


Planning in Neighborhoods with Multiple Publics: Opportunities and Challenges for Community-Based Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract

New York City is the quintessential immigrant gateway, and its transformation to a majority “minority” city is evident in the complex demography of its numerous neighborhoods. Based on detailed case studies of two neighborhoods undergoing significant development pressures that pose a dramatic reshaping of community life, this article examines whether New York City community boards serve as a “pivotal” public arena to mitigate racial tensions and meaningfully engage diverse stakeholders including immigrants in neighborhood planning. The case studies of Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens demonstrate that community boards do not necessarily engage all stakeholders in meaningful or sustained ways and are limited in advancing race relations in a challenging socioeconomic context. This article substantiates how community-based nonprofit organizations are essential to the institutional landscape of immigrant neighborhoods by engaging multiple publics in community planning.

Keywords

immigrants, community boards, neighborhood planning, zoning, community-based nonprofit organizations

Introduction

New York City is a quintessential immigrant gateway, and its transformation to a majority “minority” city is evident in the rich and complex demography of its numerous local neighborhoods. The “strong multi-minority presence” in major U.S. metropolitan areas—an outcome of unprecedented levels of Asian, Latino, and Caribbean immigration—has decidedly rendered the black-white paradigm an insufficient framework to approach racial dynamics and relations in the contemporary post-civil rights era (Pastor 2003). Local community institutions and nonprofit organizations mediate tensions and conflict that arise from rapid and dramatic demographic transitions. These conflicts stem from actual and perceived competition for resources such as municipal services, political representation, and employment and housing opportunities as well as changes in neighborhood composition and quality. As sites of daily exchange and interaction, immigrant global neighborhoods are the local spaces where the possibilities for a multiracial democracy will be established (Oliver and Grant 1995).

The decentralization of municipal governance through community boards as venues for citizen inclusion and voice has a long history in New York City (Rogers 1990). Evolving from early citizen planning councils of the 1950s, NYC’s

political landscape includes fifty-nine community boards that serve an official, albeit advisory, role on city service delivery, land use and zoning, and budgetary matters (Marcuse 1990). Mediating the local and daily lived consequences of economic restructuring, demographic and racial shifts, and progrowth urban policies has increasingly dominated the work of NYC’s community boards. This article is a qualitative case study of two multiethnic, multiracial immigrant neighborhoods undergoing significant development pressures that threaten to dramatically reshape neighborhood life and local spaces. Referred to as NYC’s “satellite” Chinatowns, Brooklyn’s Sunset Park and Flushing, Queens are, in fact, quite distinct in their racial and class composition, neighborhood typology, and relationship to the urban political economy (Hum 2002a; Zhou 2001; Smith 1995). Common to both neighborhoods, however, are recent efforts to

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reconcile racial tensions stemming from new developments and transformative demographic change.

Through detailed case studies, this article investigates whether community boards can serve as a “pivotal” public arena that facilitates cross-racial dialogue and meaningfully engages stakeholders, including immigrant groups, in neighborhood planning and policy decisions. Since concerns fueling dissension and potential conflict center on land use and development initiatives, community boards are the noted political sphere where grievances are aired and public debate becomes framed or crystallized around particular concerns and issues. While community boards legitimate citizen participation in policy-making processes and local governance, the experiences of Sunset Park and Flushing underscore that community boards do not necessarily engage all stakeholders in meaningful or sustained ways and are limited in advancing race and ethnic relations in a complex and challenging socioeconomic context.

Participating in land use and development review may be the most significant and lasting way that community boards shape their local neighborhoods (Pecorella 1989). As a body of politically appointed individuals, community boards are often extensions of the political agenda of borough presidents and city council members. The Sunset Park and Flushing case studies demonstrate that community boards often lack autonomy and grassroots accountability and fail to promote the inclusion of disenfranchised community members such as immigrants. Community boards often function as a form of “symbolic inclusion” and are rarely able to affect progressive redistributive outcomes. Based on case studies of Sunset Park and Flushing, this article finds that the key institutions and initiatives that have engaged multiple publics, and enhanced their technical capacity to participate in planning and land use discussions, are community-based nonprofit and civic organizations. In the case of Flushing, instrumental actors included a young Asian American philanthropic community foundation. Because nonprofit community-based organizations “operate between markets, households, and the state,” they may be integral to cultivating a migrant civil society that supports immigrant incorporation and activism (Theodore and Martin 2007, 271).

Without strong, active, community-based organizations that provide alternative public or “invented” spaces, large segments of diverse neighborhoods would not be heard at the district or community board level. In addition to providing a venue for political voice and representation, community-based nonprofits help reframe racialized tensions from a human relations perspective that calls for mutual respect and tolerance of cultural differences to one that focuses on equity and structural racism. Nonprofit community organizations and leaders provide vital resources, including organizing skills and professional networks, to moderate conflicts through dialogue and education and, more importantly, to

advance a critical analysis of the economic and political conditions that shape urban development and inequality.

Methodology

For this study on community boards and nonprofit community-based organizations in two of NYC’s most diverse immigrant neighborhoods, I employ a qualitative case study methodology based on the principles and practices of action research and participant observation. Simply defined, action research is a “bottom-up approach to inquiry which is aimed at producing more equitable policy outcomes” (Silverman, Taylor, and Crawford 2008, 73). Its core principles include reflexive inquiry, local knowledge, collaboration, case orientation, and social action goals (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993). As a “paradigm of praxis,” action research utilizes social science methodologies to understand lived socioeconomic and political conditions in order to solve real problems (O’Brien 1998). Over a four-year period from 2005 to 2008, I engaged in extensive fieldwork in Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens. I attended and participated in numerous community board meetings, public hearings and forums, and meetings with local nonprofit organizations and city agencies including the NYC Department of City Planning. I conducted in-depth interviews with community board members, district managers, elected officials, city agency representatives, nonprofit organizational staff and members, and other neighborhood stakeholders. These interviews and participant observations were recorded in field notes and provide the primary materials for the Sunset Park and Flushing case studies.

Between 2006 and 2007, I served as a university-based consultant for the Ford Foundation–funded Program to Advance Inter-Community Relationships (PAIR) sponsored by the Korean American Community Foundation (KACF). As one of three consultants, my responsibility was to advise KACF and participate in planning, organizing, and facilitating three PAIR intercommunity forums.¹ While all three consultants worked on the first two forums, I was the only consultant to work on the third event in Flushing, Queens.² As a member of the organizing team for the Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop, I helped frame the goals and structure of the event. I also participated in developing a survey instrument and analyzing the findings. The survey was sent to a list of invited Flushing community leaders. The survey objective was not a random sampling of community attitudes but, rather, was intended to elicit the views of key “opinion leaders” and identify the “hot button” issues to help determine workshop activities and goals. I attended and participated in the Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop and assisted in synthesizing completed feedback forms.

Secondary data from the U.S. Census provides a comparative profile of Community Boards 7 in Brooklyn (Sunset

Table 1. Community Boards and Select Sociodemographic Variables, 2007

	Community Board 7, Queens	Community Board 7, Brooklyn
Total population	243,795	148,417
Neighborhoods	Flushing, Bay Terrace, College Point, Whitestone, Malba, Beechurst, Queensboro Hill, and Willets Point	Sunset Park and Windsor Terrace
Borough president	Helen Marshall	Marty Markowitz
New York City Council members	John C. Liu, District 20; Tony Avella, District 19; and Julissa Ferreras, ^a District 21	Sara M. Gonzalez, District 38
Racial composition		
Non-Hispanic white	90,578 (37%)	35,117 (24%)
Asian	101,986 (42%)	37,511 (25%)
Latino	40,830 (17%)	68,225 (46%)
Black	6,572 (3%)	4,923 (3%)
Other	3,829 (2%)	2,641 (2%)
Median household income ^b		
Non-Hispanic white	\$60,128	\$57,017
Asian	\$47,573	\$30,405
Latino	\$50,213	\$36,085
Black	\$44,969	\$41,250
Poverty rate ^c		
Non-Hispanic white	6,321 (7%)	4,097 (12%)
Asian	13,424 (13%)	11,468 (30%)
Latino	4,956 (12%)	17,863 (27%)
Home ownership rate	44,036 (50%)	14,027 (31%)

Sources: 2005-2007 American Community Survey and Mayor's Community Assistance Unit.

Note: The geographic boundaries of the census unit, Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA), approximate community boards but are not codeterminous. CB 7 in Queens is PUMA 4103, and CB 7 in Brooklyn is PUMA 4012. PUMAs are the smallest geographic unit for the most recent American Community Survey (ACS) data (2005-2007 data).

^aJulissa Ferreras was elected in a February 2009 special election to replace Hiram Monserrante, who won a seat in the New York State Senate.

^bMedian household income is in 2007 inflated-adjusted dollars.

^cPoverty rate was not calculated for blacks because the sample size was too small.

Park) and Queens (Flushing). Table 1 summarizes select sociodemographic variables that point to significant differences in race and class composition. Queens CB 7 is considerably more populous, and its geography includes three City Council districts with the largest neighborhood—Flushing—comprising a critical electoral base responsible for the first Asian elected official in the New York City Council, John C. Liu.³ Despite being labeled “satellite” Chinatowns, both community boards are characterized by high levels of racial and ethnic diversity. Asians make up the largest racial group at 42 percent of Queens CB 7 followed by non-Hispanic whites (37 percent). Defined by significant numbers of Chinese, Koreans, and South Asians, Queens CB 7's Asian population is ethnically diverse. Flushing's historically black community comprises only 3 percent, while Latinos have steadily increased to a full 17 percent of Queens CB 7's population. In contrast, the largest racial group in Brooklyn CB 7 (Sunset Park) is Latino (46 percent), followed by Asians who have now edged out non-Hispanic whites as the second largest racial group. Brooklyn CB 7's Latino population is ethnically diverse, as a historically Puerto Rican population has expanded to include Dominicans, Mexicans, and Central Americans; the Asian population is overwhelmingly Chinese.

Socioeconomic measures such as the median household income and poverty rate indicate that Flushing is comparatively more affluent than Sunset Park. Racial disparity persists in both community boards, however, as Asians typically earn less and are more likely to be poor than their non-Hispanic white neighbors. It is telling that the poverty rate for Asians and Latinos in Brooklyn CB 7 is notably higher than the city-wide average of 20 percent. Homeownership is a foundational middle class asset, and Flushing's home ownership rate of 50 percent clearly positions it as a solidly middle-class neighborhood. In addition to the census data profile, NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and Department of City Planning (DCP) materials and official plans provide important context and background for the two case study community boards. Figure 1 situates their location in the spatial geography of New York City.

New York City's Community Boards

In her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs (1961, 121) formulated three neighborhood typologies—street, district, and city level—and proposed that the district level is most effective for self-governance because



Figure 1. New York City community boards
Map prepared by Dr. Laxmi Ramasubramanian.

it mediates between the powerless street based neighborhoods and the all-powerful city. The political infrastructure of NYC includes fifty-nine district-level community boards, the most decentralized or local body of urban governance. As district-level entities, community boards are seen as venues for formalizing local everyday concerns and elevating these issues to the city level for political action and/or policy formulations. Evolving from community planning councils of the 1950s, community boards became a part of municipal government through a 1975 New York City Charter provision that formalized citizen participation in the public review of land use and zoning amendments. Community boards review development proposals and their decisions to reject or support zoning changes are officially part of the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) along with the City Planning Commission, borough presidents, and City Council. Subsequent to 1975, revisions to the New York City Charter expanded the powers

of community boards to engage in proactive comprehensive neighborhood planning through the 197-a provision.

The geographic boundaries of community boards are coterminous with service agency districts such as sanitation and fire. The populations encompassed by community boards range from 100,000 to 250,000 residents, and several community boards including Queens CB 7 are now reaching the upper limit, which is comparable to the size of numerous small U.S. cities including Portland, Maine and Irvine, California. Each community board is comprised of up to fifty unpaid members who serve staggered two-year terms and are appointed by the borough president with half nominated by the City Council member(s). A minimal paid staff consisting of a district manager and office assistant(s) provide clerical and administrative support.

Although advisory and largely reactive, community boards represent a local body politic whose broad jurisdiction covers

land use planning and zoning review, monitoring municipal services delivery, and conveying local priorities in the city expense and capital budgets (Pecorella 1989). Marcuse (1990, 155) noted that although these “voices of local democracy” have no decision-making authority, the dynamic conditions of the real estate market particularly in the past decades has meant that community boards “attained a real power through no doing of their own, but simply because events on their turf were suddenly of real importance to someone else.” An illustration of their importance is indicated in a *New York Times* article, “Local Boards Now Crucial to the Process of Change,” published just four years after the 1975 New York City Charter revision expanded the role and influence of community boards in land use and planning processes (Shaman 1979).

As a politically appointed body, community boards are constrained in their ability to act independently; this important limitation was recently illustrated in two highly publicized incidents involving the removal of community board members who opposed the development agendas of elected officials. In spring 2007, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz removed nine CB 6 members for their outspoken opposition to the Atlantic Yards project, a mega-development project proposed by Forest City Ratner for Downtown Brooklyn that will overwhelm surrounding brownstone neighborhoods (Newman 2007). A similar action was taken by former Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion when CB 4 members opposed the Yankee Stadium redevelopment.⁴ Carrion’s rationalization of his refusal to reappoint these members provides a fairly transparent statement on the function of community boards: “My very clear expectation is that these appointees are there to carry out a vision for the borough president and the leadership of this borough, and that’s simply what I expect” (Kappstatter 2006).

Community boards are also criticized for their parochial interests, emotional reactions, and lack of technical expertise (Rogers 1990). Nevertheless, as the official “voice of the people,”⁵ community boards are integral to urban planning processes and city governance, and there are current initiatives to improve community boards as well as expand their influence. Notably, as a candidate for Manhattan borough president, Scott Stringer conducted a 2005 study to substantiate the urgency for community board reform.⁶ Among his findings was the lack of uniform criteria for member appointments, long-term vacancies, conflicts of interest, funding (mis)use, and uneven performance and accountability. Upon his election, Stringer initiated a series of changes for Manhattan’s twelve community boards. He established a review board to facilitate merit-based appointments and instituted the professionalization of community boards through a community planning fellowship program that assigns a New York–area graduate student to provide technical assistance.⁷ Planning advocacy groups such as the Municipal Arts Society have spearheaded a Campaign for

Community-Based Planning to advance recommendations for further revision of the New York City Charter to provide professional planning and technical support and diversify community board membership to “more fully enable democratic participation in land use planning and decision-making.”⁸

Bloomberg’s Five Borough Economic Opportunity Plan

New York City is undergoing a sustained period of urban growth and transformation marked by numerous mega-development projects, a cornerstone of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s and former deputy mayor Dan Doctoroff’s real estate–driven economic development strategy.⁹ Reminiscent of the scale and “top-down” planning style of Robert Moses manifested in the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, rezoning, eminent domain, and public subsidies to “incentivize” private sector development are now essential and ubiquitous tools of city building (Fainstein 2005). The Bloomberg administration is distinguished by a comprehensive urban planning and economic development approach that seeks to fulfill the spatial needs and place-making of a postindustrial city (Lander and Wolf-Powers 2004). The primary strategy for this property-led revitalization is the city’s land use tools of contextual zonings, upzonings, and downzonings (Barbanel 2004).

As the first municipality in the country to adopt comprehensive and citywide zoning regulations, the 1916 NYC Zoning Ordinance established basic land use types (e.g., residential, manufacturing, and commercial), as well as building setback and height criteria, which were expanded and revised in 1961. Since then, NYC’s zoning text has been largely updated in a piecemeal fashion—neighborhood by neighborhood—and represents a cumulative sea change in land use and development policy. To date, the Bloomberg administration has overseen more than one hundred rezonings affecting approximately one-fifth of the city’s land mass excluding parks. These rezonings created commercial value through the upzoning of “blighted” and underutilized areas including 368 blocks of Jamaica, Queens; in other cases, they preserved neighborhood quality and character by downzoning or granting landmark status to majority white middle-class suburban-like neighborhoods in the outer boroughs of Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island (Santucci 2007; Murphy 2006; Lieberman 2004).¹⁰

Bloomberg’s progrowth policies are rationalized in part by the need to accommodate a projected population increase of one million new New Yorkers by 2030, an increase comparable to the population of major U.S. metropolitan areas such as San Jose, California or Detroit, Michigan.¹¹ Integral to Bloomberg’s vision is the establishment or expansion of regional economic centers in each of New York City’s five boroughs. This five-borough economic development strategy is notable for the transformative scale of several key

development initiatives. The remaking of Northeast Queens is guided by the NYC EDC's *Downtown Flushing Framework*, which seeks to revitalize and reconnect Flushing to its waterfront and redevelop neighboring Willets Point.¹² Despite decades of gross disinvestment evident in the lack of basic infrastructure such as a sewer system and paved roads, Willets Point, known as the "Iron Triangle," managed to thrive as an industrial cluster of auto-body-related businesses (chop shops) and manufacturing uses including the nation's largest distributor of Indian food products.¹³ NYC EDC's plans for Willets Point were highly contested because of the city's threat to use its eminent domain power to assemble the lots necessary for a new retail and entertainment neighborhood (with a pedestrian bridge connecting it to Flushing) to complement the nearby and newly completed multi-million-dollar Citi Field ballpark.¹⁴ In Brooklyn, Forest City Ratner's highly controversial \$4 billion Atlantic Yards project also involves eminent domain to assemble a twenty-two-acre site for a proposed mixed retail and commercial development that includes a sports arena, mixed income housing, and a hotel.

New York City's development agenda coupled with a growing and diversifying population has resulted in an outcry against overdevelopment in local neighborhoods and the increasing use of regulatory land use tools such as historic preservation to protect and preserve local neighborhood spaces (Scott 2005). Everyday concerns about new development, illegal construction activity, and out-of-scale and out-of-context land uses are voiced at community boards. Concerns about development "externalities" such as traffic congestion, infrastructure strain, overcrowded housing, and degradation of neighborhood life barely disguise the intense anxiety over new immigration and demographic shifts.¹⁵ As the first stop in city government for public review of permit applications, zoning variances, and new development proposals, community board meetings frequently witness anxieties about neighborhood change and overdevelopment. Although advisory, community boards are powerful mediators because it is at the district level of urban governance that daily tensions or conflicts become legitimated as community issues and are resolved or (re)articulated for policy deliberation at the city-wide level.

Negotiating Neighborhood Change

Recent research on immigrant incorporation has established that the representation gap produced by the waning presence of neighborhood-based mainstream political organizations has been filled by multiple and varied civic and nonprofit institutions including labor and advocacy groups, workers centers, and social service organizations (Wong 2006; Jones-Correa 1998). Increasingly, the nonprofit sector is key to materializing a political voice and the civic engagement of immigrants, including those who are undocumented.

Political actions and protests around immigrant and worker rights illustrate the success of local organizations in mobilizing a migrant civic society.¹⁶

Neighborhood-level nonprofit organizations provide critical pathways to immigrant incorporation. Studies illustrate how community nonprofits provide culturally sensitive social services and assistance, especially for linguistic minorities (Cordero-Guzman 2005; Hess, McGowan, and Botsko 2003). Min Zhou et al. (2000, 8) argue that social relations based on family and friendship are often disrupted during migration, and ethnic-based nonprofit organizations provide "an important physical site for new immigrants to re-orient themselves, to interact with members of their own group, new and old, and to re-build social networks and a sense of community." While dense, informal ethnic networks and ethnic-specific nonprofit groups and service providers distinguish immigrant neighborhoods and collectively represent the strength of bonding social capital among immigrants and the institutions that serve them, community building in multiracial immigrant neighborhoods also requires nonprofit organizations and leaders to engage in bridging social capital (Putnam 2000).

Asian and Latino immigrants are most likely to live in racially diverse neighborhoods where neighbor dynamics and exchanges frequently represent a front line in the daily contestations on the processes and consequences of ethnic succession in local residential and commercial spaces (Hum 2004). As critical intermediary organizations between immigrant populations and civic society at large, nonprofit organizations are vital in mediating community resources, representation, and relationships (Lamphere 1992). Since the local neighborhood context for nonprofit organizations is increasingly complex, identifying and promoting common interests and concerns to multiple publics is critical. In multiracial immigrant neighborhoods, nonprofit organizations need to engage in bridging social capital and collaborative relationships. As Sandercock (2003, 9) writes, "A truly multicultural society not only encourages and supports community organizations within immigrant groups, but also works to incorporate immigrants into wider, cross-cultural activities and organizations."

The demographic restructuring of local neighborhoods coincides with a revitalized period of economic growth and capital influx evident in massive real estate transactions and developments. In some immigrant neighborhoods, the presence of ethnic banks, realtors, and developers represents an emergent immigrant growth coalition that contributes to rising property values, real estate speculation, and gentrification pressures (Kwong 1996; Lin 1998; Light 2002). One result of the growing immigrant visibility has been heightened racial tensions as the influx of Asian capital is viewed as financing out of context developments that degrade neighborhood character and quality (Grimm 2007). The sources of racial tension and conflict center on anxiety

Table 2. Case Study Actors and Catalyst Land Use Issue

	Queens Community Board 7: Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop	Brooklyn Community Board 7: Sunset Park rezoning
Catalyst land use issue	Proposed three-story Korean spa	Proposed twelve-story residential building
Developer	Steven Chon	Michael Wong
Nonprofit organizational actors	Korean American Community Foundation (KACF); Ford Foundation	Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors (SPAN); Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA)
Elected officials	John C. Liu, District 20; Tony Avella, District 19; Borough President Helen Marshall	Sara M. Gonzalez, District 38; Borough President Marty Markowitz
Community board district manager and chair	Marilyn Bitterman; Eugene T. Kelyt	Jeremy Laufer; Randolph Peers

regarding differences in immigrant experiences and aspirations, patterns of housing development, and changes in the neighborhood economy. Research on reactions to immigrant settlements in North America document (1) fear of exclusion and displacement; (2) threat of engulfment, “invasion,” or “takeover”; (3) threat of loss of neighborhood character, heritage, and traditions; (4) transformation of the physical environment in terms of out-of-scale, noncontextual development and obstruction of views; and (5) perception that immigrants are not good neighbors due to cultural differences in housing styles, land use practices, and strategies for affordable home ownership (Mitchell 1993; Harwood and Myers 2002; Harwood 2005; Smith 1995; P. S. Li 1994; W. Li 2005; Luk 2005; Saito 1998). Clearly, the daily life of local multiethnic, multiracial neighborhoods is fraught with escalating tensions about the influx of immigrants and how their presence is transforming neighborhood spaces.

CBs 7 in Queens and Brooklyn are illustrative of New York City neighborhoods undergoing sweeping demographic shifts and development initiatives. Immigrant Asian capital is a primary factor in facilitating the changing neighborhood economy and character, and its presence has racialized local tension and reactions to urban growth. The following case studies exemplify how the “ecology of civic engagement”¹⁷ is increasingly complex as new actors including Asian developers and property owners complicate relations of race and class. In Flushing and Sunset Park, community boards proved to be ineffective venues in mediating conflicts about race, capital, and neighborhood planning and development. Nonprofit organizations were necessary intermediaries by creating a public space for community dialogue and intervention. Moreover, nonprofit collaborations in Sunset Park advanced efforts to advocate for equity in land use and planning and assert working poor Asian and Latino immigrant rights to the neighborhood. Table 2 lists the catalyst land use issue, the nonprofit community-based organizational actors, elected officials, and community board members who were involved in the case studies of Flushing and Sunset Park.

Flushing: An Intercommunity Dialogue on Race, Immigration, and Development

As in many local New York City neighborhoods during the 1970s, national retail stores such as Caldor’s that had historically anchored local downtown economies fled the inner city. The influx of Asian immigrants, however, infused the area with new sources of human and financial capital that both revitalized and transformed Flushing’s Main Street (Smith 1995). From the start, Asian immigrant settlement in Flushing was distinct from Manhattan’s Chinatown and Brooklyn’s Sunset Park in terms of class and ethnicity. Flushing’s economic revitalization was driven by Taiwanese and Korean immigrants who established numerous small businesses and ethnic banks and invested in real estate holdings that they marketed to overseas compatriots. The massive influx of transnational capital and high rates of business and home ownership led one researcher to title his book on Flushing *Chinatown No More* (Chen 1992).

Asian capital investments have advanced from small business enterprises to major real estate development initiatives. Several major public-private development projects such as Queens Crossing, Flushing Commons, and Sky View Parc demonstrate Flushing’s integral link to New York City’s regional economy as a center for international capital, office development, and tourism (Gregor 2006; Dworkowitz 2004; New York State Comptroller 2006). Taiwanese-born Michael Lee, an owner/founder of TDC Development LLC, a subsidiary of an international real estate company, the F&T Group, developed the high-end Queens Crossing office and retail complex. In partnership with the Rockefeller Development Corporation, TDC Development LLC is the designated developer for Flushing Commons, which seeks to dramatically transform downtown Flushing, in part by “bring(ing) back American bred businesses” (Rehak 2005). Currently a 5-acre municipal parking lot accommodating more than one thousand cars daily, the Flushing Commons site slated for mixed commercial, retail, and residential development with a 1.5-acre town plaza was the historic center of Flushing’s African American community. The Macedonia African

Methodist Episcopal Church anchors the northeast corner of the municipal parking lot and serves as a potent reminder of the site's preurban renewal use. In addition to these Flushing developments, TDC Development LLC is among the developer finalists for the proposed Willets Point project (Lombino 2006).

Situated on a former Con Edison brownfield, Sky View Parc is emblematic of future development along Flushing's waterfront. Developer Muss Corporation initially called the project Flushing Town Center, to reference a repositioning of Flushing away from its Asian ethnic-dominated downtown towards its future facing the Flushing River and the massive Willets Point redevelopment site. Essentially a gated community, Sky View Parc offers eleven hundred units of luxury condominiums; multiple corporate retailers; and privatized recreational spaces including playgrounds, tennis courts, and green space on an elevated above-ground platform.¹⁸ As components of EDC's *Downtown Flushing Framework*, these three commercial development projects seek to advance a "new vision of Flushing" consistent with Mayor Bloomberg's postindustrial New York economy based on entertainment, media, tourism, and financial services.

Flushing, Queens also made history as a part of New York City's Council District 20, which elected the first Asian American to public office in the city and state at large in 2001. Even as a candidate, John Liu was dogged by vocal complaints about neighborhood change, specifically the lack of English on commercial storefront signage in downtown Flushing. One of the first things he did as an elected official was to convene a task force to determine if a city law was necessary to require English on signs (Fanelli 2003; Kilgannon 2004). Community stakeholders including City Council member Tony Avella reasoned that the lack of English language signs hinders police and firefighter efforts in locating specific ethnic businesses. Reminiscent of the late-1980s efforts to legislate English-only ordinances in Southern California communities such as Monterey Park, intense anxiety about the growing immigrant presence is expressed in the search for legal statutes that regulate the built environment by using public safety as a pretext (Saito 1998).

Racial tensions due to perceived negative "externalities" associated with the "Asianization" of Flushing such as increased traffic congestion, population density, infrastructure strain, and the dominance of ethnic businesses have been documented for more than a decade (Smith 1995). A *New York Times* reporter cited former City Council member Julia Harrison's provocative comment that Asian immigration represented "an invasion not assimilation." Reflecting the sentiments of her longtime constituents, Harrison's comments depicted Asians as criminals and real estate speculators, and a public apology was demanded (Duggar 1996; J. Chung 1996). More importantly, despite important advancements including the election of an Asian American City Council member, these sentiments continue to resonate

in Flushing today. Heightening anxiety about "Asians taking over" among longtime residents are expressed in frequent conflicts over land use and real estate development as accusations of building and housing code violations, unscrupulous developer practices, lack of environmentalism and civic engagement, poor business conduct, and exclusionary commercial signage dominate daily discourse in local neighborhood settings.

In May 2006, an attorney representing Korean developer Steven Chon appeared before the Queens CB 7 for a public hearing on a zoning variance his client sought to develop a three-story Korean spa in a mixed used area. The proposed "physical culture establishment" served as yet another flashpoint in the anxieties around immigrant-driven development and neighborhood transformation. Although Korean spas are common for health treatments, the community board's reaction was hostile, and concerns about prostitution and degradation of neighborhood life abounded.¹⁹ Chon later recounted in a *New York Times Magazine* article featuring the new spa that the community's reaction "made people think we were opening a whorehouse" (McNeil 2008). Public records noted concerns with parking and traffic generation although news coverage alluded to community apprehension about "unsavory" activities.²⁰ CB 7's strong objections were premised on the proposed spa's location outside of Downtown Flushing proper where residents have come to "know what to expect. They may not like it but they've come to expect it."²¹ In other words, Asian-sponsored development will be tolerated as long as the projects are located within the geographic confines of the downtown center.

Despite neighbor complaints and a lawsuit filed by City Council member Avella, the spa opened in May 2007. According to City Council member Liu's staff, this issue pushed Flushing's race and ethnic relations to a "crisis point," as was indicated by the number of complaints received at their office. With the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance,²² City Council member Liu thought it opportune to reaffirm tolerance and sought to organize a community forum on intergroup relations.

Strategic Bridging and Institutional Partners

The KACF was established in 2002 to promote a culture of philanthropy in the Korean American community. In its four short years, KACF funded numerous social service and community-based organizations throughout New York City including in Flushing, Queens. In early 2006, the Ford Foundation awarded KACF a grant to organize a series of city-wide intercommunity dialogues on the state of race relations in New York City with an emphasis on Ford's deputy director of community development's formulation of "shifting sands" neighborhoods—neighborhoods undergoing accelerated demographic and economic changes driven in part by immigration. Although KACF views itself as a "bridging

institution” across generational and class divides, it had no prior experience or expertise in organizing workshops on race relations. Nevertheless, the paradigmatic role of Korean and black conflict in urban America gave KACF significant symbolic capital to lead this effort. The intercommunity dialogue in Flushing was KACF’s third forum.

In contrast to the two earlier citywide forums with heavy Ford Foundation involvement and leadership in setting the agenda, participants, and speakers, Ford’s deputy director of community development did not attend the Flushing planning meetings but instead ceded to neighborhood leaders and experts. City Council member Liu’s staff asked a former chairperson and active member of Queens CB 7, also an expert and educator on corporate race relations, to lead the planning and organization of the forum. In the interest of building broad political support, Liu sought Queens Borough President Helen Marshall’s endorsement and involvement.²³ Marshall’s community and cultural coordinator as well as a member of her Queens General Assembly participated in the forum planning.²⁴ Additional members of the Queens General Assembly were later recruited to serve as discussion facilitators at the Flushing forum.

Framing a Dialogue on Race and Neighborhood Development

The objective of the Flushing intercommunity forum was to bring together a diverse and representative group of neighborhood leaders including CB 7 members, civic associations, religious institutions, social service agencies, and nonprofit organizations—in other words, “opinion leaders” or those in a position to influence the attitudes and views of constituents and policy makers. A key forum goal for City Council member Liu was to lead the group in an in-depth discussion aimed at differentiating between real and substantive issues (i.e., those that can be acted upon through policy, legislative, or programmatic actions) versus cultural misperceptions (i.e., individual biases). The organizers hoped not only to provide a public space to air concerns but to advance an intercommunity dialogue that identifies a set of concrete actions to reconcile “structural differences” premised on race, immigration, language, and class (A. Y. Chung and Chang 1998, 95).

To help organize the format for the Flushing forum, a questionnaire was prepared and mailed along with the invitation from City Council member Liu and Queens Borough President Marshall. Invited participants were asked to return the questionnaire with their RSVP. A total of twenty-nine questionnaires were received from approximately ninety mailed invitations, and these responses were instrumental in framing the topics for the intercommunity forum.²⁵ The short questionnaire asked four basic questions on (1) the main issues that influence neighbor relations in Flushing for better or worse, (2) the frequency and venue of interactions with

Flushing residents of similar and different ethnic backgrounds, (3) forum expectations, and (4) optional demographic information on race and age. Among those who responded to the optional demographic questions, eleven were men and thirteen were women; the average age was fifty-eight years old; seven indicated they were white; seven indicated they were Black or African American; and five indicated they were Asian (including South Asian, Korean, and Taiwanese).²⁶

The top issues that influence Flushing neighborhood relations were grouped into broader categories such as language, culture, community, and diversity. Although the issues were not surprising and there was significant thematic overlap, it was notable that whites expressed the greatest concern with language, noting it more frequently than black or Asian respondents. The perception that lack of English language proficiency hinders communication was elaborated by one respondent who wrote, “Businesses using limited or no English leads to a hostile environment.” For black respondents, the issues that influence Flushing relations were wide-ranging but centered on themes of respect, tolerance, fairness (“fair housing accommodations for all”), and obeying laws. The issue of law enforcement was also raised by a white respondent who wrote, “Why the Department of Buildings cannot enforce any laws on the multiple dwellings [*sic*]. Flushing is drowning with overpopulation and inadequate services and schools to accommodate all the people.” On the other hand, Asian respondents listed need for services, concerns regarding discrimination, and lack of interaction between ethnic-based organizations as the main issues that shaped Flushing neighbor relations.

Based on the questionnaire responses, the intercommunity forum was planned around five tables (with ten or so participants) each focused on a topic: (1) Language and Communication; (2) Community: Interactions and Organizations; (3) Living in a Multi-cultural Society; (4) Issues of Diversity, Discrimination, and Stereotyping; and (5) Housing and Development. Each table discussion was facilitated by a volunteer to solicit responses to a set of prepared open-ended questions that included (1) How can you describe or recognize this issue? and (2) What are your feelings about this issue? Since the forum goals emphasized identifying actionable steps to help reduce racial tension, participants were instructed to brainstorm on (1) components of a vision for the future that might represent a resolution to the issue and (2) concrete or action steps to realize their vision. After about ninety minutes of table discussion, all participants reconvened in a large group to share two or three components of a shared future vision and some actionable steps to help realize that vision of Flushing’s future.

Attendance at the October 23, 2007, Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop, “Building Bridges for Our Future,” exceeded expectations, and the number of participants at all five discussion tables was greater than ten.

Opening statements by City Council member Liu and Queens Borough President Marshall sought to set a tone for the evening by underscoring the need for honest and open discussion while affirming and celebrating Queens' unprecedented racial and ethnic diversity. The evening's discussions were indeed difficult and highly contentious. In some instances, observers were asked to jump in to help mediate or counter hostile views expressed by participants. After the individual table discussions, the groups shared their visions and actionable steps for planning Flushing's future. Reiterating the concerns expressed in the questionnaire responses, the five discussion groups emphasized the "public responsibility" of a common language for residents and store owners who should be able to communicate in English, the need to improve the quality of life for all people in Flushing and to provide jobs and housing for longtime Flushing residents (including Flushing's small but vocal African American population), and the urgency of controlling overdevelopment by enforcing laws that govern housing construction and protection of green spaces.

At the end of the evening, participants were asked to fill out an evaluation form, and of the thirty-five collected, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive regarding the relevance of topics discussed and the representativeness of the community leadership present. By setting aside time and space for constructive engagement in the difficult topics of race, immigration, and neighborhood change, the event helped to moderate escalating tensions in Flushing. As one participant wrote, "People have strong opinions . . . there is hope for community." Responses to suggestions for improving future seminars were particularly encouraging, with numerous requests to maintain the format and hold more frequent sessions.

Cosponsorship by two philanthropic organizations, the KACF and the Ford Foundation, legitimated a "neutral" public space to bring elected officials, community leaders, and stakeholders together. Foundational support was not insignificant as it provided the rental fee for a large meeting room in Flushing's Sheraton LaGuardia East Hotel, refreshments, and modest stipends for the forum organizer and consultant. More importantly, the Ford Foundation's pioneering work in asset building and community development worldwide is well known and respected. Its partnership with a local ethnic-based community foundation, whose mission is to promote bridging activities, helped elevate the significance of the ground-level conflicts that shape daily life in Flushing, Queens. The endorsement of the Ford Foundation and KACF indicated that Flushing may be a barometer of future race and ethnic dynamics in urban America. The strategies Flushing stakeholders employ to coexist may hold importance for other neighborhoods.

There were no expectations that these entrenched issues would be resolved in one meeting, and the high level of participation and interest underscored the necessity of a space

and time separate from community board meetings to engage in discussion that could "strengthen the relationships between diverse community leaders through increased communication and identify steps that would further negotiation and bridging of differences within the community."²⁷ Although a structured venue such as the Building Bridges forum did, in fact, provide some release of escalating racial tensions, the tenor of the evening could result in a hardening of racial fault lines if follow-up workshops on actionable steps and continued affirmation of a common vision for Flushing do not take place in a timely manner. Without structured venues for continued engagement and discussion, a public airing of such sentiments as white anxieties of an Asian invasion, black perceptions of exclusion by an immigrant group, deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes, and a pervasive criminalization of immigrants could result in merely reinforcing and legitimating these biases.

The intercommunity dialogue sought to publicly affirm Flushing's historic tolerance and peaceful coexistence among a multitude of religions, cultures, and racial groups. The KACF's and Ford Foundation's underwriting and involvement were critical in inventing a public space independent of CB 7. However, the Flushing forum is just a first and small step toward building bridges and new understanding among local civic leaders, especially since a subtext of the evening's discussion was to "neutralize" challenging cultural and linguistic differences by upholding the primacy of educating immigrants to behave more like the mainstream. In other words, immigrants should get along by speaking English, obeying laws, and interacting with an English-speaking majority. Although similar neighborhood development trajectories and anxieties prevail in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, not only did community-based nonprofits create an alternative space to deescalate racial and ethnic tensions, but Sunset Park's migrant civil society advanced an analysis of local power relationships and the necessity of a Latino-Asian collaboration to counter shared conditions of economic and social inequality.

Sunset Park: The Politics of Rezoning and Equitable Development

By the time of its designation as a federal poverty area in the late 1960s, Sunset Park's transition to a majority poor Puerto Rican neighborhood was nearly complete. Its housing stock, however, included a sizable brownstone belt that helped sustain a small but stable population of white home owners during the period of neighborhood decline and its late-1980s revitalization driven by a massive influx of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, China, and Mexico. As one of New York City's most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Sunset Park is once again at a crossroads as gentrification pressures intensify due to two socioeconomic trends (Collins 2006). Young white professionals and artists who

can no longer afford neighboring Park Slope are settling in once-dilapidated areas near Greenwood Cemetery and defining new neighborhood formations (e.g., Greenwood Heights) in the northern section of Sunset Park. A second gentrifying force is mobilized by an immigrant growth coalition composed of Chinese developers, realtors, and ethnic banks in the development of condominium projects scattered throughout the neighborhood. The working poor Puerto Ricans who did not abandon the neighborhood and the immigrant groups who helped revitalize its local economy are increasingly at risk of displacement due to real estate speculation and rising housing costs in Sunset Park.

In early spring 2007, an “as of right” development proposal for a twelve-story residential development stirred community uproar about yet another example of out-of-context development on a residential block with a landmarked historic building (Zraick 2007). Proposed for a city block of two- and three-story residential row houses, the condominium project would rise more than one hundred feet and obstruct the view from Sunset Park past a local landmark, St. Michael Church’s egg-shaped dome, toward the upper New York Harbor.²⁸ That the developer and contractor were Chinese further infused overdevelopment concerns with racialized comments about a “Chinese invasion.”²⁹ These comments expressed fears that transnational real estate investments are a form of money laundering and that neighborhoods will degrade as new owners subdivide their condo units and rent to numerous undocumented immigrants. To protest overdevelopment, a community coalition quickly formed, the Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors (SPAN), composed largely of white home owners and Latino residents (tenants and home owners), and proceeded to gather hundreds of signatures for a petition calling for zoning protections. A civic association, Concerned Citizens of Greenwood Heights, was consulted on “guerilla tactics” to monitor the development site and harass the contractor and developer at first suspicion of illegal work activity.³⁰ SPAN’s planned march and rally, however, was preempted by an agreement negotiated by City Council member Sara Gonzalez in which developer Michael Wong promised to reduce the height of his proposed development project, stating his desire to be a good neighbor.³¹ A few weeks later, at a March 27, 2007, Sunset Park town hall meeting attended by Mayor Bloomberg and NYC Department of City Planning Director and City Planning Commission Chair Amanda Burden, the city announced an expedited contextual rezoning study for Sunset Park with an end of the year completion deadline.³²

The victory in reducing the building size was tempered by the splintering of SPAN into two factions. The white home owners regrouped as the Sunset Park Alliance for Rezoning (SPARZ), whose single-focused goal was to downzone Sunset Park’s side streets to protect the predominant housing stock of two- and three-story row houses and preserve the views of upper New York Bay. The second faction retained

the organizational name of SPAN, whose leadership was now made up of Latino activists including a one-time opponent of City Council member Gonzalez, union organizer David Galarza. The cause of the split was ostensibly over the language used in the public acknowledgement of City Council member Gonzalez’s role in brokering a compromise with developer Michael Wong. However, the division between white home owners and Latino residents reflects fundamental and irreconcilable differences in organizing strategies and short- and long-term goals in the rezoning of Sunset Park. SPARZ sought to work with the neighborhood’s power base including elected officials and CB 7, as its objectives can be met by the narrow parameters of a zoning study set by the NYC DCP. On the other hand, SPAN sought to mobilize a broad-based participatory dialogue on race and class equity in urban planning processes and development policy. City Council member Gonzalez proceeded to hire the Pratt Center for Community Development to conduct a parallel study based on two public meetings cosponsored by CB 7 to prepare a community-based report for a “balanced zoning” proposal for Sunset Park.

In response to DCP’s rezoning study, several local Chinese property owners, developers, realtors and other business owners formed the Eighth Avenue Improvement Association (EAIA) to advance Sunset Park’s growth and development. EAIA also collected signatures but their petition protested any downzoning of Sunset Park. As developers and owners invested in rising property values and maximizing opportunities for residential and commercial development, EAIA pushed a progrowth agenda premised in part on Mayor Bloomberg’s population projection increase of one million new New Yorkers by 2030.³³ At various public meetings, EAIA founder and representative Denny Chen, owner of Ritz Realty, claimed an additional ten thousand Chinese will settle in Sunset Park within the next few years. In making a case to maintain Sunset Park’s current permissive zoning, EAIA sought to cultivate ethnic solidarity and unity among the Chinese community by presenting their intentions to enhance and promote real estate speculation and business development as strategies for community improvement.³⁴ While segments of the Chinese community remain doubtful that this development trajectory will trickle down gains for the working poor majority, EAIA found a supportive ear among CB 7.

The Bloomberg administration has utilized rezonings to preserve neighborhood residential quality while accommodating growth and development along commercial avenues and near transportation nodes. This zoning principle provides a means to reconcile the demands of two potentially opposing Sunset Park factions: white home owners’ desire to protect the neighborhood’s architectural fabric and waterfront views and the Chinese immigrant growth coalition’s intent to maximize opportunities for commercial and residential development. These goals are complementary and

consistent with the Bloomberg administration's rezoning strategy because contextualizing residential zoning to conform to the existing character of the low-rise row houses on Sunset Park's side streets will satisfy home owners, while upzoning commercial avenues will accommodate new high-rise developments.

Rejecting the narrow focus of an expedited rezoning, SPAN and the Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) viewed overdevelopment as symptomatic of broader trends and challenges in sustaining the neighborhoods of NYC's immigrant working class. Moreover, remediation measures proposed by the rezoning were deemed inadequate. For example, upzoning the commercial avenues would simply facilitate the gentrification trajectory southward through Sunset Park, potentially displacing thousands of low-income Chinese and Latino residents and small businesses (Moses 2005). Resisting the simplistic racialization of Chinese immigrants as responsible for "out-of-scale" development, SPAN and CSWA formed an alliance to promote shared community development concerns. CSWA is a nonprofit workers' center with a long and rich history in organizing workers and building successful cross-racial collaborations in the struggle for social and economic justice in immigrant multiracial neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side (Kwong 1994). Based in Manhattan's Chinatown, CSWA established an office in Sunset Park in 1995 to counter the proliferation of sweatshop conditions in relocating Chinatown garment factories.³⁵ Rather than deliberate zoning recommendations and push for minor modifications, CSWA and SPAN's coalitional effort pressed for a comprehensive and inclusive planning process that would address systematic inequities that have long shaped neighborhood quality and life chances for working poor Latinos and Chinese in Sunset Park.

Latino and Asian coalitions are not new to Sunset Park, although they tend to be issue-oriented and short-term.³⁶ Nevertheless, the formation of a vibrant migrant civil society comprised of community organizations, workers' centers, churches and faith-based organizations, and hometown associations provides the critical "free spaces" necessary for forming collective identities and "shared analyses of socio-political problems" (Theodore and Martin 2007, 271). Sunset Park's Latino and Chinese community leadership recognized the potential strength of their coalition in refocusing the zoning debate on procedural equity and equality in outcomes (Maantay 2002). The shared experiences of marginalization in established political venues including the community board, high rates of working poverty and rentership, and the prospect of residential displacement formed the basis for a Latino-Asian coalition. SPAN and CSWA reached out to their constituents who lack voice on the community board, and SPAN held a bilingual planning summit to hear community concerns and issues on Sunset Park's present and future conditions.³⁷

A key goal of the Latino-Asian coalition is focused on building community capacity to engage and participate in neighborhood planning to preserve Sunset Park as a multi-racial immigrant working-class neighborhood. SPAN and CSWA rejected the narrow parameters of DCP and CB 7's rezoning study and encouraged a broader planning process for greater equity in agenda setting and transformation in the economic and political power relationships that define neoliberal city planning practices. Nonprofit organizations, specifically worker centers and community activist organizations, focus on transformative populism defined as building capacity and skill in marginalized communities rather than redistributive populism (Kennedy 1996). This Latino-Chinese alliance has developed a set of demands for a more comprehensive approach to neighborhood planning and greater equity in development outcomes by setting realistic income guidelines for mandatory inclusionary housing provisions, by locating underutilized and potential development sites such as the air rights over subway tracks for neighborhood expansion, and by pointing out the limitations of community board representation.

As a neighborhood, several Sunset Park organizations including CB 7 are supportive of community-based planning and have endorsed the Municipal Arts Society's Campaign for Community-Based Planning. However, serious limitations hamper CB 7 as a public space for formulating a planning agenda that advances the concerns and needs of working poor Asians and Latinos. Most importantly, CB 7 is distinguished by an acute representational gap. Latinos and Asians constitute the majority of the Sunset Park rezoning area but have minimal representation on CB 7.

Sunset Park's rezoning study area constitutes the largest neighborhood represented by CB 7, which also includes the largely white affluent neighborhoods of Windsor Terrace and South Park Slope. According to the 2000 census, the Sunset Park rezoning study area represents 65 percent of CB 7's total population and is overwhelmingly Latino and Asian. In 2000, non-Hispanic whites made up nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of CB 7's population but only represented 12 percent of the Sunset Park rezoning study area. However, CB 7 membership continues to be dominated by non-Hispanic whites, and this representational disparity persists despite the facts that the fastest growing population group in CB 7 is Asian, and Latinos remain its largest population group. Currently, there are only four Asian CB 7 members from Sunset Park; all are men and include two local business owners, a developer, and a controversial CEO of an established multi-service agency. While there is token Asian representation, the interests of Sunset Park's majority working class is clearly absent on CB 7. Another critical concern is CB 7's geographic boundaries. The eastern border of CB 7 is 8th Avenue (Sunset Park's Chinese commercial avenue), which means that one side of the avenue is in CB 7 and the other is in a different community board area, CB 12. A previous

study conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund on neighborhood boundaries found that Chinese residents define Sunset Park's boundary further east than 8th Avenue (Hum 2002b). Utilizing 8th Avenue as the boundary for Sunset Park's rezoning study area effectively disenfranchises the Chinese community; however, both DCP and CB 7 refuse to recognize this fact since the rezoning study would become more complicated if it involved more than one community board. Comprehensiveness and respect for neighborhood boundaries essential to a meaningful discussion on community development have fallen by the wayside in the interest of an expedited rezoning.

A smart and balanced approach to zoning requires comprehensive planning, and this approach has not taken place in Sunset Park. Zoning functions to create or increase property values and ultimately benefits real estate developers and home owners. As noted, the Bloomberg administration views rezonings as a strategy to facilitate economic revitalization and new development including affordable housing.³⁸ Even though the production record for affordable housing premised on bonus densities is mixed, the current Sunset Park rezoning discussion has not generated any substantive provisions to prevent gentrification and displacement or to preserve the neighborhood's multiracial, multiethnic, working-class qualities. The stated rezoning goals of contextualizing new development to fit neighborhood quality and preserve waterfront views may, in fact, result in exclusionary zoning as working poor Latinos and Asians will find it increasingly untenable to remain in or move to Sunset Park.

CB 7 did not provide a "pivotal" public space to negotiate an equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of growth and development. In fact, raising concerns about racial equity was derisively described by one Brooklyn CB 7 member as "waving the Latino flag."³⁹ Embedded in an established political process that continues to marginalize immigrant stakeholders, CB 7 embraced DCP's rezoning proposal to protect home owners' neighborhood quality (i.e., low-rise row houses and waterfront views) while permitting "as of right" market rate condominium development on the commercial corridors. The collaboration between CSWA and SPAN created the necessary public space to formulate and voice a critical analysis of overdevelopment based on panracial working-class concerns. Community-based nonprofit organizations, especially those that comprise a migrant civil society, present a more viable venue for making policy claims and articulating alternative development visions to sustain immigrant neighborhoods.

Conclusion: Building Community in Multiethnic, Multiracial Neighborhoods

Flushing and Sunset Park are dynamic immigrant neighborhoods facing the challenges of community building under conditions of globalization. These neighborhoods exemplify

the tensions integral to remaking the spatial and social structures of a postindustrial city that is also distinguished by high levels of persistent inequality. In this political economic context, a vibrant migrant civil society composed of various nonprofit organizations and supported by community foundations is critical to cultivating the leadership and invented public spaces for comprehensive and inclusive neighborhood planning and development. Community-based nonprofit organizations provide vital resources to mobilize immigrant incorporation and actions for social and economic justice.

The Flushing and Sunset Park case studies demonstrate the multiple intersections of race and class in diverse neighborhoods and the complex task of democratizing urban planning and local governance. Sunset Park is defined by stark class divisions among its Asian stakeholders. Asian developers and property owners sought racial solidarity with the majority working poor to support progrowth activities. Recognizing common class interests between Asians and Latinos, two community-based nonprofit organizations built an alliance to protect Sunset Park as an affordable and sustainable working-class neighborhood. Since the overwhelming majority of Sunset Park's Asian and Latino immigrant populations are not property owners, the rezoning objectives were not framed around preserving neighborhood quality and waterfront vistas. CSWA and SPAN engaged in political action to push the community board discussion and agenda towards inclusion and redistributive equity.

As Table 1 indicated, Flushing is a largely middle-class neighborhood with a high level of home ownership. Asian-owned businesses and developers are key driving forces of private investment. Asian transnational capital is instrumental to establishing Flushing as a regional economic center. However, Flushing's transformation supported by Bloomberg's neoliberal policies is resisted by some community stakeholders due to the ethnic quality and perceived predatory nature of Asian commercial development that generates "visual graffiti,"⁴⁰ limited retail options for American consumers, and distinctive enclaves. In Flushing, the struggle with transnational capital and development is expressed as a racialized struggle for community identity. In both cases, community boards failed to provide a public forum to reconcile race and class contestations about neighborhood change, new economic and political actors, and community planning for equitable land use and development.

A 1974 *New York Times* article on community boards noted that "perhaps the best argument for the boards' existence is that they provide a point of view in planning decisions that might not otherwise be expressed" (Selver 1974). In this regard, NYC's approach to decentralizing urban governance is successful because community boards have become integral to the land use and development review process. However, community boards as the official structure for citizen participation in planning and local governance represent a form of

“bureaucratic enfranchisement” (Fainstein and Fainstein 1982, 12), as members are appointed by elected officials and deemed “city officers.”⁴¹ Although the New York City Council electoral representatives for Flushing and Sunset Park are Asian and Latino, respectively, community boards typically reflect the NYC electorate, which remains a largely embattled white middle class. Racial disparity is chronic, and even in diverse immigrant neighborhoods, community boards are defined by acute underrepresentation of the population majority.

Since community boards remain “the only official recognized structure for public participation in neighborhood planning,”⁴² critical review and reform of these local institutions is imperative to democratic practices and citizen engagement. Equally important to community board reforms for accountability, professionalism, transparency, and representation, global cities with large immigrant populations need to support and engage a vibrant migrant civil society composed of community-based nonprofit organizations. These organizations can create opportunities and support for immigrant integration and mobilization and broaden urban planning agendas to advance redistributive economic justice and fairness in diverse “shifting sands” neighborhoods. In Sunset Park and Flushing, activist nonprofit organizations invented the necessary public space to air grievances and “challenge the status quo in the hope of larger societal change” (Miraftab 2004, 1). In creating alternative spaces, these community-based organizations engaged in collective action that sought to advance alliances beyond improving cross-cultural communication and representation to tackling substantive issues of equity, planning and decision-making power, and immigrant rights to the city.

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Notes

1. A condition of the Korean American Community Foundation (KACF)–Ford Foundation grant portion for the intercommunity forums was to work with three advisors—myself; Professor Hector Cordero-Guzman; and Benjamin Butler, principal of Community Development Associates, Inc.
2. The first KACF–Ford Foundation intercommunity forum was “The New Majority: Building Relationships and Collaborations in Changing Neighborhoods,” May 1, 2006, at CUNY’s Baruch College; and the second forum was “Different Voices, One Community: New York City Perspective,” October 21, 2006, at Queens Museum of Art.
3. John C. Liu was elected to the citywide office of NYC Comptroller in November 2009.
4. In February 2009, Adolfo Carrion was appointed the director of a new White House Office on Urban Policy by President Obama.
5. Interview with Lynda Spielman, member and former chair of Queens Community Board (CB) 7, June 25, 2009.
6. Scott Stringer’s 2005 study is titled “Elevating Citizen Government: A Blueprint to Reform and Empower Manhattan’s Community Boards.”
7. For information about this program, refer to [http://mbpo.org/uploads/Fellowship percent20Annual percent20Report percent 202007-2008.pdf](http://mbpo.org/uploads/Fellowship%20Annual%20Report%202007-2008.pdf).
8. The Municipal Arts Society Campaign for Community-Based Planning Web site is <http://communitybasedplanning.wordpress.com/>.
9. Refer to Mayor Bloomberg and NYC Economic Development Corporation’s brochure on Major Economic Development Initiatives at <http://www.nycedc.com/NR/rdoonlyres/2AE444E7-4FF6-407B-B4D0B9ABF045E1C7/0/InitiativesBrochure.pdf>.
10. Refer to Department of City Planning (DCP) Press Release, “Department of City Planning Certifies Sweeping Downzoning Proposal to Preserve Traditional Staten Island Residential Neighborhoods,” September 9, 2003.
11. Refer to Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030 Web site at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml>.
12. NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) *Downtown Flushing Framework* is online at <http://www.downtownflushing.com/index.html>.
13. A Hunter College Urban Planning studio counted 225 auto-repair-related businesses, of which the majority were immigrant-owned and created more than one thousand jobs.
14. Numerous organizations formed to protect Willets Point, including the Willets Point Industry and Realty Association.
15. A prime example is the blog “Queens Crap: A website focused on the overdevelopment and ‘tweeding’ of the borough of Queens in the City of New York,” online at <http://queenscrap.blogspot.com/>.
16. Citywide advocacy groups on immigrant rights, labor issues, and voting rights including New York Immigration Coalition, Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC-NY), Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA), and New York Voting Rights Consortium have been successful in mobilizing immigrants to participate in political actions and protests.
17. Marion Orr (2007, 3) defines the ecology of civic engagement as “the terms by which major community and institutional sectors of a city relate to one another and their role in the structure and function of local political regimes.”
18. Refer to Muss Corporation Sky View Parc Web site at <http://www.skyviewparc.com/>.
19. Interview with Lynda Spielman, CB 7 member and former chair, September 10, 2008. CB 7’s public hearing record notes that fourteen community members voiced concerns about the proposed Korean spa, but the public record does not provide

- detail on their concerns and only notes, “Spoke in opposition to the physical culture establishment.”
20. Refer to the following newspaper articles: Mindlin (2006), Stirling (2007), Rhoades (2007), and Tozzi (2007).
 21. Interview with Lynda Spielman, June 25, 2009.
 22. The Flushing Remonstrance was signed in 1657 by a group of Flushing settlers to defend the freedom to worship and oppose Governor Peter Stuyvesant’s restriction on the religious practices of Quakers as they were not members of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop: “Building Bridges for Our Future” was publicized as part of a series of events to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance. See <http://www.flushingremonstrance.info/>.
 23. Marshall, an African American woman, had extensive involvement in mediating racial conflict in transitioning Queens neighborhoods, which is documented in Sanjek’s (1998) *The Future of Us All*.
 24. For a description of the Queens General Assembly and its activities, refer to http://www.queenstribune.com/guides/2006_ImmigrantGuide/pages/TheRulingClass.htm.
 25. The responses were confidential in that the questionnaire did not ask for the respondents’ name. Staff separated the RSVP and questionnaire before turning over the questionnaires to the organizing committee. The responses are not a random sample and reflect the concerns of a segment of neighborhood stakeholders and leaders.
 26. No surveys were received from Latino neighborhood leaders, but they attended and actively participated in the event.
 27. From City Council member Liu’s posting of the Building Bridges forum on the Flushing Remonstrance events Web site.
 28. Refer to <http://www.forgotten-ny.com/NEIGHBORHOODS/sunset.park2/sunset1.html> for neighborhood photos and description including St. Michael’s Church and waterfront views.
 29. Comments heard at a March 1, 2007, emergency meeting at the Brooklyn CB 7 regarding the 420 42nd Street development.
 30. Refer to March 1, 2007, *New York Sun* article, “Brooklynite Uses YouTube to Battle Development,” by Eliot Brown that profiles Aaron Brashear, cofounder of Concerned Citizens of Greenwood Heights, a civic association representing residents of a new neighborhood defined in northern Sunset Park, and his videotapes of alleged illegal construction activity.
 31. Refer to “420 42nd Street Building Gets Cut in Half,” online at http://brownstoner.com/brownstoner/archives/2007/03/420_42nd_street_2.php.
 32. Refer to “Sunset Park to Enter Downzoning Olympics,” online at http://curbed.com/archives/2007/03/28/sunset_park_to_enter_downzoning_olympics.php.
 33. Refer to Mayor Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030 Web site at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml>.
 34. September 6, 2007, meeting at the New Chinese Promise Baptist church with Rev. Samuel Wong and members of his parish, Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors (SPAN) and Eighth Avenue Improvement Association (EAIA) members.
 35. Refer to CSWA Web site at http://www.cswa.org/www/our_history.asp.
 36. Refer to Hum (2002b), summary proceedings on “Redistricting and the New Demographics: Defining ‘Communities of Interest’ in New York City,” for a discussion of Sunset Park Latino-Asian collaborations including Sunset United, UPROSE organizing on environmental justice, and AALDEF and PRLDEF collaboration in political redistricting in Sunset Park.
 37. SPAN held a neighborhood summit on September 23, 2007, with a stated goal: “To find unity in the diverse voices of Sunset Park and create a plan for the future development of Sunset Park that will support families and residents.” See [http://sunsetparkzone.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2007-01-01T00 percent3A00 percent3A00-05 percent3A00&updated-max=2008-01-01T00 percent3A00 percent3A00-05 percent3A00&max-results=17](http://sunsetparkzone.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2007-01-01T00%20percent3A00%20percent3A00-05%20percent3A00&updated-max=2008-01-01T00%20percent3A00%20percent3A00-05%20percent3A00&max-results=17).
 38. Refer to 2006 interview with DCP Director Amanda Burden, available at <http://www.planetizen.com/node/21476>; and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer’s comments that the “new paradigm” of affordable housing is based on zoning and land use delivered at Asian Americans for Equality’s (AAFE’s) Community Development Conference on October 26, 2007, available at <http://www.aafe.org/index.html>.
 39. Interview with Aaron Braesher, Concerned Citizens of Greenwood Heights, October 4, 2007.
 40. Interview with Queens CB 7 district manager who used this phrase to describe downtown Flushing and the dominance of commercial signs in various Asian languages, March 30, 2009.
 41. Refer to http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/downloads/pdf/community_board_basics.pdf.
 42. Refer to Municipal Arts Society document on Suggested Changes to the New York City Charter, Submitted to the 2005 Charter Revision Commission, July 6, 2005, online at [http://www.mas.org/images/media/original/CCBP percent20Charter percent20Recs.pdf](http://www.mas.org/images/media/original/CCBP_percent20Charter_percent20Recs.pdf).

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Bio

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