

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

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## I. Introduction

New York City is the quintessential immigrant gateway city, and its transformation to a majority “minority” city is evident in the rich and complex demography of its numerous local neighborhoods. Policy reports such as the recent Brookings Institution study substantiate a “strong multi-minority presence” in major US metropolitan areas -- an outcome of unprecedented levels of Asian, Latino, and Caribbean immigration (Frey 2006). The increasing complexity of race has decidedly rendered a Black-white paradigm insufficient to frame our approach and understanding of racial dynamics and relations in a post-civil rights era (Pastor 2003). Local civic institutions and nonprofit organizations are in the trenches mediating racial tensions and conflict that arise from rapid and dramatic demographic transitions including the actual and perceived competition for resources such as municipal services, political representation, and employment and housing opportunities as well as changes in neighborhood quality. As sites of daily exchange and interaction, these immigrant global neighborhoods are the local spaces where the possibilities for a multi-racial democracy will be established (Oliver and Grant 1995).

The political infrastructure of New York City includes 59 community boards – the most decentralized or local body of urban governance. Evolving from community planning boards of the 1950s, community boards were formally made a part of municipal government through the 1975 New York City Charter to formalize citizen participation in the public review of land use and zoning amendments. Subsequent revisions of the New York City Charter expanded the powers of community boards to engage in comprehensive planning through the 197-a provision. Each community board is comprised of up to 50 unpaid members who serve staggered two year terms and are appointed by the Borough President in consultation with the City Councilor(s). A minimal paid staff 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 jurisdiction is fairly broad covering land use and zoning issues, municipal services delivery, and input on the city budgetary process regarding local service needs.<sup>1</sup> Planning advocacy groups such as the Municipal Arts Society have spearheaded a Campaign for Community-Based Planning to advance recommendations for further revisions of the New York City Charter to provide professional planning and technical support, and diversify community board membership in order to “more fully enable democratic participation in land use planning and decision-making”.<sup>2</sup>

Urban anthropologist Roger Sanjek’s seminal 1998 book, The Future of Us All, was based on extensive ethnographic research in the Elmhurst-Corona neighborhoods in Queens, New York which had transitioned to majority ‘minority’ by the early 1980s. Sanjek (1998, 2000) argues that community boards serve as vital public spaces for defusing ethnic tensions and creating a more inclusive body politic. Based on Jane Jacobs’ formulation of three neighborhood typologies – street, district, and city level – Jacobs proposed that the district level was most

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<sup>1</sup> Mayor’s Community Assistance Unit coordinates the 59 community boards and its website includes contact information such as district manager, address and telephone number, and links to CBs with webpages.

<sup>2</sup> Municipal Arts Society Campaign for Community-Based Planning online link is <http://www.mas.org/viewarticle.php?id=1339>. Refer to 2005 statement on Suggested Changes to the New York City Charter.

effective for self-governance because it mediated between the powerless street level neighborhoods and the all powerful city (1961, 121). As district level entities or administrative districts, 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. Building the case for community boards critical role in local politics, Sanjek attended hundreds of meetings during the late 1980s and documented through retelling personal experiences, individuals who had expanded their social networks and friendships across racial and ethnic lines, emerged as neighborhood leaders, and ultimately, (re)framed common concerns on declining neighborhood conditions as a consequence of the NYC fiscal crisis rather than the massive immigrant influx (Sanjek 1998, 2000). Sanjek writes, “Without a community board there would have been no public forum at which white, black, Latin American, and Asian leaders had a place to interact” (2000, 772). Accordingly, community boards or district level forums serve as “pivotal” public spheres for critical engagement across race and ethnic boundaries, and the possibility for bridging social capital and strategic alliances, in other words, the creation of a political community (Sanjek 1998, 330).

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 and Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff’s real estate or property driven economic development strategy.<sup>3</sup> Reminiscent of the scale and “top-down” planning style of Robert Moses during the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal initiatives; 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 post-industrial city (Lander & Wolf-Powers 2004). The primary strategy for this property led revitalization is the city’s land use tool of zoning through contextual zonings, upzonings, and downzonings (Barbarnel 2004). The first municipality in the country to adopt comprehensive and city-wide zoning regulations, the 1916 NYC Zoning Ordinance established basic land use types (e.g., residential, manufacturing, and commercial), and building set back 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 – representing a cumulative sea change in land use and development policy. The Bloomberg administration has overseen numerous rezonings – creating commercial value through the upzoning of “blighted” and underutilized areas including 368 blocks of Jamaica, Queens; and in other cases, preserving 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, Liberman 2004).<sup>4</sup>

The “Manhattanization” of the outer boroughs is symbolized by mega-development proposals such as Forest Ratner City’s controversial \$4 billion dollar Atlantic Yards project that involves

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Mayor Bloomberg and NYC Economic Development Corporation’s brochure on Major Economic Development Initiatives that lists projects to achieve the Mayor’s three priorities to make NYC more livable, business friendly, and to diversify the NYC economy: <http://www.nycedc.com/NR/rdonlyres/2AE444E7-4FF6-407B-B4D0-B9ABF045E1C7/0/InitiativesBrochure.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Burden quoted in DCP Press Release, “Department of City Planning Certifies Sweeping Downzoning Proposal to Preserve Traditional Staten Island Residential Neighborhoods.” September 9, 2003.

eminent domain to assemble a 22 acre site for a proposed 850,000 sq. ft. sport and entertainment arena, 336,000 sq.ft. of office space, 6,430 units of mixed income housing, 247,000 sq. ft. of retail space and a 180 room hotel.<sup>5</sup> The Bloomberg administration's pro-growth position is rationalized in part by the need to accommodate a projected population increase of 1 million new New Yorkers by 2030 – an increase equal to the population of major US metropolitan areas such as Boston or Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup>

New York City's corporate driven development agenda and pro-growth policies coupled with an increasing and diversifying population has resulted in an outcry of overdevelopment in local neighborhoods, and the increasing use of zoning regulatory tools and land use controls such as historic preservation to protect and preserve local neighborhood spaces (Scott 2005). Everyday concerns about new development, illegal construction activity, out of scale and out of context land uses have been voiced at community boards. Concerns about the physical environment and development consequences such as traffic congestion, infrastructure strain, overcrowded housing, and degradation of neighborhood life barely disguise the intense anxiety about new immigration and overall demographic shifts.<sup>7</sup> As the first stop in city government for public review of permit applications, zoning variances, and new development proposals, anxieties about neighborhood change and overdevelopment are frequently aired at community board meetings. 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 citywide level.

This paper is a comparative case study of two multi-ethnic, multi-racial immigrant neighborhoods undergoing significant development pressures that pose a dramatic reshaping of neighborhood life and local spaces – Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens. Referred to as New York City's "satellite" Chinatowns, Sunset Park and Flushing are, in fact, quite distinct in their racial and class composition, neighborhood typology, and relationship to the urban political economy (Hum 2002, Zhou 2001, Smith 1995). Common to both neighborhoods, however, are recent efforts to mediate racial and ethnic tensions stemming from new developments and dramatic demographic change. Through a comparative study, this paper reexamines if community boards serve as the "pivotal" public arena to diffuse racial and ethnic tensions and meaningfully engage stakeholders including immigrant groups in neighborhood planning and policy discussions. Since concerns fueling dissension and potential conflict center on land use and development proposals, community boards are the noted political sphere where grievances are aired and hopefully, resolved.

Based on attendance at community board meetings, public hearings and forums, and numerous in-depth interviews with community board members, district managers, nonprofit organizational staff and members, and other neighborhood stakeholders, I find community boards do not engage all stakeholders in meaningful or sustained ways, and are limited in advancing race and ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> Adcock, Thomas. 2007. "Brooklyn Lawyers Dodge 'Manhattanization'" New York Law Journal, available online at: <http://www.nylawyer.com/display.php/file=/probono/news/07/060807c>,

<sup>6</sup> See Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030 website at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml>.

<sup>7</sup> A prime example is blog site – Queens Crap: A website focused on the overdevelopment and "tweeding" of the borough of Queens in the City of New York at <http://queenscrap.blogspot.com/>.

relations in a new and challenging multi-racial context.<sup>8</sup> As a body of politically appointed individuals, community boards are extensions of the political agenda of borough presidents and city councilors and it may not be in their vested interests to promote coalition building among immigrant activist organizations especially those that advocate for undocumented immigrants. Rather, the key institutions and initiatives that have engaged multiple publics and advanced capacity to participate in technical and complex planning and land use discussions, and deescalated racial tensions are nonprofit and civic organizations. In the case of Flushing, an instrumental actor included a young Asian American philanthropic community foundation. Because nonprofit community organizations “operate between markets, households, and the state”, they are integral to cultivating a migrant civic society that “plays an increasingly important role in mediating the myriad dislocations and conflicts brought on by mass migration” (Theodore and Martin 2007, 271).

## **II. Non-Profit Organizations and Social Capital in Changing Neighborhoods**

Robert Putnam’s latest research finds that diverse neighborhoods due to high rates of Asian and Latino immigration have less social capital – networks, trust, norms – and little civic engagement. Marked by a high level of social isolation, residents act like turtles and “hunker down” (Putnam 2007, 149). Putnam’s findings have significant relevance for the public life of metropolitan areas such as New York City whose social and demographic landscape has been transformed by the formation of numerous multi-ethnic, multi-racial immigrant neighborhoods. Recent research on immigrant incorporation, however, has established that the waning presence of neighborhood-based mainstream political parties in facilitating civic engagement 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 incorporation of immigrants including those who are undocumented; and foster social capital especially bonding social capital by uniting people of similar ethnicities and social class. Political actions and protests on immigrant and workers rights illustrate the success of local civic organizations in mobilizing immigrant participation.<sup>9</sup>

Neighborhood level nonprofit organizations such as social service agencies, ethnic associations and advocacy groups, labor and worker centers, religious institutions, and civic associations 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, Botsko 2003). Min Zhou et al. (2000) 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.” (p.8). While dense, informal ethnic networks and ethnic-specific non-profit groups and service providers distinguish immigrant neighborhoods and collectively represent the strength of bonding social capital among immigrants and the

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<sup>8</sup> Flushing is part of Queens’ Community Board 7 and Sunset Park is part of Brooklyn’s Community Board 7.

<sup>9</sup> 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, New York Voting Rights Consortium have been successful in mobilizing immigrants to participate in political actions and protests.

institutions that serve their needs, community building in multi-racial immigrant neighborhoods also require nonprofit organizations and leaders to engage in bridging social capital (Putnam 2000).

Asian and Latino immigrants are most likely to live in multi-racial, multi-ethnic neighborhoods (Hum 2004) where neighbor dynamics and exchanges frequently represent a frontline in the daily contestations on the processes and consequences of ethnic succession in local residential and commercial spaces. 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). As the local neighborhood context for nonprofit organizations are increasingly complex, identifying and promoting common interests and concerns to multiple publics are critical. In multi-racial immigrant neighborhoods, nonprofit organizations need to engage in bridging social capital and collaborative relationships. As Sandercock 2003 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” (p. 9).

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 represent 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 has been heightened racial tensions as the influx of Asian capital is viewed as financing out of context developments that denigrate neighborhood character and quality (Grimm 2007). The sources of racial tension and conflict center around anxiety 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 “take over”; (3) threat of loss of the neighborhood way of life, its character, heritage, and traditions; (4) transformation of the physical environment including public spaces and amenities in terms of out of scale, non-contextual development, and obstruction of views; and (5) immigrants are not good neighborhoods due to cultural differences in housing styles, land use practices, and strategies for affordable homeownership that involves subdivision and rental to co-ethnics including the undocumented (Mitchell 1993, Harwood and Myers 2002, Harwood 2005, Smith 1995, Li 1994, Li 2005, Luk 2005, Saito 1998). Clearly, the daily life of local multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhoods is fraught with escalating tensions about the influx of immigrants and how their presence is transforming neighborhood spaces.

Mediating the local impacts of macro-level trends in economic restructuring, demographic and racial shifts, and pro-growth urban policies has increasingly dominated the work of NYC’s community boards. However, the presence and representation of Asian and Latino immigrants is nominal even in neighborhoods where they comprise significant population shares. Without strong and active nonprofit organizations that provide alternative public or “coalitional” spaces, large segments of multi-racial and multi-ethnic neighborhoods would not be heard at the district or community board level. In addition to providing a venue for political voice and representation, nonprofit organizations help reframe racialized tensions from a human relations

and cultural difference perspective to one that focuses on equity and structural racism. Nonprofit community organizations and leaders provide vital resources including organizing skills and professional networks to help defuse simmering conflicts through dialogue and education, and moreover, to advance a critical analysis of the economic and political conditions that shape urban development and inequality.

### **III. Flushing: An Inter-Community 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 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 homeownership lead one researcher to title his book on Flushing, Chinatown No More.<sup>10</sup>

Asian capital investments have advanced from small business enterprises to major real estate development initiatives. Several mega public-private development projects – Flushing Commons, Queens Crossing, and Flushing Town Center -- 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, NYS 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, is the designated developer of both Queens Crossing<sup>11</sup> and Flushing Commons<sup>12</sup> (in partnership with the Rockefeller Development Corporation) which will dramatically transform downtown Flushing, in part, by “bring(ing) back American bred businesses.”<sup>13</sup> These mega-development projects will be joined by a new Flushing Town Center proposed by Muss Development that will further the corporatization of downtown Flushing with a planned addition of thousands of square feet of office and commercial space.<sup>14</sup> Nearby industrial Willets Point is also slated for massive redevelopment – a hotel, retail space, and

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<sup>10</sup> Hsiang-Shui Chen, 1992, Chinatown No More: Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York, Cornell University Press.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.queenscrossing.com/>

<sup>12</sup> City owned municipal parking lot – 5 acres, two level parking lot accommodate 1,100 cars and in 2005, generated 2.5 million in parking revenues sold to TDC Development LLC in partnership with the Rockefeller Development Corporation who propose to replace the parking lot with a mixed use mega-development project includes residential, commercial, retail, community facility, hotel uses, a multi-level underground parking garage, and an approximately 1.5-acre town square that is publicly accessible but privately owned. Recent controversy over rising projected construction costs and subsequent impacts for community benefits – namely, a new facility for Flushing's YMCA (Wisloski 2007).

<sup>13</sup> TDC Development president Michael Myers quoted in 2005 Queens Tribune article – project to attract non-Asian market to counter Asian concentration – mainstream Flushing downtown commerce.

<sup>14</sup> Flushing Town Center is a \$1 billion, 3.3 million-square-foot project on 14 acres along the Flushing River currently brownfield and contaminated river site. Project include approximately 800,000 square feet of retail, a 2,500-space parking garage, 1,100 condominium units in six residential towers, a 3.5-acre landscaped park, and 40-foot-wide waterfront. <http://www.muss.com/news/050105.phtml>

convention center -- and TDC Development LLC is among the finalist developers (Lombino 2006).

Flushing, Queens also made history as a part of New York City Council District 20 which elected the first Asian American to public office in the city and state at large in 2000. 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).

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-specific businesses has been documented for over a decade (Smith 1995). A New York Times reporter cited former city councilor Julia Harrison’s provocative comment that Asian immigration represented “an invasion not assimilation”. Reflecting the sentiments of her long-time constituents, Harrison’s comments depicted Asians as criminals and real estate speculators, and a public apology was demanded (Duggar 1996, Chung 1996). More importantly, despite important advancements including the election of an Asian American city councilor, these sentiments continue to resonate in Flushing today. Heightening anxiety about “Asians taking over” among long time 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<sup>15</sup> and civic engagement, poor business conduct, and exclusionary commercial signage due to the lack of English dominate daily discourse in local neighborhood settings.

In May 2006, an attorney representing Korean developer Steven Chon appeared before the Queens Community Board 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 reaction was hostile and concerns about prostitution and degradation of neighborhood life abounded.<sup>16</sup> Public records noted concerns with parking and traffic generation although news coverage alluded to community apprehension about “unsavory” activities.<sup>17</sup> Despite neighbor complaints and a lawsuit filed by City Councilor Tony Avella, a vocal opponent of overdevelopment, the spa opened in May 2007. According to City Councilor John Liu’s staff, race and ethnic relations had reached a “crisis point” indicated by the number of complaints received by their office. With the occasion of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance<sup>18</sup>, Councilor John Liu thought it opportune to reaffirm tolerance and sought to

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<sup>15</sup> In May 2007, a Korean homeowner cut down several trees in the yard that surrounds his landmarked mansion leading to community outcry (Bertrand 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Lynda Spielman, CB7 member. Public hearing record notes 14 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.”

<sup>17</sup> Refer to the following newspaper articles: Mindlin 2006, Stirling 2007, Rhoades 2007, Tozzi 2007.

<sup>18</sup> The Flushing Remonstrance was signed in 1657 by a group of Flushing settlers to defend the freedom to worship and oppose Governor Peter Styvesant’s restriction on the religious practices of Quakers as they were not members of the Dutch Reformed Church. See Columbia University historian, Kenneth T. Jackson’s op ed in the December 27,

organize a community forum on inter-group relations and consider the possibility of a series of neighborhood dialogues.

### **Strategic bridging and institutional partners**

The Korean American Community Foundation (KACF) was established in 2002 to promote a culture of philanthropy in the Korean American community. In its short four year, KACF funded numerous social service and community-based organizations throughout New York City including Flushing, Queens. In early 2006, the Ford Foundation's Deputy Director of Community Development, Miguel Garcia, awarded KACF a grant to further its philanthropic activities and organize a series of citywide inter-community dialogues on the state of race relations in New York City especially in light of Garcia'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 inter-community dialogue in Flushing was KACF's third and final forum.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the two earlier citywide forums with heavy Ford Foundation involvement and leadership in setting the agenda, participants, and speakers, Deputy Director Garcia did not attend the Flushing planning meetings ceding to neighborhood leaders and experts. Councilor John Liu's staff asked former chairperson and active member of Queens Community Board 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.<sup>20</sup> Queens Borough President Marshall's Community and Cultural Coordinator as well as a member of her Queens General Assembly participated in forum planning.<sup>21</sup> Additional members of the Queens General Assembly were later recruited to serve as discussion facilitators at the Flushing forum.

### **Approach to dialogue on race and neighborhood development**

The objective of the Flushing forum was to bring together a diverse and representative group of neighborhood and community leaders including Community Board 7 members, neighborhood civic associations, religious institutions, key social service agencies and nonprofit organizations, in other words, "opinion leaders" or those in a position to influence the attitudes and views of

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2007 New York Times. The Flushing Community Leadership Seminar Workshop: Building Bridges for our Future was publicized as part of a series of events to commemorate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance, see <http://www.flushingremonstrance.info/>.

<sup>19</sup> The first KACF-Ford Foundation inter-community forum was The New Majority: Building Relationships and Collaborations in Changing Neighborhoods and took place on May 1, 2006 at CUNY's Baruch College and the second inter-community forum was Different Voices, One Community: New York City Perspective and took place on October 21, 2006 at the Queens Museum of Art.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, an African American woman, had extensive involvement in mediating racial conflict in transitioning Queens neighborhoods documented in Sanjek's *The Future of Us All*.

<sup>21</sup> For a description of the Queens General Assembly and its activities, refer to: [http://www.queenstribune.com/guides/2006\\_ImmigrantGuide/pages/TheRulingClass.htm](http://www.queenstribune.com/guides/2006_ImmigrantGuide/pages/TheRulingClass.htm)

constituents and policymakers. A key goal of the forum was to lead the group in an in-depth discussion to differentiate between real and substantive issues (i.e., those that can be acted upon through policy, legislative or programmatic actions) versus simple misperceptions (individual biases). The organizers hoped to not only provide a public space to air concerns but to advance an inter-community dialogue that identifies a set of concrete actions to reconcile “structural differences” (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 Councilor John Liu and Queens Borough President Helen Marshall. Invited participants were asked to return the questionnaire with their RSVP. A total of 29 questionnaires were received from approximately 90 mailed invitations and these responses were instrumental in framing the topics for the inter-community forum.<sup>22</sup> The short questionnaire asked four basic questions on the (1) main issues that influence neighbor relations in Flushing for better or worst; (2) 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 that responded to the optional demographic questions -- 11 were men and 13 women; the average age was 58 years old; and 7 indicated they were White; 7 indicated they were Black or African American; and 5 indicated they were Asian (including South Asian, Korean, and Taiwanese).

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. 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 among ethnic based organizations as the main issues that shaped Flushing neighbor relations.

Based on the questionnaire responses, the inter-community forum was planned around five tables (with 10 or so participants) each focused on a topic: (1) Language and Communication, (2) Community: Interactions and Organizations, (3) Living in a Multicultural 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? (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

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<sup>22</sup> 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.

for the future that might represent a resolution to the issue, and (2) concrete or action steps to realize your vision. After about 90 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 Councilor John Liu and Queens Borough President Helen 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 components of a future vision and actionable steps. Reiterating the concerns expressed in the questionnaire responses, the five discussion groups emphasized the "public responsibility" of a common language for residents and storeowners 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 long time 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.

Co-sponsorship by the philanthropic organizations – Korean American Community Foundation and Ford Foundation – legitimated a "neutral" public space to bring elected and community leaders and stakeholders together. Participants were asked to fill out an evaluation form at the end of the evening and of the 35 collected, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive regarding the relevance of topics discussed and the representativeness of 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 defuse escalating tensions in Flushing. As one participant wrote, "People have strong opinions...there is hope for community." Responses to suggestions on improving future seminars were particularly encouraging with numerous comments to maintain the format and hold more frequent sessions.

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".<sup>23</sup> Although a structured venue such as the Building Bridges forum did, in fact, provide some release of escalating racial tensions, the tenure 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 of Flushing do not take place in a timely fashion. Without additional structured venues for discussion and bridge building, 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.

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<sup>23</sup> From City Councilor Liu posting of the Building Bridges forum on the Flushing Remonstrance events website.

The inter-community dialogue sought to publicly affirm Flushing's historic tolerance and peaceful co-existence among a multitude of religions, cultures and racial groups. KACF and Ford Foundation underwriting and involvement was critical in creating a neutral public space independent of Community Board 7. However, the Flushing forum is just a first step to building bridges and new understanding among the civic leadership especially as a subtext of the evening's discussion was to "neutralize" rich and challenging differences by educating immigrants to behave more like the mainstream – to 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, the role of nonprofit organizations not only created an alternative space to defuse and deescalate racial and ethnic tensions, but its 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.

## **V. 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 homeowners 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 pushing the geographic boundaries of new neighborhood formations (e.g., Greenwood Heights and South Park Slope) into the northern sections of Sunset Park. A second gentrifying force is mobilized by an immigrant growth coalition comprised 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.

Early spring 2007, an "as of right" development proposal for a 12 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 to be developed on a residential block of two and three story rowhouses, the condominium project would rise over 100 feet obstructing the view from Sunset Park past a local landmark - St. Michael Church's egg shaped dome - toward the upper New York harbor.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the developer and contractor were Chinese further infused overdevelopment concerns with racialized comments about a "Chinese invasion", transnational real estate investments as a form of money laundering, fear of neighborhood degradation as new owners subdivide their condo units and rent to numerous

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<sup>24</sup> 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.

undocumented immigrants.<sup>25</sup> To protest overdevelopment, a community coalition quickly formed – the Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors (SPAN) comprised of largely white homeowners and Latino residents (tenants and homeowners) 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.<sup>26</sup> SPAN’s planned march and rally, however, was preempted by an agreement negotiated by City Councilor Sara Gonzalez in which developer Michael Wong promised to reduce the height of his proposed development project stating a desire to be a good neighbor.<sup>27</sup> A few weeks later, at a March 27, 2007 Sunset Park town hall meeting attended by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and NYC Department of City Planning (DCP) 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.<sup>28</sup>

The victory in reducing the building size was tempered by the splintering of SPAN into two factions – the white homeowners 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 rowhouses and views of the upper New York Bay from the 23 acre Sunset Park. The second faction retained the organizational name of SPAN whose leadership was now comprised of Latino activists including one time opponent of City Councilor Sara Gonzalez, union organizer David Galarza. The cause of the split was ostensibly over the language used in the public acknowledgement of City Councilor Gonzalez’s role in brokering a compromise with developer Michael Wong. However, the division between white homeowners and Latino residents reflect fundamental and irreconcilable differences in organizing strategies and short and long term goals in the rezoning Sunset Park. SPARZ sought to work with the neighborhood’s power base including elected officials and Community Board 7, as their objectives can be met by the narrow parameters of a zoning study set by the NYC Department of City Planning. On the other hand, SPAN sought to mobilize a broadly based participatory dialogue on race and class equity in urban planning processes and development policy. City Councilor Gonzalez proceeded to hire the Pratt Center for Community Development to conduct a parallel study based on two public meetings co-sponsored by CB 7 to prepare a community-based report for a “balanced zoning” proposal for Sunset Park.

In response to the DCP’s rezoning study, several Chinese local 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 vested in rising property

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<sup>25</sup> Comments heard at a March 1, 2007 emergency meeting at the Brooklyn Community Board 7 regarding the 420 42<sup>nd</sup> Street development.

<sup>26</sup> 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 in his neighborhood.

<sup>27</sup> See “420 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Building Gets Cut in Half” online at: [http://brownstoner.com/brownstoner/archives/2007/03/420\\_42nd\\_street\\_2.php](http://brownstoner.com/brownstoner/archives/2007/03/420_42nd_street_2.php)

<sup>28</sup> See “Sunset Park to Enter Downzoning Olympics” online at: [http://curbed.com/archives/2007/03/28/sunset\\_park\\_to\\_enter\\_downzoning\\_olympics.php](http://curbed.com/archives/2007/03/28/sunset_park_to_enter_downzoning_olympics.php)

values and maximizing opportunities for residential and commercial development, EAIA pushed a pro-growth agenda premised in part on Mayor Bloomberg's population projection increase of 1 million new New Yorkers by 2030.<sup>29</sup> At various public meetings, EAIA founder and representative Denny Chen, owner of Ritz Realty, claimed an additional 10,000 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.<sup>30</sup> While segments of the Chinese community remain doubtful that this development trajectory would trickle down gains for the working poor majority, EAIA found a supportive ear among Community Board 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 homeowners' 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 largely 2 and 3 story rowhouses on Sunset Park's side streets will satisfy homeowners 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 are 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 multi-racial neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side (Kwong 1994). Based in Manhattan Chinatown, CSWA established an office in Sunset Park in 1995 to counter the proliferation of sweatshop conditions in relocating Chinatown garment factories.<sup>31</sup> 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.

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<sup>29</sup> See Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030 website at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml>.

<sup>30</sup> September 6, 2007 meeting at New Chinese Promise Baptist church with Rev. Wong and members of his parish, SPAN members, and EAIA members.

<sup>31</sup> Refer to CSWA website - [http://www.cswa.org/www/our\\_history.asp](http://www.cswa.org/www/our_history.asp)

Latino and Asian coalitions are not new to Sunset Park although they tend to be issue-oriented and short-term.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the formation of a vibrant migrant civil society comprised of community organizations, workers centers, churches and faith-based organizations, and hometown associations provide the critical “free spaces” necessary for forming collective identities and “shared analyses of sociopolitical 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 outreached to their constituents who lack voice on the community board and SPAN held a bi-lingual planning summit to hear community concerns and issues on Sunset Park’s present and future conditions.<sup>33</sup>

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 CB7’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 in 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, locating underutilized and potential development sites such as the air rights over subway tracks for neighborhood expansion, and pointing out the limitations of community board representation.

As a neighborhood, 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 CB7.

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<sup>32</sup> Refer to Hum 2002 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.

<sup>33</sup> SPAN held a neighborhood summit on September 23, 2007 with a stated goal of: “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%3A00%3A00-05%3A00&updated-max=2008-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-05%3A00&max-results=17>

**Racial Composition of Brooklyn CB7, 2000 and 2006<sup>a</sup>**

	2000 Population	% CB 7 Pop.	2006 Population	% CB 7 Pop.	2000-2006 Growth
Non Hispanic White	27,531	23%	36,781	24%	34%
<b>Asian</b>	<b>21,168</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>39,887</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>88%</b>
<b>Latino/Hispanic</b>	<b>61,316</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>71,234</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>16%</b>
Black/African American	4,106	3%	3,904	3%	-5%
Multi-Race	3,863	3%	452	0.3%	-88%
Other	1,028	1%	828	1%	-19%
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>119,012</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>153,086</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>29%</b>

<sup>a</sup>2006 estimates from American Community Survey

Source: 2000 Census, STF3

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% of CB 7’s total population and is overwhelmingly Latino and Asian. In 2000, Non Hispanic Whites (NHWs) made up nearly one-quarter (22%) of CB 7’s population but only represented 12% of the Sunset Park rezoning study area. However, CB 7 membership continues to be dominated by NHWs and this representational disparity persists despite that the fastest growing population group in CB 7 is Asian; and Latinos remain its largest population group. Currently, there are only four Asian CB7 members from Sunset Park – all are men and include two local business owners, a developer, and a CEO of an established multi-service agency.

Another critical concern is CB 7’s geographic boundaries. The eastern border of CB 7 is 8<sup>th</sup> 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 – 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 even further east than 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue (Hum 2002). Utilizing 8<sup>th</sup> 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 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 has not taken place in Sunset Park. Zoning functions to create or increase property values and ultimately, benefits real estate developers and homeowners. As noted, the Bloomberg administration views rezonings as a strategy to facilitate economic revitalization and new development including affordable housing.<sup>34</sup> Even though the production record for affordable housing premised on bonus densities is mixed, the current Sunset Park rezoning discussion has

<sup>34</sup> 2006 interview with DCP Director Amanda Burden available at: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/21476> and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer comments that the “new paradigm” of affordable housing is zoning and land use delivered at Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE)’s Community Development Conference on October 26, 2007 available at: <http://www.aafe.org/index.html>.

not generated any substantive provisions to prevent gentrification and displacement, or preserve the neighborhood's multi-racial, multi-ethnic 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 or move to Sunset Park. Community boards do not provide a "pivotal" public space to negotiate an equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of growth and development because they are embedded in an established political process that continues to marginalize critical stakeholders. For example, raising concerns about racial equity was derisively described by one Brooklyn CB 7 member as "waving the Latino flag". Nonprofit organizations especially those that comprise a migrant civil society present a more viable venue to make policy claims and articulate alternative development visions to sustain immigrant neighborhoods.

## **VI. Conclusion: Building Community in Multi-Ethnic, Multi-Racial Neighborhoods**

Flushing and Sunset Park are dynamic immigrant neighborhoods faced with the challenges of development, growth, and population diversity. These neighborhoods exemplify the tensions integral to reshaping the spatial and social structures of a post-industrial city that is also distinguished by high levels of persistent inequality. In this political economic context, a vibrant migrant civil society comprised of various nonprofit organizations and supported by community foundations is critical to providing the leadership and public space to promote comprehensive and inclusive strategies for community building and development. Robert Putnam in his 2007 study on diversity and social capital did not include a variable on nonprofit organizational density in his quantitative models<sup>35</sup>; and his conclusions may have been different had he included a measure of the third sector. Nonprofit organizations are vital in countering isolation and "hunkering down" by providing vital services to facilitate immigrant incorporation and develop leadership and practices to engage multiple publics in social and economic justice work.

This comparative study of Sunset Park and Flushing highlights the need to sustain bridging social capital and inter-community coalitional efforts; and reform community boards. The Sunset Park Coalition for New Immigrants illustrates the importance of both these efforts. Comprised of key established Latino and Asian multi-service and community development organizations including the Center for Family Life, Chinese American Planning Council, and Fifth Avenue Committee, the Sunset Park Immigration Coalition sought funding to establish a leadership institute to train immigrants to advocate and participate on the community board. As their funding proposal claims,

It is clear that both the Chinese and the Latino communities face very significant obstacles to achieving economic and social stability. The Leadership Training Academy, sponsored by the Sunset Park Coalition for New Immigrants, will help create a *foundation for activism that bridges ethnic barriers and empowers new immigrants to take an active role in organizing for community change*. Emphasis added.

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<sup>35</sup> Putnam 2007, p. 151-152 describes his controls for both individual and neighborhood (census tract) effects on social capital including age, ethnicity, education, affluence/poverty, language, residential mobility, citizenship, commuting time, homeownership, region, census tract population density, index of income inequality and county crime rate.

Reforming community boards is integral to advancing democratic practices and venues for citizen engagement in local development and policy overview and decision-making. Despite their serious limitations, community boards remain “the only official recognized structure for public participation in neighborhood planning” (Municipal Arts Society 2005). As zoning and land use have evolved into the new terrain for struggle around equity and economic justice, community boards must become more inclusive, skillful, and de-linked from the political process. The Municipal Arts Society Planning Center calls for the diversification of community board membership and involvement of NYC’s Public Advocate in appointing members. In addition to reforming community boards, the Sunset Park and Flushing case studies demonstrate that a strong nonprofit institutional landscape is critical to fair representation of marginalized community groups, creating a public venue to articulate and advocate for race and class equity, and holding community boards accountable to their planning and policy recommendations. Nonprofit organizations help advance bridging social capital and cross racial 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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