# Neighborhood Governance in Portland Oregon: An Analysis of Public Involvement in Urban Planning

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Portland, Oregon is often seen as a model of participatory democracy, especially in the realm of planning and urban policy. The City of Portland has a long established system of neighborhood associations that evolved out of neighborhood activism of the late 1960s. This system has been praised as a successful model of community engagement in a time of waning public involvement and declining civil society. However, a more in-depth analysis of the history of the neighborhood association governance system reveals that there are limitations and shortcoming to this system. This paper demonstrates that the governance structure of Portland's neighborhood association system relies on political, economic and social capital to influence urban policy, and that this process—when used as the sole mechanism for social change—directly reinforces the stratification of political power between white and minority populations. This shortcoming is rooted in the neighborhood association model, or civic model, as it will be referred to in this paper. However, there are strengths to the current neighborhood association system: first, the civic model can legitimize public participation in the face of changing political leadership; and second, it can adapt as a hybrid with other participation models.

The neighborhood association system, or civic model, developed out of the neighborhood activism of the late 1960s; activism that aimed to overpower institutional change from above (e.g. large urban renewal and federal highway projects, and a number of other comprehensive planning projects) with the goal of preserving old, established neighborhoods that served as the economic and social heart of local communities. In Portland, one such project involved Interstate 5, which runs north south through central Portland. Originally, the highway was slated to run through NW Portland. However, after a large community effort—in combination with a changing local political landscape—the neighborhood succeeded in re-routing this federal project. The NW neighborhood's success in combating this large federal project has been referenced as a model example of Portland's empowering neighborhood system of local government. In the large federal project has been referenced as a model example of Portland's empowering neighborhood system of local government.

Unfortunately, the rerouting of I-5 to North Portland was not a victory for all citizens. N and NE Portland, primarily African American neighborhoods, watched as the re-routed corridor displaced and isolated large numbers of residents, affected higher levels of childhood asthma, and contributed to a general decline in social capital; all this, despite vocal and organized opposition to the plan. The I-5 corridor was not the only project that impacted the social fabric of these neighborhoods and the city of Portland in general.

The battle over the routing of I-5 brings up the question of why some neighborhood led movements are successful at opposing large-scale planning projects, while others are not. To answer this question, this paper first provides a context of analysis, rooted in social movement and planning literature. The second section of this paper builds from this theoretical framework and provides an analysis of the evolution of Portland's neighborhood association system in the larger context of the national neighborhood association movement. Included in this section is an assessment of how national social movements of the 1960s and 1970s impacted both the role and significance of public participation for the planning field. The third section of the paper strives to answer the question: is there something inherent to the structure of Portland's neighborhood association system that benefits, or better represents certain cultural and social systems of communication? In order to answer this question, a series of interviews were conducted with professionals and activists working in the public arena. In addition, in-depth analysis on the structure of the civic model was completed to portray how the neighborhood association model operates on a day-to-day basis. The fourth, and concluding section, provides a summary comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of this civic model. This section identifies (1) who benefits from this model and (2) provides recommendations for increasing

inclusion and engagement of typically disenfranchised Portland neighbors. Before continuing however, a distinction between a *model of engagement* and an *individual civil society organization* must be made. In this paper, the term *model* is used to distinguish an organizational framework from an individual organization or group. A single social movement is carried out by a diverse group of activists and organizations all using different models of engagement to achieve a single goal.

#### **Literature Review**

Dating back to the 1830's, with Alexis de Tocqueville's discussion of the American network of civil associations, public participation has long been recognized as an American Democratic tradition. Tocqueville sited the vast civil associations that Americans made in their daily life and the stabilizing effect these associations had on the democratic process. A resurgence of this idea appeared during the late 1950s with William Kornhauser's work. Kornhauser, identified as a founder of modern neo-Tocquevillean theory, differentiates society into three levels: first, the family; second, intermediate associations; and third, the relationship of the population as a whole, i.e. the state. For Kornhauser, it is this second level that distinguishes civil society. Modern academic scholars have argued that the 1950s served as the golden age of civic engagement in America, with a steady decline since. In general, the proponents of public involvement argue that public participation not only legitimizes government action, but also strengthens civic capacity at the community level, thereby strengthening the democratic process at the institutional level.

While this may be true in general, civil society and public participation is not homogenous or static. There are many models of participation used by a diversity of groups and activists that have evolved and morphed in relationship to changing political, economic, and power structures. It is not enough to say that all civil society associations and organizations are equally influential for all citizens in providing a means of engagement and opportunity for change. Civil associations must be analyzed in context of a number of influential forces in order to identify how and when civil society organizations influence the democratic process. In addition, when analyzing the value of public participation it is important to recognize that participation must not only increase the "depth" of involvement but also the "breadth". Liestner defines "breadth" as the number and range of different cultural perspectives involved in the decision making process, while "depth" is the "extent to which community members can affect the final outcome and implementation of public decision." In this case, the civic model in Portland is successful in increasing the "depth" of involvement. However, it falls short of providing an equitable "breadth" of involvement in public decision-making.

The following is a brief overview of four variables that impact the degree of influence civil society has on democratic process: (1) population change within a challenge group, (2) dynamic change between challenge group and authority or institutions, (3) organizational context within a larger social movement, and (4) the influence of individuals in power positions. No matter which model of engagement is used to affect democratic change, all of these variables influence a challenge group's ability to achieve their democratic ends. By analyzing models of engagement through the lens of these four variables one can more accurately identify how two challenge groups, using the same model of engagement, can affect institutional change to varying degrees.

The first variable that influences a challenge group's repertoire (means of action) is the change in the population of those participating in the social movement. Polletta, as cited by Clemens and Minkoff, argues that an increase in scale can provide a crisis for a challenge group that is dependent on public participation. With the Portland Neighborhood Association case study, once the repertoire of action used by the Northwest Neighborhood was institutionalized as a city-wide model of public involvement, the increase in scale lead to a breakdown in effectiveness of sustained equitable participation because of the varying cultures that it needed to serve, as well as the reliance on technical and legal information as a critical piece of involvement.

The second variable that can change the repertoire of action of a social movement group is a dynamic change between challenge group and authority. Katzenstein notes that the interaction rules at the institutional level are dependent on a challenge group's relationship to power and authority. Katzenstein discusses the importance of understanding an organization's proximity to the state when

examining its repertoire of action because there is a direct relationship between power and policy influence, <sup>xii</sup> He further argues that the closer the relationship is between a challenge group and power authority, the more that group will follow the traditional interaction rules. Conversely, the farther a challenge group is from state authority the less they follow the traditional means of interaction thereby becoming more radical.

Clemens and Minkoff present the third variable that causes social movement actors to change their repertoire of action. Drawing their conclusions from Scully and Creed's research on workplace activism, they argue that organizational context, or the relationship between challenge groups, influences the resources and strategies available to individual challenge groups. In other words, as the values of one challenge group become institutionalized, a separate challenge group—working within the same social movement—may appear more radical, or even become more radical in their repertoire of action.

As the NW neighborhood's repertoire of action became institutionalized into the city's civic model, other neighborhoods that used alternative, less social capital depended, or technically oriented means, became less influential in the public authority realm. In other words, as the City continued to work with Northwest and Southwest neighborhood associations—neighborhoods which were very technically and institutionally minded—those neighborhoods that did not approach community engagement through the same institutionalized channels, or with the same level of technical understanding, were not able to address their needs as successfully. In this case, a framework for engagement had been established, but it did not easily adapt to a diverse repertoire of action.

Lastly, it is important to note the influence that individuals in power positions have on social movements. Raeburn, as summarized by Clemens and Minkoff, notes how structural realignments in power positions can shift the balance of power between challenge groups and authority.\* This fourth variable has greatly impacted both the organizational structure and the scope of influence that the neighborhood association system has had on public involvement in Portland. In Portland, either the Mayor or one of the four city commissioners has oversight over the neighborhood association system because the individual associations are ultimately part of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI), a city bureau. This means that organizational direction is subject to frequent change (as often as every four years when bureaus are reassigned). The individual relationship of neighborhood associations to individuals in power has played a large role in not only the repertoire of action of neighborhood associations, but also their success in institutionalizing their community vision. This fourth variable continues to play an influential role on the breadth and depth of public involvement in large planning processes.

#### **Evolution of the Civic Model**

The 1960s are known for the large national social movements that swept through American culture with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam era anti-war movement, and the neighborhood organizing "revolution". These national social movements had a variety of types of challenge groups using diverse repertoires of action. This period of American history is marked as a time of radicalized activities and actors. These more radical and transformative social movements had innumerable impacts on American culture, achieving large national successes in changing both public policy and cultural perspectives. By the 1970s many of the broad accomplishments of the '60s were beginning to appear at the local level. But by this time economic instability was affecting the fabric of urban neighborhoods with the recession of 1971 and cultural ideology on the role of social movements started to change. Fisher discusses this inward turn, saying, "many thousands of neighborhood organizations, single-issue groups, and progressive political action efforts formed in response to the economic crisis." The urban problems of continued disinvestment and middle-class out-migration to newly developed suburbs were accelerated by the financial crisis of the 1970s. The federal government responded to these issues with a strategy to eliminate blight with large-scale urban renewal and federal highway projects; projects that lead, ultimately, to the displacement of entire communities. XVIII At the same time, local governments were seen as inefficient and inept at dealing with these large-scale fiscal problems. This dynamic lead the local government to cut social services.

Individual neighborhoods were left to fend for themselves while the city struggled to keep business investments that were still in the city. At the same time, ideologically, individual activists began to eschew more radical actions in their efforts to address these national urban issues that affected individual urban neighborhoods.

As individuals shifted their attention from large national movements to address more localized issues there was a filtering effect that lead, ultimately, to a fractionalization of these larger movements. This new populist movement is referred to as a groundswell movement with citizens calling for a return to power at the local level. The activists and community organizers of the populist movement "championed America's democratic mission and supported the struggles of 'the people' against the 'plutocrats'...". From their perspective the problem was that the government had gotten too big and was in the hands of too few; not a problem with the basic economic or political structure. Therefore, the solution was to organize in controlled and administered community organizations that worked within the system to return power to the local level. The neighborhood associations system served as the perfect model of involvement to fit this ideological framework. They focused on winning back power and ownership of their neighborhoods while working within the structure of the local government.

# **Case Study: The Portland Civic Model**

Portland's rise to acclaim for its participatory approach to public decision-making and urban planning has its roots in the pluralist movement of the 1970s. Starting as early as the 1950s, many neighborhoods experienced displacement as a result of large federally supported Urban Renewal Area (URA) projects. Memorial Coliseum, built in 1956, displaced the oldest part of the African American community on the east side of the river<sup>xx</sup>; The South Auditorium URA, started in 1960, eventually displaced large portions of Lair Hill, traditionally Jewish and Italian neighborhoods; and the Emanuel URA (1970-1978) wiped out the last remaining economic neighborhood center of the African American community in Portland. What is compelling about the Portland case study is not that some neighborhoods successfully battled large federal urban renewal and highway projects while other did not, but is the question of why this dynamic occurred. The following is a brief analysis of three unique districts in the Portland central city and their individual relationship to both the neighborhood association system and the planning processes.

#### The NW Experience

The Northwest District of the 1960s was characterized as a primarily white, middle-class area with older wood-frame housing that had served long-time residents and families; traditional street-car commercial strips that ran through residential areas; and industrial businesses to the north and downtown commercial to the south and east. While this area was beginning to see signs of aging, both in its housing stock and its residents, the late 1960s saw an influx of young active families—Hovey describes this as an "influx of hippies and young urban "pioneers." The NW district was the first neighborhood to develop its own city adopted neighborhood plan, and some of its residents, through this planning process, became the institutional and political leaders that pioneered the Portland neighborhood association system.

Following the national trends, these accomplishments evolved out of local, grass-roots activism against large-scale urban renewal and highway projects. The major catalyst for the development of the Northwest District Plan was the creation of a city urban renewal plan to expand the Good Samaritan Hospital in 1969 (located in the heart of the NW Alphabet district). This expansion would have razed a 16-block section of the neighborhood; an area of primarily residential and mixed-use commercial space. Within months of the plan becoming public the neighborhood had rallied together and formed the Northwest District Association (NWDA).

The NWDA was successful in fighting the initial urban renewal plan as a result of the techniques used by local neighborhood activists. Because of their professional standing, residents had a detailed and advanced understanding of the technical and legal side of planning and used this to inform their repertoire of action. The argument brought against the City and their initial urban

renewal plan used the municipal code to demonstrate that the City could not adopt a plan for a small portion of the neighborhood without first adopting a plan for the entire neighborhood. This argument, founded in legal code, carried traction and successfully slowed down the development process. It also served to gain the trust and respect of planners working on the project and thus allowed the NWDA to work closely within the power structure to craft their own neighborhood plan that represented residents' values of the preservation of old-housing stock, mixed-use commercial areas, and of limiting growth. Not only did this process serve the NWDA, but it also created a new city process; a process which led to amending the city charter to allow for the adoption of neighborhood plans (1977).xxiv

Between the years 1969 – 1977 the neighborhood also successfully organized against the I-5 federal highway project. The neighborhood capitalized on the momentum from the neighborhood policy plan and their extensive knowledge of the legal and technical parameters of the project. The NWDA's insight into power dynamics, language, and the already established relationships with city officials, furnished the organization with the political and social capital to overcome the federal highway project. What distinguishes the I-5 case is that the NWDA was able to integrate Environmental Protection Agency mandates into their argument.\*\*

The NWDA experience had lasting implications for the civic model of engagement in Portland. Not only did the neighborhood's actions lead to the institutionalization of the neighborhood association system in Portland, but those individuals involved in this effort went on to become leaders in the political structure that eventually adopted the city-wide neighborhood association system. For example: former Mayor Vera Katz was actively involved in the NWDA planning effort; Mary Penderson, an active member of the NWDA for both the neighborhood planning effort and the I-5 project not only served as a private consultant to Good Samaritan Hospital, but also was hired by the City to draft the initial ordinance that initiated the City's neighborhood system; Bud Clark, another Portland Mayor, also served as an active member of NWDA. \*\*XXXXIII\*

The fact that the NWDA interacted with planning bureau and city staff in constructive and mutually respective ways demonstrates that the relationship between the NWDA and institutional authority not only changed over time, but also influenced the NDWA's success in implementing their goals. The NWDA crafted an organization that served its members' strengths and also its' organizational position relative to institutional authority. This organizational model served as a template for Portland's civic model of engagement. In addition to these variables, NWDA capitalized on the context of political support from individuals in power at state and city levels. In 1973, Tom McCall, pushed for Senate Bill 100, which not only mandated state-wide planning with established citizen engagement requirements, but also institutionalized the concept that cities should serve as regional centers and the value of local power structures in these efforts. The NW experience not only demonstrates the evolution of Portland's Civic model of engagement, but also demonstrates how the four theoretically based social movement variables discussed above impacted the evolution of the neighborhood association system.

### The SW Experience

The Southwest experience is similar to the NW experience regarding the neighborhood's successful organization against a large city planning process. However, the dynamics do differ slightly in regards to how the four social movement variables impacted the process. The Southwest Community Plan (SWCP), which was completed in 2001, is an example of how the civic model—as a result of its institutional structure—relies on its' social and political capital to affect change within the context of large planning projects.

The SWCP process started in 1994, when the boom in the national housing market put pressure on the City to update the comprehensive plan to accommodate for higher levels of infill and new development. To accomplish this, the city planned to upzone the neighborhood to allow for higher density development. Once publicly announced, this upzoning enraged the neighborhood and led to a mobilization effort within the framework of the neighborhood association system whose goal was to preserve the values of the neighborhood—to keep it the way it was. The SW residents recognized that power was held in policy documents and "took up a city-provided 'toolbox' of zoning

policies and ordinances and applied them to their neighborhoods with focused purpose." While the relationships between residents and city officials was considerably more adversarial than in the NW experience, the citizens used their understanding of technical and legal documents, as well as their political and social capital, to affect policy change. Despite citizens outwardly disagreeing with city officials and challenging their political authority, the neighborhoods did not work to overhaul the system, but work within it to achieve their goals.

In 1998, when Vera Katz was elected mayor and took over the Bureau of Planning, the dynamic between the SW neighbors and the City changed. SW neighbors took advantage of both the change in leadership as well as the values and personal experience of this new political leader. However, the debate between the City and neighborhood activists continued for another 2 years. Finally, in 2000, the coalition of SW neighborhoods used the Endangered Species Act to end the debate when fish—which use the small creeks and streams in the SW hills for spawning—were put on the endangered species list. Hovey writes: "middle class, well educated, and typically professional [SW neighbors] had the same advantages that the leaders in Northwest did, but they seemed even more sophisticated." Both the NW and SW experiences demonstrate that the Portland civic model necessitates a high level of social and political capital to affect change at an institutional policy level.

## The N/NE Experience

North and Northeast Portland, home to the only primarily African American neighborhoods in the city, have experienced a very different history. Between 1956 and 1970 four large urban renewal and federal highway projects displaced community after community: Memorial Coliseum (1956), I-5 (1966-1970), Emanuel Hospital (1970), and the southern edge of the Freemont Bridge (1970). A long-time resident, who lived in North Portland before these large projects took place, recalls, "It wiped out the whole business district. We had restaurants, clothing stores, pharmacies... small business shops, barbershops, nightclubs... and they were all wiped out—like... a breeze just came through and we no longer exist." While not all of these urban renewal projects took place during the new populist movement of the 1970s, urban renewal projects have had a major impact on N and NE neighborhoods. In none of the cases were N or NE neighborhoods able to contend with slated projects as effectively and demonstrably as the SW and NW neighborhoods.

This is not to say that these communities were not as actively organized or as involved as the NW and SW communities; but because of the type of social and political capital that the civic model is dependent on, these lower-income minority communities faced large barriers to equitably affecting change and preserving their community values. Karen Gibson discusses the impact of the urban renewal plan for the expansion of Emanuel Hospital in 1970 on the last healthy economic heart of the African American community. While community activists worked within the civic model by engaging in the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Program (ANIP) to rehabilitate homes in their community and develop a park, this did not ensure their victory in fighting a large federally funded urban renewal project. "...citizens petitioned the city to extend ANIP activities below Freemont Street and to change the city's plan to renew the area, but city commissioners refused. The Emanuel Hospital project was in motion and could not be stopped." The civic model, while providing adequate "depth" of engagement to some communities (NW and SW), does not offer the "breath" needed to empower all communities. The Albina neighborhood was not successful in petitioning the city to stop or even modify the Emanuel Hospital project or either of the I-5 projects.

Hovey, in his analysis of the importance of language in the construction of power states: "those sociological phenomena that concepts of structure and agency have been used to organize and explain are much more about language than they are about a 'mode of production' or 'the establishment' or any of the other abstract descriptors that have been applied to the 'power structure' in the past." Hovey continues: "Social relations are crucial, but language is more so." If these statements are applied to the above discussion of the four variables that influence the success of challenge groups on social movements, then the argument is that, despite the level of significance that any of those four variables have on challenge groups, language, and a challenge group's relationship to language, is the most important factor in affecting policy change.

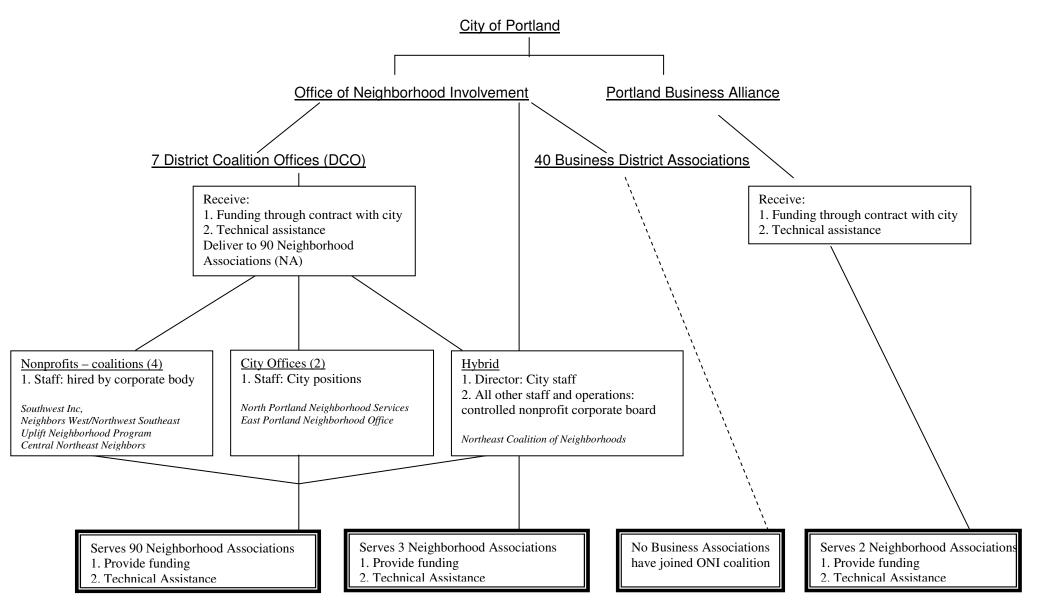
#### The Future of the Portland Civic Model and Conclusions

When comparing the N/NE experience to those of both NW and SW the question of language is an important one. Both NW and SW neighbors were able to use highly specialized technical and legal documents to win key aspects of their battle. For the NWDA, it was an environmental impact study put out by the EPA, and for SW it was the Endangered Species Act, though neither of which are directly related planning documents. While it is difficult to judge what would have happened in either of these cases had those documents not been utilized, the question should still be posed: could the neighbors in these communities have been as successful in stopping these large scale planning projects had they relied solely on standard planning language (comprehensive plans and zoning)? However, the question that *can* be answered is: what is it about the Portland civic model that limits the 'breadth' of public involvement? The answer: the reliance on culturally specific social and political capital. All of the interviews conducted for this research identified the reliance on cultural capital as one of the major weaknesses of the civic model.\*\*

The Office of Neighborhood Involvement (ONI)—the city bureau that manages the annual budget for, and provides technical assistance to, all 95 neighborhood associations—acknowledges the aforementioned shortcoming with the Portland civic model. The interviewees at ONI recognize the dependence on political and social capital, the dependence on culturally specific language, and the relevance of individuals in power positions as all impacting the "breadth" of engagement that the civic model provides to citizens. However, from 2004 - 2008, under former Mayor Tom Potter, the Office of Neighborhood Involvement was engaged in a process to evaluate the effectiveness of Portland's civic model. Out of this process came a 5-year plan, called Community Connect, which identified three goals that would ultimately improve the civic model by increasing its "breadth" of engagement.xxxvii These goals are: (1) Increase the number and diversity of people involved in their communities. (2) Strengthen community capacity. (3) Increase community impact on public decisions. This third goal is closest to the planning process due to the fact that if it were implemented it would lead to the adoption of city wide public involvement standards for all bureaus. Unfortunately—in a clear example of the influence of individuals in power—the election of a new mayor in 2009 these goals were not adopted in their entirety by the city. However, ONI, as a city bureau, has integrated the three goals into their mission, thereby ensuring that this bureau has the institutional framework to pursue integrating new hybrid approaches to the civic model.

Despite the shortcomings of Portland's civic model it does have a number of strengths that justify Portland's reputation as a model city in public engagement. First, by institutionalizing a geographically equitable system for representation all areas of the city are given a voice that has a direct link to city hall. Second, ONI and the neighborhood associations serve as critical placeholders for the continued cultural support of public engagement as a community value. Despite ONI's institutional status it continually struggles to defend the cultural value of public involvement. Paul Liestner recounted a comment made by a citizen on how money would be more wisely spent filling in potholes than investing in public involvement. Comments like these demonstrate the difficulty in defending the value of public involvement—often due to the lack of tangible outcomes.

Appendix 1: Portland neighborhood Association institutional Organization



Appendix 2: Models of Community Organizing\*\*xxviii

Model	Theory of Urban Change	Organizing the Community	Impacting the Public Sphere
Power-Based model	BUILD POWER: Urban neighborhood problems stem from the community's lack of power within the political decision-making process. Solution is to build the community's clout so that its interests are better	PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATION: Build large, formal, highly disciplined "people's" organizations to fight for the community's interests in the public sphere	CONFLICT AND CONFRONTATION: Use conflict and confrontation to demonstrate resident's power and pressure political and economic powerholders to concede to the community's demands.
Community Building model	represented within the pluralist public sphere REBUILD SOCIAL FABRIC: Urban neighborhood problems stem from the deterioration of the community's social and economic infrastructure. Solution is to rebuild the community from within by mobilizing its assets and connecting it to the mainstream economy	COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP: Build broad collaborative partnerships of diverse neighborhood "stakeholder" groups, including non-profits, businesses, residents' associations, and government.	LEGITIMACY AND COLLABORATION: Strive to influence public decision-making through consensual partnerships with government. Goal is to be recognized as the legitimate representative of the community as a whole.
Civic model	RESTORE SOCIAL ORDER: Urban neighborhood problems stem from social disorder and instability within the community. Solution is to restore and maintain the neighborhood's stability by activating both formal and informal mechanisms of social control	INFORMAL FORUM: Create informal, unstructured forums fro neighbors to meet one another, exchange information, and problem solve	ACCESSING EXISTING CHANNELS: Use official, bureaucratic channels for citizen interaction with local government to get the city services system to respond to neighborhood problems. Interact with city services personnel on ar individual to individual basis
Women-Centered model	LINK PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES: Urban neighborhood problems stem from the fact that the institutions at the core of community life aren't responsive to the vision and needs of women and families. Solution is to reconceptualize private household problems as public issues with collective solutions, and to build women's leadership roles within the community	SUPPORT TEAM: Create small teams modeled on a support group structure. Provide safe, nurturing spaces where resident can gather, provide mutual support and build shared leadership	INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: Seek to build face-to-face relationships with the staff and administration of public institutions in order to make programs and services more responsive to the needs of families
Transformative model	STRUCTURAL CHANGE: Urban neighborhood problems are the symptoms of unjust economic and political institutions. Solution is to challenge the existing institutional arrangements in order to create a more equitable society	SOCIAL MOVEMENT: Develop the ideological foundations within the neighborhood for the emergence of a broadbased movement for social change	CREATING ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS: View the public sphere as dominated by institutions that systematically disempower low-income residents. Seek to alter the dominant ideological frameworks and to change the terms of the public debate.

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