

Chapter 1

Big City Neighbors in Action

“In the last few years, we have learned one thing clearly – no one is going to do anything for us. If we want to have a cleaner, safer, more livable neighborhood, we must do it ourselves. The federal government won’t do it for us, and City Hall won’t act without pressure from us.”

More than 500 Near West Side neighbors listened to this outspoken criticism and bitterly agreed. The speaker was Tom Wagner, president of Near West Side Neighbors in Action, a community organization on Cleveland’s Near West Side. The date was March 29, 1980. The recent election of a new mayor had not altered the conviction of Tom Wagner that, for Clevelanders, neighborhood revival and neighborhood survival depended more on sustained resident action than on a change in local politicians.

Wagner reminded the gathering that their organization had already outlived the political tenure of two mayors and five local councilmen since it had first emerged as the Ohio City Block Club Association. He praised the audience for the successive wars they had waged to rid the neighborhood of rats, dogs, arsonists, and abandoned cars. Then he grimly reminded them that continued neighborhood improvements required continual effort by every last resident of the area.

The Near West Side Neighbors in Action were meeting to consider policy resolutions for the ensuing twelve months. The resolutions sounded like a work program for a small city government:

- trees should be planted along I-90 to shield adjacent homes;
- police should improve the pick-up of abandoned cars, drunks in neighborhood parks, and debris in alleys;
- scooter patrols should be placed on local streets;
- vacant and vandalized houses should be torn down;
- a neighborhood-wide “Spring Clean Up” campaign should be organized in which city government should participate;
- potholes should be filled;
- street lighting and street signs should be added;

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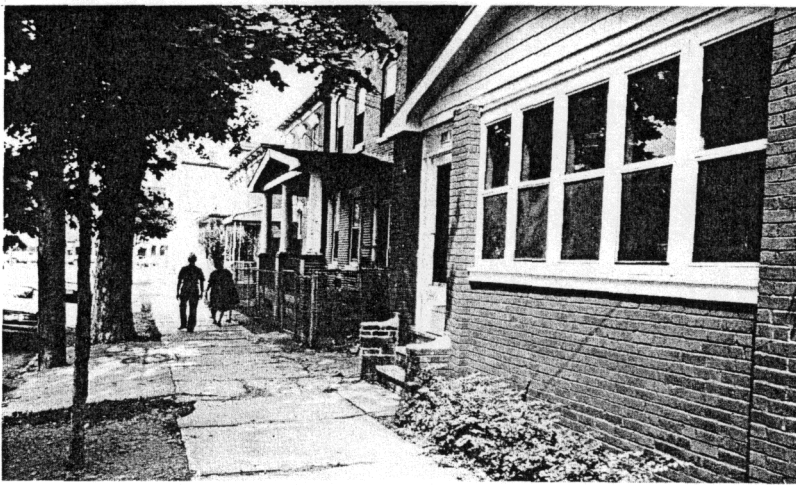
- trees should be planted on tree lawns; and sidewalks should be repaired;
- certain businesses which emit noxious odors should be prevented from polluting the neighborhood;
- the Dog Warden should institute a patrol to remove stray dogs.

Although this was an agenda for a city council, the Near West Side is not a city. Its boundaries are not printed on any city map. The Near West Side contains all of Ward 8 and parts of Wards 3 and 5. No councilman or state representative serves all of the Near West Side. No city department acknowledges its boundaries. Yet its residents know its dimensions.

The Near West Side begins at the west base of the Cuyahoga Valley and extends farther west to West 65th Street. On the south, it is bounded by Interstate 90, and on the north by Lake Erie. Within its boundaries live nearly 40,000 people of diverse backgrounds—many of Latin descent, Appalachians, American Indians, Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans, Blacks, Catholics, Baptists.

Lately, young white gentry have been moving into Tom Wagner's neighborhood, Ohio City. But nearby live the poor in public housing—high rise units for the elderly at Riverview and low rises for families at Lakeview Terrace. Despite their own diversity Near West Siders have more in common with each other than with the 550,000 Cleveland residents spread out over the city's many square miles. They share a common physical environment. Their dependence on common institutions for recreation, retail goods, and cultural activities binds them together.

Their physical environment is a product of Cleveland's prosperity before World War I. Manufacturing plants abound in the Near West Side, but houses are not protected from industry. Many of these houses were built before Henry Ford created the family car. At that time, few thought to build buffer zones to separate areas of industrial, commercial, institutional, or residential use. In large sections of the Near West Side, 75 percent or more of the houses lack garages. Many do not even have driveways. Cars are parked, repaired, and abandoned on residential streets. As many as three or four single or two-story frame houses are situated on thirty-foot-wide lots, one directly behind the other. Front doors open almost directly onto sidewalks. These houses have no noticeable front yards, back yards, or side yards.



A view of West 38th Street, south of Lorain.

In other parts of the Near West Side, the houses might once have been called mansions. They are remnants of the Near West Side's affluent turn-of-the-century past. Three stories tall, they boast beveled and stained glass doorways and spacious front porches. Some even have coach houses. In these neighborhoods, there are still beautifully designed, richly appointed churches to remind residents of the area's fleeting era as a community of the rich.

The Near West Side was built before zoning was a factor in city development. Now its houses without yards or garages, its many stores without parking lots, and its many alleys impose a lifestyle on both rich and poor, newcomer or lifelong resident that is almost totally unknown to the blacks in Lee-Harvard or those of Slovenian descent near Neff Road. A Hough resident, faced with the physical obsolescence of the Near West Side, would be certain that he was the victim of racial discrimination. Many Hough families can still strive for a suburban life style in a central city setting.

Not so, however, on the Near West Side. There, it is physically impossible for most families to have outdoor swing sets for children. Schools do not have grass-covered playgrounds. For most residents, churches and settlement houses, not schools or city facilities, are the only sources of culture and recreation within easy walking distance.

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Some of the Near West Side neighbors for whom Tom Wagner and his organization have attempted to speak live in a block bounded on the north by Lorain Avenue, on the south by Brough Avenue, on the east by West 38th Street, and on the west by West 41st Street. Probably none of the houses in that block had a market value in 1978 in excess of \$25,000. Some were worth as little as \$10,000. Most were valued between \$12,000 and \$17,000.

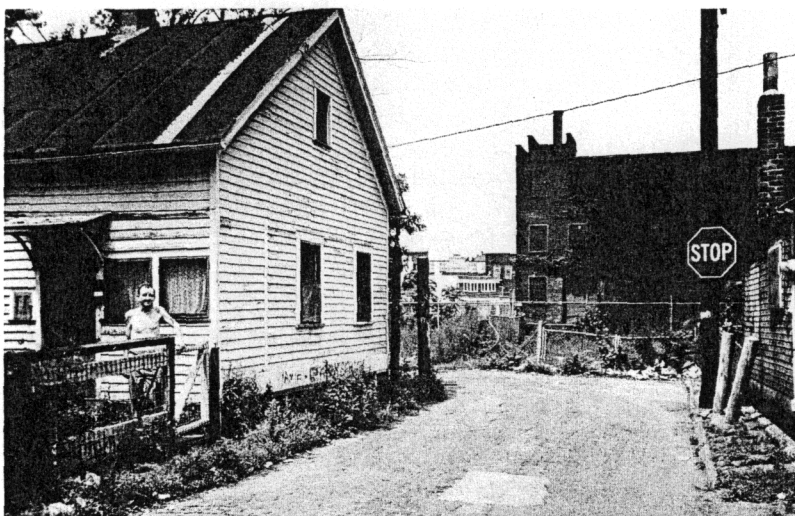
The houses were typically constructed between 1880 and 1900 when the area was part of Old Brooklyn. Most front doors are virtually on the sidewalk. There are few front yards, and back yards, if any, are usually quite small. Side yards are often just narrow strips. Lots range irregularly from 30 to 60 feet in width, and only an occasional lot has a garage. Alleyways lace the block.

Near the Lorain end of the block is a factory building occupied by Arrow Publicity Company and Ray-Craft, Inc. The building faces on no street, although its address is listed as 2067 West 41st Street. Access to the building is from an alley that passes the homes of Delphine Dotson and Albert Kish. Altogether, ten residences are on properties that bound this factory on three sides. It is easily seen above the tops of the houses.

Tom Wagner and his friends are concerned about the needs and aspirations of the residents near that factory. Delphine Dotson, Albert Kish, and Mark and Bernice Mikolic are representative of the range of needs and aspirations of people who lived near the factory in the summer of 1980.

Albert Kish is the oldest. He is a retired Great Lakes fishing captain. Divorced, he was born in the neighborhood and has lived there for over twenty years on the alley that leads to the factory building. His mother came from Hungary. Mr. Kish is a renter living on Social Security. His home is clean but spartan.

Actually, Mr. Kish lives in one part of a long one story frame dwelling. Another single man has the other end. Mr. Kish's portion is no more than twenty by thirty feet. He has three rooms—a living room, kitchen, bedroom and lavatory without a bath. He keeps clean by sponge bathing and by using his neighbor's bathtub. Every spare inch of land is devoted to his garden in which he grows carrots, beans, tomatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. Mr. Kish says his garden is important to meeting the cost of living. He cannot afford a rent increase or any other addition to his cost of living.



Albert Kish at his garden gate with factory building in background.

Not far from Albert Kish live Mr. and Mrs. Delphine Dotson at 2055 West 41st Street. The Dotsons own the largest home on the block – an attractive three story, ten room brick house on a 60 x 125 foot lot, that, if it had a garage, might be worth \$80,000 or more in most suburbs.

Mr. Dotson was born in West Virginia but came to work in Cleveland nearly 30 years ago. He has lived near his present home during most of his years in Cleveland. In 1978, at age 50, he retired based on accumulated seniority from factory work at the Ford Motor Company.

The Dotsons are the largest residential land owners on West 41st Street. Besides their ten room home, they own two houses on a single lot immediately adjacent to their home and another house farther south on the street. Mr. Dotson's mother lives in one of the houses and a son lives in another. Mr. Dotson plans to remodel the houses next to him.

He has no intention of returning to work as someone else's employee. He fully intends to enjoy life by tending to a large vegetable garden in the rear of his home and improving his properties. He loves the neighborhood, considers himself a Cleveland-er, would not live in any other neighborhood, and fully expects the neighborhood to improve.

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Mr. and Mrs. Dotson live immediately north of the Arrow Publicity Company's factory building. Mr. Kish lives immediately west of it. Immediately to the south of the factory are three houses on a single lot fronting on West 38th Street. The three houses contain five families—some related. The buildings are owned by a Lakewood resident; all occupants are renters, but some have been there over 20 years. Across the street, a few houses toward Lorain Avenue, live Mark and Bernice Mikolic.

The Mikolics are in their 20's and have two daughters. The youngest was five in 1980 and ready for kindergarten.

Bernice Mikolic was born in Georgia but grew up in the Collinwood area when her parents moved to Cleveland. She met her husband, Mark, while in high school. At that time, Mark lived near East 71st and St. Clair Avenue.

In 1978, the Mikolics bought their house on West 38th Street for less than \$15,000. Theirs is one of the few lots with enough rear yard for a swing-set. They expect to send their children to Orchard Elementary School, three blocks away, which, because of the Spanish and black population in the neighborhood, is integrated. They hope that the Federal Court will accept the natural integration of the neighborhood and not impose unnecessary busing of school children.

What most concerned the Mikolics in 1980 were neighborhood rowdies, unsupervised children, and the misuse of vacant lots. The lot next to them has been empty because the house on it burned. That fire damaged their own home. They would like to acquire the lot, which is tax delinquent. They can't do it because the City of Cleveland has not completed legal proceedings on the delinquency.

The problem of parental supervision of children extends to the very young as well as to teenagers. The block club to which the Mikolics belong wants Cleveland City Council to enact an ordinance that would permit the police to ticket parents whose children are in violation of Cleveland's curfew ordinance. There is a belief that if parents were fined for not controlling their children, children would be off the streets at night and better behaved.

Perhaps the greatest toll taken by uncontrolled children is seen at the Greenwood swimming pool two blocks away from the Mikolics on their own street. Mrs. Mikolic is concerned both about rowdy children and about broken glass at the pool.



The owners of Greenwood Pool.

In the summer of 1980, Greenwood pool was surrounded by debris and minor destruction. This is distinctly a neighborhood pool. It is approximately Olympic size – not one of the mammoth outdoor pools that one sees in the suburbs or at the large Cleveland parks. Its location makes it invisible except to those who live in the Mikolics' neighborhood. If neighborhood residents could control the pool and those around it, they would enjoy the comfort of a country club.

Instead, the young rowdies have wreaked destruction upon the pool, and adults tend to stay away. There is a gaping hole in the cyclone fence surrounding the pool. The hole is wonderful for freebooters but could cause a liability problem to the City if someone were to be injured in the pool after hours. Since anyone can enter the pool area through the hole at night to socialize, the bottom and deck of the pool often have broken glass – another safety hazard.

The block shared by the Mikolics, the Dotsons, and Mr. Kish is one on which many residents work hard to preserve and improve their own property and neighborhood. The City of Cleve-

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land's most valuable asset has become an eyesore and a safety hazard. Orchard School is surrounded by paved land and is not geared toward play. The responsible residents are hard pressed to gain public support so that civilized standards can be enforced on all residents.

In 1965, the neighborhood was designated by Cleveland's anti-poverty agency—the Council for Economic Opportunity in Greater Cleveland—as one of Cleveland's poorest areas. At the time when the agency's main west side office was located at West 35th and Lorain Avenue, the area was lily white, crime ridden, and declining. Today it is integrated, and the neighborhood is favorably situated directly adjacent to the West 41st Street entrance to I-90. Successful antique stores have opened nearby on Lorain Avenue. There are noticeable signs of commercial re-investment in that sector of Lorain Avenue.

What no resident can predict or immediately affect is the future of the Arrow Publicity Company's factory building. When the factory becomes economically useless to its present occupants—a virtual certainty over time—what will its re-use be? Will it revert to a residential use? Or will the proximity to I-90 and prosperity on Lorain Avenue bring a new business venture? Will the new use enhance or detract from the investments of the Dotsons and the Mikolics? Does anyone at City Hall care? Does anyone at City Hall even know that the factory building directly touches the residential life of a dozen families?

Mr. Kish, the Dotsons, and the Mikolics very much need the help of groups like Near West Side Neighbors In Action. The Dotsons and Mikolics, in particular, are investors. They are not community activists. They have made relatively low cost investments which they don't want to lose and which could increase greatly if their neighborhood improved. They are essentially enthusiastic about their neighborhood. Life on the Near West Side provides many highly desirable amenities at a low investment. They have vegetable gardens, tree-lined streets, proximity to shops, jobs and downtown, a public swimming pool, churches, and a neighborhood elementary school. They need Near West Side Neighbors in Action to help keep their life improving and their investment increasing. They are not certain that they can count on city government to share their views. They need a strong spokesman for their residential interests.

Community Organizations and Neighborhood Leaders

The Near West Side Neighbors is one of at least five such coalitions of street clubs, tenants associations, home owners associations, and neighborhood civic associations that have arisen in Cleveland since 1974. The historic Slovenian-Croatian community between East 40th Street and Liberty Boulevard is the domain of the St. Clair-Superior Coalition. From East 80th to Shaker Square and from Woodland to Kinsman, the Buckeye-Woodland Community Congress has staked its turf. Further to the south is the territory of the Union-Miles Coalition. Closer to downtown along the industrial valley, the Citizens to Bring Back Broadway are similarly engaged.

Utilizing many of the principles of Chicago's famed Saul Alinsky, these organizations focus on very local issues and employ confrontation as a primary technique to command action from government and businesses. Although their membership encompasses many low-income residents and their style is aggressive, their leadership is decidedly middle-class. All share the Near West Side's conviction that local government will not address special neighborhood needs without strong pressure. They have adopted the philosophy of the anti-poverty organizers of the sixties and put it to use on behalf of all residents in a particular neighborhood.

These Alinsky-like community organizations are the most recent array of neighborhood associations that began evolving in Cleveland before World War II. The oldest associations are less strident but not quiet. Their names are known to many – the Euclid Park Civic Club, the Glenville Area Council, the Hough Area Council, the Forest City Park Civic Association, the Lee-Harvard Community Council, the Mt. Pleasant Community Council, the Southwest Civic Association, the Waterloo Beach Homeowner's Association to mention a few. For decades they have pushed for better city services, and many city council representatives first gained supporters by service in those organizations.

With the growth of federal funding for neighborhood development in the 1960s, a third family of neighborhood organizations has also emerged in Cleveland. These call themselves community development corporations. The Old Brooklyn Community Development Corporation, the Hough Area Development Corporation, the Detroit Shoreway Development Corporation, and the Southeast Economic Development Corporation are in that

number. They are not confrontational. They build alliances between businesses and homeowners. A primary purpose is to construct and rehabilitate buildings. Their leadership, nonetheless, is like those of the old neighborhood associations and the new confrontation groups. It is resident leadership.

The Real Cleveland

All of those organizations serve the real Cleveland. The real Cleveland is the Near West Side, Hough, Euclid Park, and the multitude of other residential areas within the city limits. The residents of the real Cleveland are people like Delphine Dotson, Albert Kish, and the Mikolics. The civic leaders are citizens like Tom Wagner. The civic organizations for real Clevelanders are the many neighborhood coalitions, neighborhood associations, community development corporations, and street clubs that few suburbanites know.

Downtown is a symbol for the Cleveland metropolitan region, but it is only a small part of the real Cleveland. Downtown may belong more to suburbanites than to real Clevelanders. Real Clevelanders do not own the land downtown. The Citizens League, the City Club of Cleveland, and the Greater Cleveland Growth Association are not the civic structures for real Clevelanders.

City government as viewed by real Clevelanders is mostly concerned with delivering municipal services to their doorsteps or neighborhoods. Unless those functions are performed reliably and efficiently, no city government will be deemed a success.

For nearly two decades, the message real Clevelanders have been sending about their city government is that it is a failure. They have delivered that message by protests and sit-ins at City Hall, by electing five different mayors in 15 years, by regularly defeating incumbent council representatives, by refusing to work for any tax levies, and by voting for increased taxes only when city government has reached the brink of bankruptcy.

This book is about how the real Cleveland evolved to such a state, how its municipal government actually functions, and how city government might be better structured to earn the support and meet the needs of real Clevelanders.