color. Whether or not the Realtor thought that this outcome would benefit the couple, maintain the city’s profitable dual housing market, or both remains unclear.

⁸⁰ James A. Walrath, Jack Greenberg, and Percy L. Julian, Administrative Complaint, May 1977, box 7, folder 6, SPCA Records, 6-7; 1980 US Census.

⁸¹ Walrath et al., Administrative Complaint. 15-16.

The final form of testing conducted in this early stage was through responding to ad listings. On April 14, Ryan Sattler and his wife, Joan, answered an ad placed by Relocation for a home in a white neighborhood in Wauwatosa. When they visited the home, “emphasized the positive factors of the house,” “encouraged the Sattlers to make an offer,” and made two follow-up calls. When Joyce and Samuel Tanner, a Black couple, visited the next day, “they were told that the house was in need of repairs” and “encouraged to delay any decision to make an offer.” The agent did not follow up.⁸²

Similarly, Betty and Clarence Nicholas, a Black couple, responded to an ad placed by Keske for a home on Custer Avenue about two miles north of Sherman Park and toured the house on May 3. When Betty asked the agent to show them around, “the agent responded, ‘well, you see the house,’” and remained in the kitchen while the couple inspected the premises themselves. Afterwards,

The agent suggested that the Nicholas’ look elsewhere, stating that the Sherman Park Community had nice homes and was a nice place to live in. He asked why they had not considered that area. They replied that it did not matter where the house was.

When Skip Seager, a white member of the SPCA’s housing committee, visited the same house later that month, the agent escorted him through the house and made no mention of Sherman Park as a preferable alternative.⁸³

For the Valents, the mundanity of the discrimination they experienced was eye-opening. According to Teresa, who was Black,

The first thing the agent said to us was, “we don't have any north side properties.” And up until then, the only way you would know you were discriminated against, most of the time, because it was pretty subtle, was when you compared your treatment with the other person. So, we would always walk out thinking we were treated just fine, that there were no problems. But that one sticks out in my mind as just poor business, and, just a blatant

⁸² Walrath et al., Administrative Complaint, 27-28.

⁸³ Walrath et al., Administrative Complaint, 20-21.

display of exactly what we were testing against, when he made that comment. And of course he was very, the real estate agent was very cordial and worked at showing us things. So, we thought that in spite of the fact that he made this comment, maybe he then turned around and did what he was supposed to. But then later comparing our experiences with the other persons showed that they were very different.⁸⁴

Teresa's reflections speak to a major flaw in human relations thought regarding housing discrimination. While this ideology stresses conforming to middle-class standards of decency, it is perfectly possible for Realtors to politely interact with clients of color and still discriminate against them. Ed added,

The assumption is, it's just these like Nazis or Klan members who are out there doing this. But really it, to have, to explain the level of discrimination that exists, it's almost like you have to go to that guy on the south side who said, who just assumed by looking at us that we wanted a north side listing before we said anything and, and say, it's the assumptions that people are making about where somebody else wants to live or would be comfortable or would be happy are making them do something that's really specifically against the law, and I think part of the thing about real estate agents having to try and figure out what you want and then close, drives them in the direction of making those assumptions for you.⁸⁵

As the Valents and the SPCA were discovering, the problem of institutionalized housing discrimination lay not in the hands of a few blockbusters. Instead, the whole real estate industry, operating in a racially segregated housing market, was structured in such a way that most Realtors faced incentives to make racist assumptions and steer their clients based on these assumptions. The human relations approach the SPCA had previously used of attempting to educate Realtors about their obligations under the Fair Housing Act had clearly failed to overturn these assumptions. The entire housing market needed to be reformed to address a problem this deep. Advocating for reforming the industry beyond the firms operating in Sherman Park, however, proved beyond the SPCA's increasingly geographically and programmatically

⁸⁴ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

⁸⁵ Edward and Teresa Valent interview.

narrowed scope. But in lockstep with the growing number of fair housing enforcement agencies during this period, the SPCA could try to compel the behavior of the Realtors and firms it tested through legal action.

Armed with damning results, Freiberg sent copies of the audit report to National Neighbors, the DOJ, and the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing—then the preeminent fair housing organization in the United States.⁸⁶ Despite concerns that the audit could affect the SPCA’s United Way funding, the testers, with the support of the board, decided in October to proceed with litigation.⁸⁷ The NAACP Legal Defense Fund agreed to serve as legal counsel for the plaintiffs, along with Jim Walrath, a Sherman Park-based attorney who advised the SPCA’s testing program.⁸⁸

The SPCA continued to conduct testing through April of 1977, only weeks before it filed an administrative complaint with HUD’s regional office in Chicago on May 19. By then, the organization had collected 43 cases of discrimination by the four firms against 39 plaintiffs over the course of a year.⁸⁹ HUD quickly assigned an investigator to the case, but by the fall, the SPCA felt the investigation had stalled.⁹⁰ Independently from the HUD complaint, the SPCA filed a civil complaint in federal court in July alleging housing discrimination using the same tests as evidence.⁹¹ The organization sought an order to “stop refusing to show or sell any

⁸⁶ Minutes, 12 October 1976, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records.

⁸⁷ Minutes, 12 October 1976; “Board Special Meeting Minutes,” 9 October 1976, box 1, folder 18, SPCA Records.

⁸⁸ “Board Special Meeting Minutes.” The DOJ was also involved in a supportive role, but the extent of this role is unclear.

⁸⁹ Walrath et al., Administrative Complaint; Gregory D. Stanford, “42 Stories of Realty Bias Submitted,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 20, 1977. Stanford either missed the final test in the complaint or felt strongly about multiples of twelve.

⁹⁰ Mile Plemmons, “Hud Assigns Prober Here,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 25, 1977; Schuler Seager to Barb Blumenfield, 19 August 1977, box 12, folder 24, Henry S. Reuss Papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives (hereafter Reuss Papers).

⁹¹ “US Gets Complaint of Real Estate Bias,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 22, 1977.

dwelling to any person because of race, to stop the practice of racial steering and to take ‘affirmative action to overcome past discriminatory acts’” by encouraging “blacks [sic] to buy home in predominantly white areas and whites to buy homes integrated and predominantly black areas” and “display equal opportunity and fair housing posters in their offices and to include such insignia in advertisements.”⁹² They also asked for \$1,000 for each plaintiff. As with seemingly every high-profile federal case in which the SPCA had a modicum of involvement, the fair housing case landed in the court of Judge John Reynolds.

Towne came running “hat in hand,” according to Ace Backus, and moved to settle almost immediately.⁹³ Litigation with the remaining three firms, however, dragged on for years. A hearing on whether the SPCA’s testers had standing to bring the case before federal court was held on December 1, 1978. During the hearing, lawyers for the defense argued that plaintiffs, as testers, had not actually suffered any injuries, that the process of “initially matching” buyers with neighborhoods did not constitute steering, that the statements made by the Realtors to testers were factually true and not explicitly racial, and that the Court did not have an effective remedy for Milwaukee’s segregated housing pattern.⁹⁴

After waiting for a decision on a similar case in Illinois, Reynolds delivered his ruling on March 31, 1980. He found that “residents of the Milwaukee area have a right to integrated neighborhoods and, thus, have legal standing to sue real estate companies with policies and practices that prevent integration.” Reynolds opinion stated that “persons who sue can do so on

⁹² “US Gets Complaint of Real Estate Bias.”

⁹³ August Backus interview; “Affirmative Action OK’d by Towne Realty,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 21, 1977. This was most likely due to Towne fearing that not complying with federal law would lead to the cancellation of several military contracts held by the firm.

⁹⁴ “Local Realtors Offer Old Arguments for Old Problem,” *Sherman Park News*, March 1979, box 6, folder 4, SPCA Records.

behalf of all people in the metropolitan area who desire or will desire to live in integrated neighborhoods, even though the named plaintiffs are not from every segregated neighborhood in the area.”⁹⁵ In essence, private organizations like the SPCA could use the test they orchestrate as evidence for class action lawsuits in federal courts.

Reynolds’ language also embraced much of the SPCA’s arguments regarding its area and the benefits of integrated neighborhoods:

Residents of a changing neighborhood face significant social, professional and economic losses. These losses are real and concrete and are sufficient to confer standing upon those plaintiffs who reside within the SPCA service area.

But furthermore, in Reynolds’ view, the plaintiffs who did not reside in Sherman Park also had standing because, “by discouraging black homeseekers from purchasing homes in these areas, defendants are depriving these plaintiffs of the benefits of living in an integrated community and are in effect consigning them to life in insulated ‘white ghettos.’”⁹⁶ Wauwatosa, Relocation, and Keske settled with the SPCA in the spring of 1981, although litigation around whether or not all parties were complying with the terms of their respective consent orders continued through 1985. Most of those firms had folded by the end of the decade.⁹⁷

Even though it had employed a strategy developed by human relations groups, by successfully bringing this case, the SPCA had thrown off its human relations-based view of managing integration in favor of an approach that fought for the right of anyone to live anywhere they wanted, regardless of race. According to Freiberg,

We were not trying to stop [Sherman Park from becoming a predominantly Black neighborhood]. We were simply saying the fair housing laws say that everyone should have access to information about all housing opportunities. And Realtors shouldn't be taking it upon themselves to say, “well, this neighborhood's for whites and this

⁹⁵ Gregory D. Stanford, “Ruling Deals Blow to Realty ‘Steering,’” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 6, 1980.

⁹⁶ Stanford, “Ruling Deals Blow to Realty ‘Steering.’”

⁹⁷ August Backus Interview; Terry and Ed Valent interview.

neighborhood's for Blacks, and in this neighborhood, we've decided to change over because there's there are too many Black people living in the neighborhood now. And that's what was happening at that time.⁹⁸

Carol Holton credited Freiberg's work shifting the SPCA's view of integration to a color-blind approach to leading directly to increased Black acceptance of the group: "Fred resolved the issue very nicely... And in so doing, I think he gave incredible credibility to the entire organization."⁹⁹

While human relations theory had viewed limiting Black movement into white neighborhoods as a necessary step to for achieving "stable integration," activists had always believed that the housing market could eventually serve integrated neighborhoods with little oversight.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, the fair housing movement during the 1970s, along with federal policymakers, believed that instead of policing the behavior Black and white neighbors, activists should focus on the behaviors of housing providers so that the housing market could function rationally.¹⁰¹ These two approaches are both based in postwar liberal views of the housing market and are reconcilable. The SPCA's testing program demonstrates how housing nonprofits based in human relations evolved from the first position to the second relatively smoothly. This shift proved essential for the organization as the Black population in its service area increased in the following decades. In a racial geography drastically altered from its 1971 incarnation, the SPCA has managed to maintain its primacy as the representative organization for its neighborhood.

While still involved with the *Wauwatosha* case in a supportive role and as a plaintiff, Freiberg left the SPCA in November of 1977. In addition to beginning the lawsuit, Freiberg had

⁹⁸ Fred Freiberg interview.

⁹⁹ Carol Holton interview.

¹⁰⁰ Star-Lack, "Close to Home," 8.

¹⁰¹ It should be noted that the contemporary fair housing movement has evolved from this viewpoint. Fred Freiberg interview.

spent the summer of that year coordinating over 200 more tests in the region as part of a national study of housing discrimination coordinated by NCDH and HUD. He found that 63% of sales tests and 45% of rental tests in metropolitan Milwaukee involved racial discrimination of some form.¹⁰²

Addressing this issue would require an organization that lacked the geographic and programmatic constraints of the SPCA. Relying on the pool of volunteers he had developed over the previous two years, including the Valents and the Kremers, Freiberg founded the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC) with a mission of receiving, testing, and addressing housing discrimination complaints throughout Milwaukee's regional market (figure 12). The city of Milwaukee, still governed by Henry Maier's administration, did not give MMFHC block grant funding in its early years. As a result, the Milwaukee Urban League stepped into a similar role with MMFHC to United Way's regarding the SPCA, awarding MMFHC small grants out of its own budget to hire a few positions in its early years.¹⁰³ MMFHC remained based in Sherman Park until the mid-1980s.

¹⁰² Fred Freiberg interview.

¹⁰³ Bill Tisdale interview. This was an unusual role for the Urban League to play.



Figure 12. Photograph of the staff of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council, 1978 (Henry S. Reuss Papers). From left to right: Fred Freiberg, Deborah Thompson, Carla Wertheim, Anita Severson, and Bill Tisdale.

Conclusion: Neighborhood Association to Neighborhood Nonprofit

The SPCA emerged from the 1970s significantly altered from its first incarnation. Originally attempting to steer the relationships between white and Black residents in such a manner as to ensure that white families would still feel comfortable enrolling their children in the neighborhood's schools, the organization now operated a six-figure economic development program and sued realty firms in federal court. But there was also continuity. The SPCA had formed as a group based in human relations theory, and its core programming still reflected

influences from this movement. Both its housing maintenance and fair housing testing programs relied on information gathering, one of the SPCA's oldest activities, as well as its belief that individuals could be persuaded to act in ways aligned with liberal, middle-class ideals of neighborliness.

While the group's remedies for structural inequality in its service area remained based in human relations, the organization had begun openly critiqued this inequality particularly as it pertained to the housing market. It had also stopped orienting its work on integration toward the white families it hoped to convince to remain in the neighborhood, in conversation with changes in federal civil rights policy and enforcement, as well as the broader fair housing movement. Both the ruptures and continuity in the orientation and programming of the SPCA were facilitated by its transformation into a grant-funded, staffed agency and the ensuing negotiations by the organization's constituents about the best way to work within this model.

Where this period of the SPCA's history has value for scholars relates to understanding the dynamics of how a diverse array of urban community-based organizations adopted a grant-funded nonprofit structure and programming during the 1970s. To date, the majority of the literature on this subject portrays this model as often running counter to the values and strategies of these groups, forcing radical movements to bend to neoliberal priorities. In the case of the SPCA and similar human relations groups, the friction that often arises when organizations change so drastically may have been reduced compared to the groups discussed by Claire Dunning and Michael McQuarrie. There is a slippery slope from wanting to change individual behavior to wanting to serve individual clients. Another insight is the possibility that it the SPCA, through embracing the neighborhood nonprofit model, adopted a more open view of integration divorced from the human relations priority of retaining white residents.

This is not to say, however, that becoming embedded in Milwaukee's grantmaking infrastructure did not cost the organization dearly. While the SPCA had always shied away from aggressive actions that went against its middle-class image, it did take stances oppositional to Milwaukee's governing regime when conducting advocacy, especially during the Park West campaign. It lost this ability after it began the Sherman Park Plan, as doing so could threaten its funding. Warren Braun, an alderman and later state representative, speaking in the 1990s, discussed how this change affected the organization and its community:

I think they've become pretty much a, and maybe this is bad, I don't know, pretty much an institution on the west side. And that sometimes means that you lose a little bit of your advocacy push when you become an operator of programs. And I think Sherman Park has always tried to evaluate that. When they start operating programs to do things, they then have to figure out how they still do the advocacy, how they challenge to government. And that's always been a tension with them... that the more they run programs, the more difficult it is to do advocacy, to do both.¹⁰⁴

Braun's observations speak to a fundamental constraint of the economic development nonprofit sector: that grant making often prevents organizations dedicated to eradicating the effects of systemic inequality from pursuing strategies that could effect structural change. This tenet of the neoliberal approach to urban policy did not emerge in a vacuum, nor did policymakers simply import it from the neoconservative tax revolt. One can see it in the postwar liberal policymakers who authored the Fair Housing Act and in the human relation groups that lobbied for it and similar legislation at the state level in the preceding decades. The history of the SPCA, a latter-day human relations group and early neighborhood nonprofit, makes the ideological link between these two paradigms tangible.

¹⁰⁴ Warren Braun, interview by unidentified student, March 24, 1992, SPCAOH.

Conclusion: The Undiscovered Neighborhood

An analysis of the history of the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) during the 1970s captures a host of sociopolitical and demographic changes in the Sherman Park neighborhood and in urban America. The families that founded the organization in 1971 were mostly white, middle-class, and Catholic—fairly representative of the neighborhood’s postwar population. Most importantly, they tended to view racial inequality and segregation through the lens of human relations theory, and this influenced how they responded to the perceived threats of school desegregation and blockbusting. Rather than follow their neighbors to the suburbs, they founded a nonprofit that attempted to change the behaviors of students, teachers, and real estate dealers in the community. But when these human relations-based tactics failed to get results, these families began to adopt more confrontational modes of activism while retaining many aspects of human relations methods.

A combination of middle-class respectability and Alinsky-style activism helped propel the SPCA to regional prominence in the fight over the Park West freeway. While fierce opposition to freeway expansion had made building the Park West and Stadium North routes on the west side virtually impossible, the SPCA leveraged the perceived threat to advance several “place-frames” about the Sherman Park neighborhood. These frames highlighted the neighborhood’s diversity, fragility, and ability to govern itself due to education, vocations, and activism of its middle-class residents. Through this framing, the organization transformed the freeway fight into a debate over who should have the ability to make policy and planning decisions for a given neighborhood. The group’s argument that organizations like the SPCA had

a mandate to make these decisions for their service areas helped to make way for nonprofits to take up important roles in Milwaukee's governing coalition.

During the mid-to-late 1970s, the SPCA transitioned from a grassroots organization to a grant-funded staffed agency. The SPCA's founders began to face displacement in the organization by a more diverse group of board members and staff as a result. These changes led to the SPCA embracing a "color-blind" view of integration based on complete freedom of choice in the housing market. The organization also demonstrated an increased willingness to govern its service area by enforcing laws and ordinances it viewed as necessary to implement its vision for the community. Nevertheless, the human relations ideology of the founders continued to influence the SPCA's housing programming. Both the Sherman Park Plan (SPP) and the fair housing enforcement activities of the SPCA incorporated the organization's propensity for data collection with the ultimate goal of changing individual behavior to conform to middle-class norms and postwar liberal ideals of a free housing market. These programs became extremely well-known throughout Milwaukee. The SPP continues to influence contemporary housing stock improvement programs across the city, and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC) spun off from the SPCA as a result of its first successful fair housing suit against several real estate agencies. MMFHC remains active to this day. However, these programs were not enough for Sherman Park to overcome the systemic inequalities faced by contemporary urban neighborhoods with large populations of color.

On August 13, 2016, police shot and killed Sylvile Smith, a 23-year-old Black man, after he fled from a traffic stop in Sherman Park at the intersection of North 44th Street and West Auer Avenue. Smith's shooting immediately drew protestors, leading to an uprising and clashes with police throughout the day. At 10:15 p.m., a BP gas station at the corner of North Sherman

Boulevard and West Burleigh Street that discriminated against Black customers was set on fire.¹ A BMO Harris bank branch and four other businesses also burned before order was restored at around 2:20 a.m.² Protests would continue to flare up and turn violent for another day until the city imposed a curfew for youths and sent in the National Guard.³

Like similar events across the country in the years after the first Black Lives Matter protests, the Sherman Park uprising called attention to the ways in which systems of oppression continue to limit the rights, opportunities, and public goods available to African Americans, in spite of the achievements of many Black individuals. In its aftermath, JoAnne Sabir, a business owner based in Lindsey Heights, a nearby neighborhood, partnered with local developer Juli Kaufmann to raise money for a way “to revamp the area” and “build community” in Sherman Park.⁴ The foundation they set up ultimately raised \$4 million over two years, with investors ranging from the City of Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Economic Development Commission to the Vice President of the Milwaukee Bucks. This capital allowed the pair to purchase and restore the BMO building, turning it into a public market and incubator for local Black businesses, appropriately named the Sherman Phoenix, that opened at the end of 2018.⁵ At the same time, however, the city increased funding for police in order to bring crime down and bolster

¹ Allison Dikanovic, “Unrest in Sherman Park: Three Years Later: The Weekend,” *Milwaukeeenns.org*, Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service, August 12, 2019. <https://milwaukeeenns.org/2019/08/12/unrest-in-sherman-park-three-years-later-the-weekend>.

² Dikanovic, “Unrest in Sherman Park”; Kay Nolan and Niraj Chokshi, “Milwaukee Shaken by Eruption of Violence after Shooting by Police,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2016.

³ Dikanovic, “Unrest in Sherman Park”; Niraj Chokshi and Christopher Mele, “National Guard Deployed in Milwaukee amid Unrest over Fatal Police Shooting,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2016.

⁴ John Eligon and Robert Gebeloff, “Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2016; Talis Shelbourne, “Sherman Phoenix Rises from Wreckage of 2016 as Showcase of Entrepreneurship,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 30, 2018.

⁵ Shelbourne, “Sherman Phoenix Rises from Wreckage.” The Sherman Phoenix has become extremely successful as an incubator and gathering place for Milwaukee’s Black community. This chapter is not attempting to detract from these successes.

“neighborhood resilience,” also started a modest program targeted towards developers for rehabbing foreclosed homes in Sherman Park.⁶ City leaders described both efforts as attempts to stop further disinvestment and deterioration in the neighborhood.⁷

This more recent chapter of Sherman Park’s history illustrates how much has changed and how much has stayed the same in the neighborhood since the 1970s. Sherman Park continues to function as a locus of community activism and occupy a prominent place in Milwaukee’s political imagination and discourse. The city’s leadership still pays attention and reacts to events in the neighborhood. But the aftermath of the Sherman Park uprising, despite the benefits it brought to the neighborhood, also exemplifies the policy failures in which the neighborhood remains enmeshed. The political climate in 2016 was one in which discussions of institutional racism and systemic inequality were widespread. However, it is telling that the local solutions pushed for by community and municipal leaders in Milwaukee to the Sherman Park uprising centered around philanthropy, housing stock improvement, and enforcing behavior change on the part of the neighborhood’s residents in the name of economic development rather than trying to directly dismantle these systems through abolition or by expanding social services. It proves difficult to discern what effect, if any, these initiatives have had on reducing the chance that another young Black man in the neighborhood could face the same fate as Smith.⁸

⁶ Anne Bonds, “Refusing Resilience: The Racialization of Risk and Resilience,” *Urban Geography* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1288-1289.

⁷ Bonds, “Refusing Resilience,” 1289.

⁸ Anne Bonds, “Race and Ethnicity I: Property, Race, and the Carceral State,” *Progress in Human Geography* 43, no. 3 (2019): 574-583; Jenna M. Loyd and Anne Bonds, “Where do Black Lives Matter? Race, Stigma, and Place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 4 (2018): 898-918. At least 14 individuals have been shot and killed by Milwaukee police since 2016. Steven G. Brandl, *An Analysis of Use of Force Incidents in the Milwaukee Police Department in 2023* (Fire and Police Commission, 2024), 23; *An Analysis of Use of Force Incidents in the Milwaukee Police Department in 2022* (Fire and Police Commission, 2021), 22; Steven G. Brandl, *An Analysis of Use of Force Incidents in the Milwaukee Police Department in 2021* (Fire and Police Commission, 2022), 21; Steven G. Brandl, *An Analysis of Use of Force Incidents in the Milwaukee Police Department in 2020* (Fire and Police Commission, 2021), 17; Steven G. Brandl, *An Analysis of 2018 Use of Force Incidents in the*

It is also notable that by the 2010s, Sherman Park was envisioned as a Black community. The fair housing scholar Juliet Saltman, writing about the SPCA in the late-1980s, considered the organization a success. However, even the staff she spoke with at the time conceded that the SPCA only succeeded in slowing down the process of white flight, racial turnover, and disinvestment in the neighborhood, rather than substantially changing its course.⁹ This trajectory did not shift in successive decades. In 1980, three out of the eleven census tracts in the SPCA's original service area were majority Black.¹⁰ That number increased to six in 1990, nine in 2000, and ten in 2010.¹¹

The tension that emerged as the SPCA's neighborhood and mission evolved, however, nearly tore it apart. Between 1977 and 1984, the organization went through eight executive directors.¹² Carol Holton, who served as president during the late 1970s, attributed this chaos to the organization's failure to find steady revenue sources, especially as government funding for social services began to decline during the 1980s. She also pointed to ongoing disputes amongst the SPCA's stakeholders over their vision for the organization:

There was, I think, kind of a battle going on between those on the board who felt that SPCA ought to be true to its traditional strengths, which were dealing with larger macro issues like integration and housing practices and to a lesser extent the freeway, and those who felt that the approach that they ought to be concentrating on was a more of a community organizing perspective that focused on block clubs and empowerment of people rather than a sort of an identification of issues and working on those particular issues... And there was also, I think, a kind of a struggle between those who represented the more middle-class point of view and those who represented a point of view that said, the issues of poorer people, predominantly in the eastern section of the neighborhood, ought to be what's dominating our thoughts and our activities.¹³

Milwaukee Police Department (Fire and Police Commission, 2019), 15; *An Analysis of 2017 Use of Force Incidents in the Milwaukee Police Department* (Fire and Police Commission, 2018), 13.

⁹ Saltman, *A Fragile Movement: The Struggle for Neighborhood Stabilization* (Greenwood Press, 1990), 158.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Population by Race*, 1980.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Population by Race*, 1990; U.S. Census Bureau, *Population by Race*, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, *Population by Race*, 2010.

¹² Saltman, *A Fragile Movement*, 131.

¹³ Carol Holton, interviewed by Mark Shelstad, April 6, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

Despite the relatively smooth transition from a human relations-based model to a neighborhood nonprofit during the late 1970s discussed in Chapter 3, Holton's quote suggests that tensions relating to this transition continued to simmer during the following decade. This demonstrates how the SPCA's Grant Boulevard-based founders resisted losing control of the organization to a more diverse group of board members and staff. While the SPCA's founders had created the Sherman Park neighborhood in the public's imagination, they could not control how the neighborhood's residents steered the organization going forward. William Malone, who served as executive director from 1981 to 1983, characterized these arguments as those between an activist board of directors and harried staff in a difficult fundraising climate:

I think you had a board of directors that didn't really understand the proper role of a board of directors in organizing in, in running an organization... One of the problems that we were facing was that there was a stagnation, and, in fact, a small loss of overall support for the operations of the association... There was, I think, on the part of a great many of them... a failure to understand the need for stepped up grassroots fundraising and for them to play a role in it. At the same time, they wanted to organize a network of block clubs. They wanted to do block watches. They wanted to have the annual housing survey. As a result, they tended to overwork their staff. And a number of people who left because I think, frankly, they just burned out.¹⁴

Even as the SPCA weathered this crisis, the block grant-funded Sherman Park Plan continued to endure as its largest and most recognizable program, resolving these disputes in practice if not theory. By the 1990s, many of the group's founding families had relocated, either to the neighborhood's western portion or to the suburbs.¹⁵

The SPCA remains embedded in the neighborhood it created. While disputes remain about the degree to which the organization represents the interests of its constituents, these

¹⁴ William Malone, interviewed by unknown student, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

¹⁵ John Conway and Rita Conway, interview by Nicola Sherril, March 23, 1992, SPCAOH Records; Marilyn Johannsen and Walter Johannsen, interview by unidentified student, March 24, 1992, SPCAOH Records.

disputes no longer fall along racial lines.¹⁶ African American participation in the organization began to increase during the 1980s, and a majority of the organization's current leadership and staff are Black.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the need for social services and support in the neighborhood is greater than ever. As documented by Chelsea Wait in her dissertation, Sherman Park was badly affected by the subprime mortgage crisis in 2000s and 2010s (figure 13), which drastically reduced the community's homeowners and housing stock.¹⁸ But while homeowners no longer make up a majority of the neighborhood's population, the SPCA's programs continue to favor this segment of residents, as does the neighborhood's discourse.¹⁹

¹⁶ Informal conversations between author and community members; Chelsea Wait, "Neighborhood Care: Structural Conditions, Class, and Aesthetics in Sherman Park, Milwaukee, WI, 1980-2020" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024).

¹⁷ "Staff & Board," [shermanpark.org](https://shermanpark.org/about/staff/), Sherman Park Community Association, 2025.

¹⁸ Wait, "Neighborhood Care," 69.

¹⁹ Wait, "Neighborhood Care," 130.

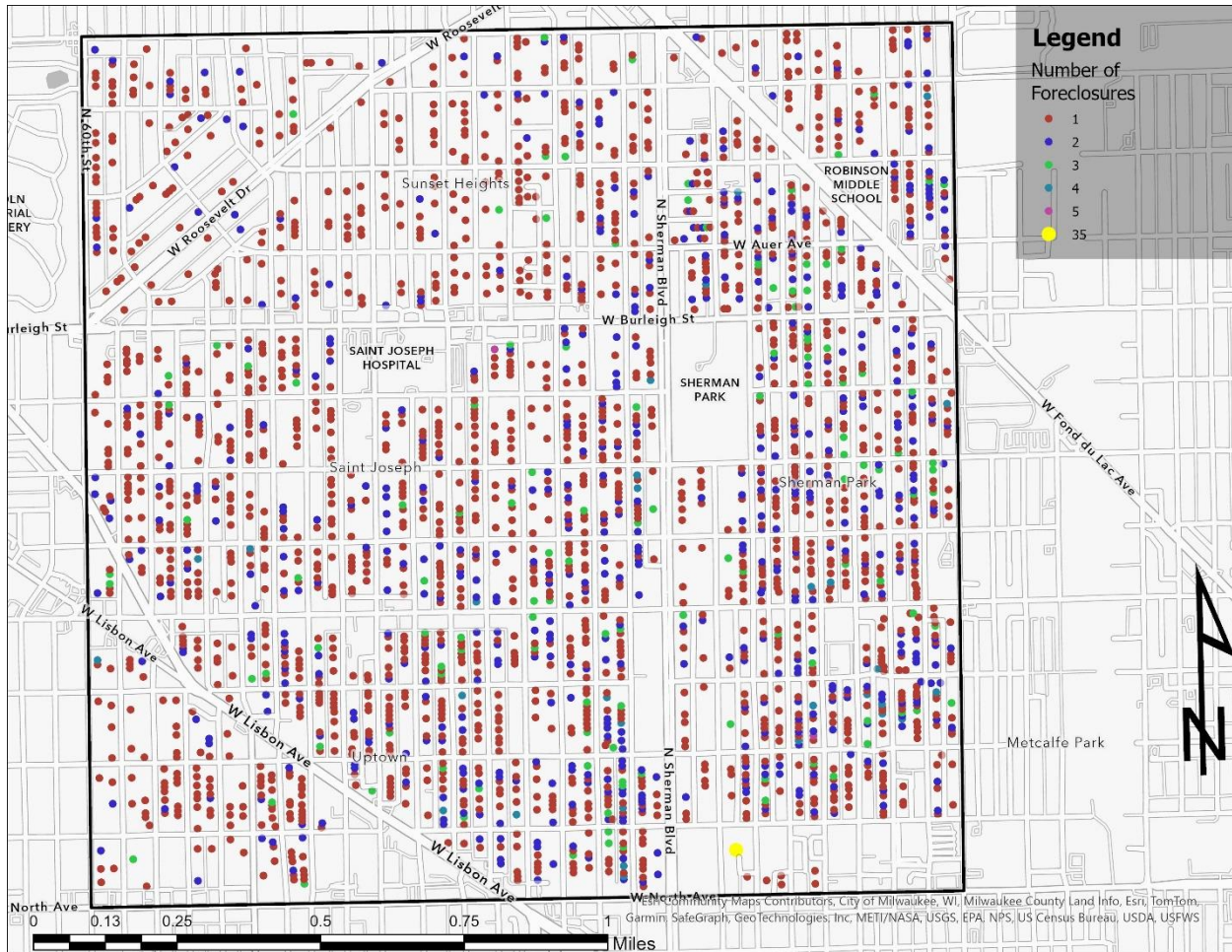


Figure 13. Map of foreclosed properties in the Sherman Park Community Association’s original service area, 1995-2024 (Data from John Johnson)

The attitudes and approaches of the Grant Avenue families that founded the SPCA laid the groundwork for both the beauty and tragedy of contemporary Sherman Park. Ironically, however, the SPCA may have had a greater impact outside of its neighborhood than within it. The housing stock improvement programs of Milwaukee’s CDCs like Rooted and Rising, Riverworks, and Walnut Way all share the DNA of the Sherman Park Plan. The Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council is, of course, a direct descendent of the SPCA. All of these groups perform valuable work and have improved the lives of many residents in their respective communities. But the scholarly consensus on the past half-century of urban policy in America is

that we remain no closer to eradicating racial inequality today than during the 1968 passage of Fair Housing Act,

And yet at time of writing, these organizations and their programs face defunding. The SPCA, as soon as it received its first block grant, downplayed the role of the government in enabling the organization to perform its work.²⁰ It was not alone. Today, it seems likely that the majority of Americans do not understand the extent of the nonprofit sector's dependence on federal grantmaking. This ignorance has made it all the easier for the current presidential administration to cancel grants to any organization or program it deems hostile to its political agenda. Soon, the only remaining federal presence in cities may be through the carceral state—one of the few modes of government the administration seems determined *not* to abolish. If, or when, groups like the SPCA cease operating, disinvested neighborhoods will lose a flawed, yet powerful vehicle to represent their interests at all levels of American politics.

The coming years may see a renegotiation of the federal government's role in civil society, a retreat like no other in living memory. When the dust settles and we behold this new landscape, it will be up to us to remember the political possibilities that can result from residents coming together to fight for their communities and their values. The story of the SPCA epitomizes this potential. Despite the critiques made by this thesis of many of the organization's members' views and methods, it is undeniable that the Johannsens, the Conways, the Valents, Carol Holton, Ace Backus, Fred Freiberg, and their peers succeeded beyond their wildest expectations in reimagining and reshaping their neighborhood and, by extension, their city. What could we achieve if we take their examples to heart?

²⁰ Jan Gottfredsen and Ira Jean Hadnot, "Calls Bring Helping Hands," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 23, 1977.