

# Urban Policy in Houston, Texas

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Urban policy in Houston? It sounds like an oxymoron, at least a contradiction, certainly more than a paradox. Policy implies forethought, planning, conscious direction. Houston seems to be the exact opposite, a spontaneous, unplanned city where urban policy seems little in evidence and the opposite, a sort of urban anarchy, is readily apparent. The only major city in the United States without a zoning ordinance, a city with too little in the way of taxes to support public planning, a city where public sector intervention has been seen historically as detrimental to urban development, Houston seems to be more an unbridled phenomenon than the product of urban policy. In 1978 *U.S. News and World Report* saw Houston exactly that way. More than a city, it reported, Houston is

an explosive, roaring urban juggernaut that's shattering traditions as it expands outward and upward with an energy that surprises even its residents ... Absorbing capital, people and new corporations like a sponge, Houston is constantly being reshaped — physically by the wrecking ball and new construction and culturally by newcomers with fresh ideas and philosophies.<sup>1</sup>

But the image of an undirected Houston, a city without any urban policy, makes for good news copy and first impressions, but fares poorly on closer inspection. It is certainly true that Houston has been, at least until very recently, a 'laissez-faire' city where public-sector-initiated urban policy and planning were discouraged.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1980s, for

example, Houston spent about \$0.32 per person annually for city planning, while Kansas City spent \$7.24, Baltimore \$2.79, Dallas \$1.53, and Los Angeles \$1.37.<sup>3</sup> But urban policy and plans do exist in a 'laissez-faire' context. They are made, for example, by investors, developers, builders, realtors, architects, and planners in the private sector and by business organisations like the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>4</sup> In such a context the public sector is the limited caretaker of daily urban needs: water, sewers, roads, health, education, parks, and safety. But city priorities and most comprehensive policy and planning, especially that which effects economic growth, are initiated and developed by or have the approval of leading voices in the private sector.

The thesis advanced here develops as follows: Houston is an appropriate symbol of urban growth in the late twentieth century in the United States. As in other cities economic development has been the priority of urban policy. In Houston, this development has been closely tied to the growth of the oil industry, the acceptance of an ideology of laissez-faire capitalism, and the leadership of a business oligarchy which has guided urban growth with the tacit support of most citizens. But all has not been shiny for everyone in the 'golden buckle of the sunbelt'. Not everyone has benefited from the private-sector policy which is oriented almost exclusively to economic growth to the neglect of neighbourhood services and social planning. Serious social and public costs have accompanied the narrow focus on economic expansion and profit maximisation. But

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An earlier version, now amended and refocused, appeared in *Amerika Studien/American Studies* 33 (1988), pp. 73–91.

<sup>1</sup> Recer, P., (1978), 'The Texas City That's Bursting Out All Over', *U.S. News and World Report*, November 27, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Lupsha, P. A. and Siembieda, W. J., (1977), 'The Poverty of Public Services in the Land of Plenty: An Analysis and Interpretation', in Perry and Watkins, (eds.), *Rise of the Sunbelt Cities*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 172–78.

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, B., (1983), 'Houston: The Golden Buckle of the Sunbelt', in Bernard, R. M. and Rice, B. R. (eds.), *Sunbelt Cities*, Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> Lupsha and Siembieda, *ibid.*, p. 173.

there have been relatively few policy initiatives from the grassroots. In most other major cities urban policy affecting the poor or powerless — low-cost housing, social services, urban renewal, for example — has been a dialectical process in which ‘policy makers’ had to respond to the needs and demands of citizens, as expressed through grassroots organisations and social movements. In Houston, however, decades of prosperity and a consciously conservative political milieu created, at least until recently, a relatively content and quiescent citizenry. In fact, grassroots organising often took a conservative cast which supported the policy priorities and laissez-faire orientation of private sector leaders. Accordingly, participation in the policy process and the presentation of alternative visions of urban policy have been dramatically limited in Houston.

### Growth

The perpetual growth of Houston since 1920 is its most striking feature. In 1910 it was a southern railroad town of some 78,800, servicing the Texas gulf coast and hinterland. Population nearly doubled by 1920, more than doubled during the 1920s, and except for a slowing of the growth process during the Great Depression, Houston continued from 1940 onward to add from 200,000 to 360,000 people per decade, approaching in the 1970s an increase of 1,000 people per week.

Striking as these figures are, the population increase is less significant than the spatial dimensions of Houston’s growth. New York City and Los Angeles, for example, have histories of much larger population booms. But Houston is the archetypal ‘multi-nucleic’ urban area, a decentralised, low density city which sprawls more than 25 miles in each direction from downtown with both multifunctional and specialised nodes connected by hundreds of miles of freeways. Whereas Houston was only 9 square miles in 1900, by 1980 continued annexation

had increased the incorporated city to 556 square miles. And while continuous spatial growth has been Houston’s hallmark in the twentieth century, the recentness of the boom is dramatised by the fact that three-quarters of the city has been built since 1945.<sup>5</sup>

Why has this growth occurred? Boosters to the contrary, the reasons for Houston’s growth are not entirely unique. Technological developments — specifically the automobile and the air-conditioner — combined with economic and political decisions made far beyond the city borders to foster the extraordinary economic growth of the ‘sunbelt’ cities, Houston included, in the past 40 years.<sup>6</sup> On closer examination, however, the growth of the oil industry provides a context which distinguishes Houston from its boomtown counterparts.<sup>7</sup> In 1901 the Spindletop oil field, outside of Houston, blew in. Texaco, Gulf, Humble, and Standard Oil companies quickly organised or expanded operations to Houston. By 1930 as the oil boom rippled through the Houston economy the ‘sleepy southern town’ was transformed into a major southern city.<sup>8</sup>

This growth, stimulated by Federal assistance, increased during and after the Second World War. Houston became internationally eminent in the oil and petro-chemical industries and continued to attract more capital investment and supplementary services and industries. Economic expansion in the 1960s was assisted further by quotas on oil imports, which raised the price of domestic oil 250 per cent over that sold on the world market.<sup>9</sup> And Houston continued to prosper with the staggering increases in oil prices after 1973. From 1970 to 1983 205 large office buildings (each more than 100,000 square feet) were built, three-fourths of all the large office buildings in the city. Most are the administrative centres for executive and clerical staffs of the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries and related firms. The city now houses more than 435 oil and gas companies, among them 34 of the 35 largest oil companies. There are hundreds of petroleum engineering firms,

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Two excellent sources on this national transformation are Bluestone, B. and Harrison, B., (1982), *The De-industrialisation of America*, New York: Basic Books and Sale, K., (1975), *Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment*, New York: Vintage.

<sup>7</sup> The critical studies on the interrelation of Houston and the oil industry are Feagin, J. R., (1985), ‘The Global Context of Metropolitan Growth: Houston and the Oil Industry’, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 90, pp. 1204–1230 and Feagin, J. R., (1988), *Houston — The Free Enterprise City: Growth and Decline in a Sunbelt Boomtown*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Larson, H. M. and Porter, K. W. (1959), *The History of Humble Oil and Refining Company*, New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>9</sup> Feagin, ‘Global Context’, p. 14.

drilling contractors, geological firms, supply and transportation companies, law and accounting firms servicing primarily the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries. In addition, in the 1960s and 1970s Houston became a centre for oil industry technology; since then Houston companies have played a leading role in providing engineering services and technology in oil fields in the Middle East, the North sea, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Two-thirds of the world's oil tools are now produced in Houston.<sup>10</sup>

The growth of the oil industry continually stimulated the entire economy, multiplying economic growth, creating a perpetual boomtown atmosphere. One of the most prominent industries affected by the oil boom was real estate. Land prices sky-rocketed as population soared; developers were quick to capitalise on the unprecedented demand. Within one year, 1971–72, the FM 1960 tract of 197 acres, some 20 miles north of downtown, went from \$9,500 to \$18,500 per acre. Homebuilders were forced, they reported, to move out further: to build a \$30,000 middle-class home in the early 1970s they needed to pay only \$4,500 per acre. In Northeast Houston prices jumped in 1972 from \$950 to \$4,000 per acre; and in Northwest Houston prices per acre were \$972 in 1962, \$2,839 in 1967, and \$11,000 in 1972. In Southwest Houston, four miles from downtown, land in the late 1950s just prior to the opening of the southwest freeway sold for 75 cents a square foot; by 1970 the cost had increased more than 500 per cent, to \$4 a square foot, or \$180,000 per acre.<sup>11</sup> And this data does not take into account the spectacular boom of the 1970s, the decade in which Houston and real estate values experienced their largest growth.

With 280 skyscrapers, with suburban development extending 25 miles in every direction, with an industrial east side of town of oil, gas, and petrochemical companies and ancillary businesses extending 40 miles to the Gulf Coast, with freeways and automobiles connecting the metropolis, Houston by the 1980s had become a much bigger — the fourth largest city in the US — and much richer city than it

was two generations earlier. And the growth of the oil industry was at the epicentre of this development.

### Ideology

Most Houstonians, not only conservative boosters, would contend, however, that any analysis of Houston's success must also include the role of the political culture of unregulated capitalism. This argument has it that since the Allen brothers, two New York City entrepreneurs, successfully marketed a Gulf Coast swampy area, the city of Houston has known growth and prosperity due to its free market economy — an economy unbridled by government intervention and supported by an ideology of laissez-faire capitalism. In Houston, as a recent article in *Fortune* remarked, 'free enterprise is still the gospel'.<sup>12</sup>

The ideological thrust in Houston in the twentieth century has remained anti-government, anti-regulation, anti-union, anti-public planning, anti-taxes, anti-anything which seemed to represent in fact or fantasy the implementation of limits on the economic prerogative and activity of the city's business community. For example, Houston is the only major city in the nation without a zoning ordinance.<sup>13</sup> Planning has always been done, until very recently, by the private, not the public, sector, or done by the public sector at the request and under the guidance of private sector leadership.<sup>14</sup> There are no state or city income taxes. Property taxes have always been low. As one historian put it, according to 'this version of capitalism ... the private sector is the driving force in the city. In this atmosphere, the government provides a minimum of basic services and assists business growth. Citizens who want more than the minimum of public services go to the private sector to obtain support.'<sup>15</sup>

The Allen brothers and their descendants are at first glance not unique to Houston but an illustration of a continuous pattern of profit-motivated urban development in the United States. Most of this

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Donahue, J. (ed.), (1973), *Big Town, Big Money: The Business of Houston*, Houston: Cordovan Press.

<sup>12</sup> Fortune (eds.), (1980), 'Houston', *Fortune*, 14 July, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Siegan, B. H., (1972), *Land Use Without Zoning*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books; Kaplan, B., (1980), 'Urban Development, Economic Growth, and Personal Liberty: The Rhetoric of the Anti-Zoning Movements, 1947–1962', *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 84, October, pp. 133–68.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, R. H., (1977), 'City Planning in Houston Without Zoning', Unpublished paper; Olson, W. A., (1967), 'City Participation in the Enforcement of Private Deed Restrictions', Unpublished paper presented to American Society of Planning Officials, April.

<sup>15</sup> Kaplan, (1983), p. 199.

development has been initiated by the private sector and occurred with little concern for social and human dimensions.<sup>16</sup> In other cities throughout the nation since the early twentieth century, however, social problems pressed themselves on city leaders, or were pressed on them by city residents active in urban social movements, occasioning an expansion of the role of government and a modest curtailing of the unrestrained uses of economic power.<sup>17</sup> Urban policy had to address neighbourhood as well as downtown concerns, concerns for public and social services as well as economic growth. What usually evolved from this political struggle was a policy strategy, referred to by some as 'corporate liberalism', where business sought to work hand in hand with an active and enlarged government and representatives of conservative labour to ease the most onerous examples of social distress, curtail the most exploitative corporate practices, and use this newly established partnership with an enlarged government and conservative labour to maximise profits and enhance growth.<sup>18</sup> Such a transition from *laissez-faire* to liberal capitalism never took place in Houston. Government was kept small, social problems were ignored, and policy formation remained dominated by the private sector.<sup>19</sup> This, obviously, has important implications for urban policy in a democracy. If government must be kept small and very limited, if services and amenities are seen primarily as a private matter, and if a neighbourhood or community or individual does not have the connections or clout to achieve their objectives, who

do they turn to or organise against in order to improve their situation? How do ordinary citizens affect urban policy?

### Privatised Politics

In a nutshell, since the late nineteenth century the primary policy-making and planning institutions in Houston have been extra-political, private bodies, not the public sector. According to the staff of the *Houston Business Journal*, City Hall

was an extension, a working arm, of the Houston Chamber of Commerce ... The long term influence of City Hall continuity and goals provided by the Houston Chamber of Commerce could not be over-estimated. In fact, one had only to study the goals listed by the Chamber of Commerce each year to get a good indication of what City Hall would be working on in years and decades to come.<sup>20</sup>

And this is not idle boasting.

The dominant role of the Chamber of Commerce has been a relatively recent development.<sup>21</sup> Control in the city prior to the late 1950s rested in the hands of a small group of developers, industrialists, and finance capitalists who met informally in Suite 8F of the Lamar Hotel in downtown Houston. The suite was leased to George and Herman Brown, multi-millionaire industrialists, the founders of Brown and Root, whose political power stretched from Houston to the state house in Austin and, ultimately, to the

<sup>16</sup> Warner, Jr., S. B., (1972), *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City*, New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>17</sup> Lubove, R., (1969), *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change*, New York: Random House.

<sup>18</sup> Weinstein, J., (1968), *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918*, Boston: Beacon Press; Silver, C., (1984), *Twentieth Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press; Mollenkopf, J., (1978), 'The Postwar Politics of Urban Development' in Tabb, W. K. and Sawers, L., (eds.), *Marxism and the Metropolis*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> At one level, Houston as the last frontier of *laissez-faire* capitalism is pure myth, no less exaggerated than the Alamo and the cowboy heritage. 'Free enterprise' in Houston, as in the nation, has never meant the complete absence of government intervention in economic affairs. It has meant government intervention only when it served the needs of economic growth. The major stimuli to Houston's economy have come from Federal sources at the initiation of local business leaders. Whether it was the dredging of the Ship Channel in the second decade of the twentieth century, social programmes during the 1930s, major oil pipelines and military contracts during and after World War II, or highway and NASA development funds more recently, Federal projects have played a critical role in the growth of the Houston economy.

<sup>20</sup> Donahue, (1983), *Ibid.*, p. 28 and 31.

<sup>21</sup> A thorough examination of the nature of political power in Houston remains to be done. But the substantial evidence that exists strongly supports the thesis that the city has been directed by a power elite. Davidson, C., (1982), *Houston: The City Where the Business of Government is Business*, in *Public Policy in Texas*, Wendell M. Bedichek and Neal Tannahill, eds., Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, pp. 275-82; Castro, T., (1975), 'Power and Money in Houston', *Texas Observer*, (4 July 1975), 3; Hurt, III, H., (1976), 'The Most Powerful Texans', *Texas Monthly* (April, 1976), pp. 73-78 and pp. 107-23; Smyser, C., (1977), 'Houston Power', *Houston Chronicle* (a series of articles throughout June, 1977).

capitol in Washington. The other invited members of the '8F' group were Jesse Jones — banker, developer, owner of the *Houston Chronicle*, and Secretary of Commerce under President Franklin Roosevelt; James A. Elkins — banker and senior partner of Vinson and Elkins, one of the 'big three' law firms in the city; and Gus Wortham — the founder of American General, the largest life insurance company in the South. Of course political power in Houston extended beyond this very small group. There were some 15 to 20 significant others with substantial power in the city, most notably William and Oveta Culp Hobby (owners of the *Houston Post* newspaper), Hugh Roy Cullen (independent oil man), and Oscar Holcombe (mayor of Houston for 22 of the 36 years between 1921 and 1957).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the power and prestige of this 'fringe' segment of the elite only complemented, never equalled, that of the select 8F members.<sup>23</sup>

The Browns, Jones, Elkins, and Wortham were the establishment in Houston.<sup>24</sup> 'Though each member of this all male crowd was a strong willed individual, they were, at the same time, a cohesive, like-minded group. Their blessing was the blessing of "The Establishment". Their rule was a virtually unchallenged and — they would emphasise — "civic minded" gerontocracy'.<sup>25</sup> Leon Jaworski, a prominent Houston attorney close to the inner circle, related once how the 8F group told Oscar Holcombe he would not be running for mayor and their selection, Roy Hofheinz, would be taking his place. Holcombe, already gearing up for the election, announced his retirement and Hofheinz was shortly thereafter elected mayor. 'Jesse Jones ... would meet with Gus Wortham, Herman Brown, and maybe one or two others and pretty well determine what the course of events would be in Houston', Jaworski concluded.<sup>26</sup> To an amazing degree, this small group was accepted as the voice on major policy issues for a

large segment of Houston's business class. But it presumed, and apparently with reason, 'to speak for the entire city'.<sup>27</sup>

Since the late 1950s when the '8F' group began to die off and the presence of more multi-national corporations began to diversify the composition of the city's elite, the Houston Chamber of Commerce gradually took over and expanded the role of the 8F group. Unlike the 8F group, which was small, private, and informal, the Chamber has a large budget, professional staff, and 'a structure and membership that prevent undue reliance on the skills of any one individual'.<sup>28</sup> It draws its leaders from the chief executive officers of the largest and most influential corporations in the city. It draws its membership and participants for its dozens of planning committees from the private, public, and academic sectors. It is a much more public and obvious form of business-oriented planning than that of the 8F group. Its philosophy, however, is the same, to 'protect a massive investment, stimulate even greater ones, and, in the process, build Houston to their own specifications, with as little interference from the public, and as much help from city hall, as possible'.<sup>29</sup> They do so through frequent interchanges of Chamber personnel with city hall, social contacts and informal meetings, co-optation of potential opponents, propaganda dissemination, provision of research findings and plans to policy makers, and intensive lobbying.

What is most impressive about the Chamber of Commerce is the degree of influence and support it had in the city, at least through the early 1980s. Its agenda was the one that was put into effect. It was supported by professionals throughout the city, whether in the media, the public sector, or the corporations. The Chamber successfully encouraged a conception that its objectives were identical with those of the public interest. On a day to day basis,

<sup>22</sup> Carleton, D., (1985), *Red Scare! Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas*, Austin: Texas Monthly Press, pp. 64–72.

<sup>23</sup> See Carleton, *Red Scare*; Davidson, 'Houston: Where the Business of Government is Business'; Hurt, 'Most Powerful Texans'.

<sup>24</sup> Green, G., (1979), *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938–1957*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, 'Houston: Where the Business of Government is Business', p. 276.

<sup>26</sup> Carleton, *Red Scare*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Davidson, 'Houston: Where the Business of Government is Business', p. 277.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.*

until the election in 1980 of Mayor Whitmire, there was no political body in Houston that came close to matching the power of the Chamber in areas where the Chamber sought to have influence.<sup>30</sup> Except for two poorly planned referenda, one on zoning in 1962 and one on mass transit in 1983, both of which were defeated by voters, the primary elements of the policy agenda of the Chamber have been adopted in Houston for over a generation.

The implications for urban policy formation in Houston are clear. As long as planning and policy-making in Houston remained initiated by private sector groups and therefore removed from public debate and discussion and as long as electoral politics in Houston remained a low-conflict, consensus style politics dependent on elite support, then most people in the city, and especially those outside the private halls of power, had little access to planning and policy decisions affecting them and the city.<sup>31</sup>

#### Costs of Boomtown Growth

While Houston has experienced dramatic growth since the 1920s and especially since World War II, there have been serious side effects which, given the continuous growth, laissez-faire ideology, and business domination of public policy, have gone largely ignored and unattended. Urban problems have tended to be seen as private problems.

Many of Houston's problems result from or are complicated by the laissez-faire ideology which, one report concluded, 'has restricted the growth of city government and has kept Houston essentially a low-service city'.<sup>32</sup> Because the Department of Public Works, for example, lacks adequate resources to address serious street and traffic problems, local

street installation and repair have been a private matter. In Houston

the rules governing the installation or reconstruction of local streets are fairly straightforward and essentially put the decision-making burden on nongovernmental actors. Thus, DPW officials assume that persons who want street improvements can get them, and those who do not have improved streets must not want them.<sup>33</sup>

The police force in 1981 was one third the size of that in Philadelphia and half that of most other big cities, and this in a city which had one of the highest murder rates in the country.<sup>34</sup> Other serious urban problems abound — air and water pollution, toxic waste dumping, subsidence, limited public transportation, the absence of public planning, and a lack of park space.<sup>35</sup> Scanty services are related to low taxes: the per capita tax burden of Houstonians (\$175) is very light when compared, for example, with that in Boston (\$695) and New York City (\$841).<sup>36</sup> Since the early 1980s the above 'quality of life' problems have begun to be addressed by private sector leaders and public officials.

But there are other serious, long-standing problems — ones of social inequity — such as poverty, racism, residential segregation, neighbourhood decay and destruction, resident dislocation, inadequate housing and health care for the poor — which because they affect only the poor and minorities in the city directly are not on the policy agenda. Such urban problems are nationwide in scope; they are not specific to Houston. But in Houston the city's elite and the ideology of free enterprise portray an untarnished golden buckle of the sunbelt. Ex-mayor Louie Welch declared in 1980, by which point he had 'stepped-up' to become head of the Chamber of

<sup>30</sup> With Whitmire's election and with other changes occurring in the city, the power of the Chamber is no longer as dominant as before. There are more power brokers and more business groups active in the urban decision-making process. Nevertheless, even Kathy Whitmore noted in 1985, in the midst of Houston's economic crisis, that 'the job of attracting business was with the Chamber, and improving services would make the Chamber's job easier'. Canetti, B., (1985), 'Welch vs Whitmire', *Houston City Magazine*, Vol. 9, p. 115.

<sup>31</sup> Feagin, *Houston The Free Enterprise City* discusses recent efforts by the Chamber and city government to find and support new planning efforts, like the Houston Economic Development Council.

<sup>32</sup> Antunes, G. E. and Plumlee, J. P., (1977), 'The Distribution of an Urban Public Service: Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, and Bureaucracy as Determinants of the Quality of Neighborhood Streets', *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 12, p. 321.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>34</sup> Bluestone and Harrison, *Deindustrialization of America*, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> For a general treatment of many of these issues see Feagin, J. R., (1985), 'The Social Costs of Houston's Growth: A Sunbelt Boomtown Reexamined', *International Journal of Urban and Social Research*, Vol. 9, pp. 164–85.

<sup>36</sup> Kaplan, 'Houston', p. 200.

Commerce, that 'no city is without poor people but the opportunity not to be poor is greater [in Houston] than in most cities ... The free market has functioned in Houston like no other place in America. It has a method of purging itself of slums'.<sup>37</sup> One would hope so given the extraordinary economic growth of the city and the opportunity that should have existed for all residents in the golden buckle of the sunbelt. But the recent history since the 1940s of racial segregation, impoverishment, and related problems, as Langston Hughes put it in another context, 'ain't been no crystal stair'.

The consequences of segregation and powerlessness are all too visible in neighbourhoods which have been ignored by Houston's privatised politics. A supervisor of street repair noted in the mid-1960s, for example, that almost all of Houston's 400 miles of unpaved streets were located in inner-city Black neighbourhoods.<sup>38</sup> As city officials noted in 1978:

The city, in its efforts to keep up with the tremendous growth of population and land areas away from the inner city, has been unable to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure of the inner city. These inner-city neighbourhoods ... are plagued by inadequate infrastructures (including unpaved streets, inadequate water and sewer capacity, nonexistent street lighting, decaying telephone and electrical lines) which are not adequately maintained and which negate locational advantages these areas may have to attract private investment.<sup>39</sup>

A 1968-69 study of Houston's inner city disclosed that Houston's poor neighbourhoods had a higher unemployment rate than many comparable poverty neighbourhoods throughout the nation, and this at the height of the economic boom. Inner city resi-

dents who found work were concentrated in low skill, low status, primarily unskilled service employment. The inner city also suffered from inadequate health care facilities, as extended health care was found non-existent and 90 per cent of residents in need of dental care. And 70 per cent of the city's major crimes occurred there.<sup>40</sup>

In Black communities outside the inner-city conditions were often worse. Settegast, an impoverished, Black neighbourhood in northeast Houston, was annexed in 1949 but did not begin to receive sewer trunk lines until 1965. The Wynnewood neighbourhood and nearby subdivisions in far north-east Houston were annexed in 1956 but as late as 1978 remained without city sewer or water services. Bordersville was annexed in 1965 but in 1985 residents still had outhouses and were without 'sinks, bathtubs, and toilets in their homes'.<sup>41</sup> These communities 'are part of a general pattern of predominantly black or brown neighbourhoods [annexed between 1949 and 1972] which have long lacked basic amenities. There are some 38 (possibly more) similar neighbourhoods all over Houston', concluded a 1983 study.<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes these neighbourhoods were not ignored, though they wish they had been. Most of the city's public and private solid waste sites, landfills, and incinerators have been placed in Black neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods in transition from white to Black residential segregation. To the extent that residents are without political power to influence decisions on municipal services, they are less able to affect not only the distribution of public goods but also less able to avoid the 'public bads', the byproducts of economic growth.<sup>43</sup>

The impact of the boom of the 1970s on such problems, a period when progress should have been

<sup>37</sup> Welch cited in Feagin, J. R., (1987), 'Tallying the Social Costs of Urban Growth Under Capitalism: The Case of Houston', in *State, Class, and Urban Revitalization*, Scott Cummings (ed.), Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>38</sup> Davidson, C., (1972), *Bi-racial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> City of Houston, 'Overall Economic Program for the Economic Development Target Area', cited in Feagin, 'Social Costs of Houston's Growth'.

<sup>40</sup> Burroughs, R., (1972), 'The History of Social Planning in Houston', unpublished paper.

<sup>41</sup> Wolde-Michael Akalou, 'The Impact of Annexation on Black Communities in Houston', unpublished paper presented to the Southwest Social Science Association (March, 1983), p. 9; Davidson, *Bi-racial Politics*, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Akalou, 'Impact of Annexation on Black Communities', p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Bullard, R. D., (1983), 'Solid Waste Sites and the Black Houston Community', *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 53, pp. 273-88 discusses how Black neighbourhoods in Houston are not only the last to get public services but the first, and often the only, neighbourhoods to get solid waste, landfill dumps, and toxic wastes. For a more detailed treatment of the general conditions faced by Blacks in Houston see Bullard, R. D., (1987), *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*, College Station, TX: Texas A & M Press.

notable, is questionable. Conditions in 1980 were little better than a decade before. In 1980 at least one fifth of all Houstonians lived in poverty or on the brink of it. The incidence of Black residential segregation remains high, ghettoised largely on the east side of the city. A recent United Way study stated, with alarm, that from one-fourth to one-third of the minority population in Harris (of which Houston makes up the large part) and Montgomery counties had incomes below \$10,000. Given the increasingly technical nature of the city's job market and the current ongoing recession it is doubtful that the low skilled will be able to escape poverty in the future. This problem is complicated further by the fact that in 1981–82 local sources accounted for only 2 per cent of the funding of 'basic needs services'. The rest, 98.1 per cent or \$129,703,327, was supplied by the Federal government. As this source of funding decreased in the 1980s conditions for those requiring such social services have deteriorated.<sup>44</sup>

As Lupsha and Siembieda conclude, public service provision — especially social services — is generally poorer in sunbelt and southern than in northern cities. And one reason for this is the local political culture.

The first basic condition for the provision of public services rests in the values and attitudes of the dominant economic and sociopolitical elites ... The fundamental difference in the disparate provision of public services in the Sunbelt, as compared to the Northern tier, is that elected political elites in the Sunbelt have traditionally believed that the provision of many common services — public

transportation, emergency medical services, paved streets, curbing, etc. — went beyond the legitimate obligations and functions of the polity.<sup>45</sup>

### Community Response

Nevertheless, urban policy in the United States is not the product simply of elite initiatives. Urban policy making is a dialectical process of interaction between elites and the grassroots. Citizens affect policy in countless little ways, expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the choices presented to them by the market place. The variety of choice, of course, is dependent largely on the amount you have to spend, whether it is for housing, health care, or transportation. But for concerns that rest outside the market or policy that presents a real alternative to the priorities defined by the private sector, grassroots organisation is critical. This was very clear in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, as urban social movements spread throughout the United States and Western Europe to push policy makers to address needs other than that of urban growth.<sup>46</sup> And citizen action groups continue even in the 1980s to play an increasingly important role in urban politics.<sup>47</sup> In a laissez-faire context such as Houston, however, there is less opportunity for such groups to form and less opportunity for those without money or power to affect urban policy.<sup>48</sup> In Houston, given the dominant political culture of laissez-faire capitalism and the institutions which reinforce it, not only are public services sparse but, equally significant,

<sup>44</sup> United Way of Houston, 'Children and Youth Task Force', (January, 1984).

<sup>45</sup> Lupsha and Siembieda, 'Poverty of Public Services', pp. 178–79.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Fisher, R., (1984), *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*, Boston: Twayne.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Boyte, H., (1981), *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Lowe, S., (1986), *Urban Social Movements After Castells*, London: Macmillan; Abbott, C., (1987), *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, Ch. 9.

<sup>48</sup> There are, of course, many reasons for the absence of challenging movements, reasons which relate to the failure of such efforts throughout the United States and especially in the South. But there are special dimensions to Houston's history which place hurdles in the path of progressive-oriented challenging groups, hurdles in addition to the one of privatised politics. Continuous growth made people content with their relatively better off condition, especially when compared with conditions in the rural South and Gulf Coast area. Wages and per capita income in Houston were high for the region. Tilly notes that social movement mobilisation is much more difficult in rapidly growing urban environments, not because people see themselves as better off, but rather in a relatively unstable situation of rapid growth the resources and organisation to support grassroots mobilisations are less available than in a more stable established urban context. The churches, so important in the life of the poor and working class, played a mediating role, encouraging moderation and accommodation rather than confrontation. Challenges in Houston were plagued furthermore by the absence of a left/radical alternative, by its slave heritage and years as a 'Jim Crow' city, by the threat of repression in the form of police brutality and the Ku Klux Klan, and by the spatial sprawl of the city which, at least to a modest extent, dispersed protest and made organising more difficult.

opportunities for initiating policy at the grassroots are constrained.<sup>49</sup>

Numerous sociologists and political commentators emphasise that the major development in mass movement organising since the 1930s has been the use of the state (government) by challenging groups as a battleground for the public debate of issues considered private affairs under laissez-faire capitalism.<sup>50</sup> They see, for example, the current neo-conservative effort to dismantle the welfare state and diminish Federal power in social affairs as a last-ditch effort to return economic issues to the private sector and keep them out of public debate. The objective, stated another way, is to remove government responsibility for the welfare of citizens and society, so that claims on the Federal government — whether it be for cleaner air or welfare benefits — are seen as illegitimate and anachronistic. In Houston, where government has been kept small and limited in power, where power has been concentrated in private, extra-political bodies, it has been near impossible to mount anything bordering on an effective challenge to the dominant directive of economic growth because of the absence of public arenas for discussing such issues and because challenging groups have had no significant public targets. The privatised politics of Houston has presented a formidable barrier to grassroots efforts; accordingly urban policy has remained primarily an elite affair with little input from community organisations or urban social movements.<sup>51</sup>

Which is not to suggest that Houstonians did not form community organisations or did not try to affect urban policy. It comes as a surprise to most to learn that Houston has more than 600 neighbourhood-based civic clubs. Houston is a highly conservative city, not exactly the place where you would expect neighbourhood organising to flourish. But it has been exactly this laissez-faire, business orien-

tation that has spawned neighbourhood civic clubs. The dominant community response in Houston to elite leadership and to the primacy of business objectives in urban policy has been to mirror and complement them.<sup>52</sup>

In Houston deed restrictions and civic clubs are said to take the place of public zoning. In residential neighbourhoods once the land is developed land use is determined, rather explicitly, by deed restrictions. Drawn up initially by the developer, such deeds include land-use controls, building restrictions, and, until recently, racial covenants. Under this system of land-use management, individual homeowners are ultimately responsible for enforcing restrictions. They are the ones who have to 'be on the lookout.' They are the ones who have to take a 'violator' to court to prevent a chicken farm or a Colonel Sanders from moving in next door. Since the first streetcar suburbs in the 1890s, Houstonians have banded together in neighbourhood-based civic clubs to assist each other in enforcing deed restrictions and, essentially, protecting property values.

To be sure, civic clubs throughout the city have performed a wide variety of functions, from lobbying city hall to supplying their own services, such as street lights and mosquito spraying, services which neighbours desired but the city would not or could not provide. But in a context where the local government does not direct or regulate land use, the primary function of civic clubs has been and remains not the delivery of services, for which most neighbourhoods lack the funds, but rather the protection of the neighbourhood against changes which would decrease property values. The laissez-faire consensus demands in Houston that community groups form to protect their own interests. The private sector not only makes policy but private individuals or groups at the grassroots must enforce it as well. Residents cannot expect assistance from the public sector or

<sup>49</sup> For examples see Burghardt, S., (1982), *The Other Side of Organizing*, Cambridge, MA: Schenkman; Fisher, *Let the People Decide*; Morris, A., (1984), *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, New York: Free Press; Castells, M., (1983), *The City and the Grassroots*, Berkeley: University of California; Lowe, S., (1986), *Urban Social Movements: The City After Castells*, London: Macmillan.

<sup>50</sup> This is the thesis of Piven, F. Fox and Cloward, R., (1982), *The New Class War: Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences*, New York: Pantheon. Also see Gough, I., (1979), *The Political Economy of the Welfare State*, London: Macmillan; and Midgley, J., et al., (1986), *Community Participation, Social Development, and the State*, London: Methuen.

<sup>51</sup> On the difficulty of grassroots organising in Houston see Carleton, *Red Scare!*; Fisher, R., (1987), 'Community Organizing in Historical Perspective: A Typology', in Fred Cox et al., eds., *Strategies of Community Organization Fourth Edition*, Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock, pp. 387-97; Bullard, *Invisible Houston*; Feagin, *Houston: Free Enterprise City*; Fisher, (1988), 'Where Seldom Is Heard a Discouraging Word: The Political Economy of Houston', *Amerika Studien*, Vol 33, pp. 73-91.

<sup>52</sup> Fisher, *Let the People Decide*, Chapter Three; Fisher, R., (1984), 'Be on the Lookout: Neighborhood Civic Clubs in Houston', *Houston Review*, Vol. 6, pp. 105-16.

from any sort of public urban planning. In response, an elaborate system of deed restrictions and widely proliferated, essentially conservative civic clubs have developed.<sup>53</sup> These neighbourhood civic clubs instead of engaging in a dialectical relationship with policy makers, instead of challenging the *laissez-faire* status quo, serve as one of the many means of maintaining it.

The case of the Fidelity Civic Club (FCC) on the east side — the poor side — of the city near the Ship Channel illustrates well the different experience but similar dilemma of grassroots organisations in poor, minority, and working class neighbourhoods. In the early 1950s residents of the Black, working class Clinton Park neighbourhood organised a civic club, as had their counterparts in affluent, white areas, to unite neighbourhood residents and lobby city hall for basic services. The primary objective of the FCC was to pave the major arterial in the neighbourhood, Burns Road (later renamed Fidelity Street). Members paid their poll taxes and voted in city elections. They wrote letters and on very rare occasions, after much effort, were able to meet briefly with a city official or their representative. But in general politicians turned a deaf ear to the neighbourhood's problems. Despite continuous efforts — mass meetings, letters, petitions, etc. — on the part of the civic club since the 1950s the blacktopping of Fidelity Street was not completed until Federal funds — Revenue Sharing — were allocated for such projects in the 1970s. The limited public sector in Houston had to choose judiciously where to spend its sparse funds, and poor Black neighbourhoods were never high on the list.<sup>54</sup>

A severely limited public sector posed other dilemmas for citizens seeking services. In Clinton Park neighbours were fearful that blacktopping would cost them too much money, for residents were expected to pay for this benefit, and they were afraid the city would put a lien on their house if they could not afford the service. The problem was not only getting a limited public sector to be willing to provide a service but also, in a *laissez-faire* city, citizens having to pay for the service as well. The

poor were the least able to afford increased taxes or special charges for basic services like street lighting or blacktopping. Accordingly, the affluent areas of Houston had paved streets, street lighting, trees, even extra policy protection, most of which they paid for themselves. In the poor sections, people often went without.<sup>55</sup>

### The Future of Urban Policy in Houston

In response to the current economic crisis in Houston, ushered in by the decline in world oil prices in 1982, many segments of the political and economic elite now see the need to expand local government, to use it as a means of financing, planning, and coordinating large scale projects. They seek the cooperation and support of an expanded public sector to address 'quality of life' concerns, such as the need for improved public transportation and other public services. 'The bare bones approach of local government', the Houston Chamber noted, may have 'at long last outlived its usefulness.'<sup>56</sup> Discussions range widely about the need to improve public services, about the declining quality of life in the city, and about the importance of increasing taxes to address city problems. Since the early 1980s the city has passed a wide variety of measures, from regulating road signs to sex shops, from mass transit improvements to beautifying the bayou that runs through downtown.<sup>57</sup> There is even discussion of how the crisis may be a blessing in disguise, because it has stopped boomtown growth and given the city an opportunity to address its mounting problems and because it has taught the city that the *laissez-faire* approach, leaving all key policy decisions to the private sector, is not always in the best interests of the city and all its citizens.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, in the last decade citizen action movements have begun to mount in Houston. This grassroots activism was assisted, first, by Federal programmes of the late 1960s and 1970s in Houston which legitimised public sector responsibility for urban problems and, second, by the current economic crisis which makes difficult the maintenance of

<sup>53</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>54</sup> Perry Manuscript Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

<sup>55</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>56</sup> Meeks, D., (1981), 'Houston, Texas: Image of a City', unpublished Master's Thesis, American University, pp. 61–62.

<sup>57</sup> 'City Moves to Curb Bad Effects of Growth', *Houston Post*, 24 March, 1985, 4D.

<sup>58</sup> Greanias, G., City Councillor, lecture, Houston In Search of A Vision conference, 31 October, 1987.

social programmes on which people have come to depend. As MacManus suggests, the attack on Federal social service programmes in the 1970s and 1980s and the inability of the City of Houston to fund such programmes locally, has spawned 'a public demand for new programmes.'<sup>59</sup> Recent victories by citizen action groups are obvious. Black voting in Houston now holds the balance in citywide elections, at least to the extent it remains unified. This is a long way from the era of the white primary and poll tax which effectively disenfranchised Black Houstonians from the early twentieth century through the 1960s. Blacks and Mexican Americans now sit on City Council and increasingly hold key, highly visible positions in the small but growing city bureaucracy. The women's movement is responsible in large measure for, among other things, the development and election of Kathy Whitmire to political office, first as City Controller in 1977, now as Mayor. Gay rights supporters have organised a sizeable grassroots movement and form an important voting block in the city. Alinsky-style community organisations such as The Metropolitan Organisation (TMO) have recently developed neighbourhood organisations in non-affluent communities throughout the city to fight for improved services and political responsiveness, and they are willing to use protest as well as negotiation with city officials to achieve their objectives.<sup>60</sup>

One of the common ingredients of the recent social movements in Houston is their willingness to focus attention on city government as the target of their activism. From the successful Federal law suit which replaced the at-large electoral system for city council with one that includes district representation from 'minority' neighbourhoods to the fact that the Mayor meets regularly with neighbourhood leaders and organisers from TMO, challenging groups since the late 1970s have demanded greater responsiveness from government at all levels and have demanded that the government assume responsibility for addressing the claims of city residents heretofore ignored.<sup>61</sup> Of course, the ability of the city to address demands for a more responsive and

expanded public sector, not to mention its ability to resolve quality of life as well as social problems, is seriously complicated by its current economic decline. But the economic crisis has stimulated, not diminished, calls for a rethinking of and a shift in urban policy.

It is difficult to know how the crisis will affect urban policy in Houston. It is probably safe to suggest, however, that to the extent that the legitimacy and functions of the public sector are expanded by elite initiative, that is through extra-political bodies such as the newly formed Houston Economic Development Council, a publicly supported private organisation, the initial concerns of that expanded public sector will continue to reflect the interests of those segments responsible for its creation. On the other hand, to the extent that laissez-faire ideology is called into question by the current crisis and the public sector is formally legitimised as an arena for policy debate and a target for the resolution of public problems, then citizen efforts which have been growing during the past decade have a greater chance to affect policy formation.

The economic crisis could end soon, if the price of oil rose again, and the city could immediately reinstate its laissez-faire approach. The public sector has not been sufficiently expanded in Houston to make that impossible. Nevertheless, the crisis in Houston does look like a long-term rather than a short-term phenomenon and the expansion of the public sector will allow challenging groups in the future to use it effectively as a forum for the discussion of urban policy and priorities. This does not necessarily mean that challenging groups will have greater success in the future, though they probably will, or that urban policy will shift dramatically, which it probably will not unless the current crisis deepens. But the expansion of the public sector and the decline of the hegemony of privatised politics and laissez-faire ideology, should these trends continue, will increase opportunities to both participate in the policy process and propose alternative visions of city life and priorities.

<sup>59</sup> MacManus, S., (1983), *Federal Aid to Houston*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, 'Houston: Where the Business of Government is Business', pp. 277, 281-84; Robert Fisher, 'Community Organizing in Historical Perspective', pp. 387-97; Bullard, *Invisible Houston*, Chapter 10.

<sup>61</sup> For additional information and sources related to recent developments in Houston see Fisher, 'Where Seldom Is Heard A Discouraging Word'.