

Beyond Cooptation or Resistance: Urban Spatial Politics, Community Organizations, and GIS-Based Spatial Narratives

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The roles, relationships, and strategies of state and civil society institutions in urban planning, problem solving, and service delivery are in flux. In trying to understand how these changes affect community organizations, grassroots groups, and local-level institutions of civil society, existing research has tended to conceptualize these roles through a series of oppositional dialectics, such as cooptation or resistance. This article shows instead that community organizations shift their technological, institutional, and spatial approaches to urban planning and problem solving in creative and multifaceted ways. They produce a variety of spatial narratives to advance their agendas by strategically enacting multiple roles vis-à-vis a diverse set of actors and institutions. Information technologies such as geographic information systems (GIS) can play a central role in this approach. Community organizations apply their own interpretive frameworks to GIS-based maps and images to produce spatial narratives of local needs, conditions, and assets that may be adapted to the diverse roles and relationships they negotiate in urban spatial politics. These arguments are developed from ethnographic research carried out with two inner-city Chicago community organizations pursuing a range of neighborhood improvement activities. *Key Words:* *community organizations, neighborhood revitalization, neoliberalism, participatory GIS, urban politics.*

The political relationships and material practices of urban planning, problem solving, and service delivery have changed dramatically in the past twenty years. These processes are increasingly carried out through purported partnerships of actors from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Emphasis on lean, efficient state structures has furthered this handoff of governance responsibilities to so-called shadow state institutions (Wolch 1990) and has led to an overall reduction in funding for planning, problem solving, and services (Peck 2001; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Fyfe and Milligan 2003). Widespread attention has been given to this transformation of the roles, responsibilities, and institutional configurations of state and civil society in urban spatial politics, with particular focus on the implications for local-level institutions, such as neighborhood associations, community-based organizations, community development corporations, and other nonprofit community agencies.¹

Community organizations' urban improvement activities, organizational structures, and institutional relationships are changing as well. They participate in an expanded range of activities, and the emergence of many new organizations has increased competition for a dwindling pool of funds (Cope 2001; Perrons and Skyers 2003; Vidal and Keating 2004). State and private funders' growing emphasis on technical expertise, use of

"best practices," and demonstrable achievement of measurable outcomes has led to what some characterize as a professionalization of the field (Morison 2000; Mitchell 2001). A growing number of community organizations use digital spatial technologies such as geographic information systems (GIS) to carry out statistical and spatial data analysis and mapping for program planning and implementation, fundraising, and monitoring neighborhood change (Sieber 2000; Sawicki and Peterman 2002; Elwood and Leitner 2003).

These developments constitute fundamental shifts in the processes and relationships through which local-level urban change is negotiated, planned, and implemented. Understanding the strategies that community organizations use to influence these processes and the relationships between state and civil society that may be altered through their activities informs several key questions in urban geography. These questions include the nature of democratic practice in the production of neighborhood and the role of spatial analysis technologies and different types of spatial knowledge in these negotiations. Spatial knowledge here refers to the characteristics and meanings that individuals, social groups, and institutions ascribe to particular places. Spatial knowledge is a critically important component of the changing practices and power relations of urban politics because it affects how and to what extent the needs, priorities, and goals of

residents and community organizations are expressed and included.

GIS and Society research has identified spatial knowledge as an essential element through which the social and political impacts of GIS technologies are mediated (Craig, Harris, and Weiner 2002). Much of the public participation GIS (PPGIS) literature, however, focuses on questions of technology and data access and outcomes of specific participatory GIS initiatives. Although important, this focus has neglected richer theorization of how agency and authority are negotiated in multiple ways among the actors and institutions in particular spatial decision-making processes where a GIS is used. To explore these intersections, I examine the following questions: How has existing research conceptualized the negotiation of community organizations' role and power in the politics of urban planning, revitalization, and service delivery? What roles and relationships do community organizations enact within these urban politics to try to maintain an influential and independent role? How are spatial knowledge and GIS-based representations implicated in these strategic relations?

Informed by ongoing ethnographic research with two Chicago community organizations, I show how they produce flexible forms of spatial knowledge to support different objectives at different times, cultivating multiple roles in urban planning, development, and social life simultaneously. The use of spatial information technologies is central to this approach as they use GIS to create narratives about neighborhoods that are interpreted and reinterpreted to support different roles and activities. By producing flexible spatial narratives that enable them to pursue multiple objectives, community organizations strategically navigate the institutional, spatial, and knowledge politics that produce and transform urban spaces, in a way that cannot be solely characterized as either cooptation by or resistance to more powerful state and business interests. Instead, they have devised a more complicated institutional and spatial strategy that allows them to maintain opportunities to insert their spatial knowledge into key decision-making practices, sustain long-term working relationships with other influential agents in urban spatial politics, and enhance their own capacities by drawing on funds, expertise, and advocacy from other actors and institutions.

Negotiating the Agency and Authority of Community Organizations in Urban Politics

Researchers across an interdisciplinary literature assert the importance of community organizations' capacity to

articulate their own agendas for social and spatial change, and to influence decisions that affect their communities. These efforts to explain how changing urban politics affect community organizations highlight three primary arenas in which the autonomy and authority of these institutions is negotiated: spatial politics, institutional politics, and knowledge politics. Each of these elements of urban politics has been framed by some as an arena through which community organizations can expand their role and power, and by others as a site of disempowerment relative to the state and other urban government actors.

Spatial Politics

Urban geographers and others argue that the politics of urban planning, problem solving, and service provision are fundamentally spatial. Several scholars have shown that the spatial scaling of these political practices, as well as the production of spatial meanings, plays an important role in determining agency and authority of different institutions, individuals, and social groups (Martin 2000; Wilson and Grammenos 2000; J. Fraser et al. 2003; Martin, McCann, and Purcell 2003; McCann 2003). State institutions, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations all engage in a range of spatial politics through which they attempt to influence urban change and decision-making processes (McCann 1999, 2001a; Purcell 2001; Wilson and Wouters 2003). For instance, Raco (2000) and J. Fraser et al. (2003) show that many policy regimes and planning practices aimed at improving urban conditions target "the community" as an ideal, appropriate scale. They contend that this definition of a local spatial scale as the appropriate one for community organizations' involvement limits their autonomy in urban politics. In this understanding of community organizations' changing role and power, spatial politics are used to mobilize local institutions in the service of state-controlled urban improvement initiatives, thereby limiting their influence on decisions affecting other spatial scales. Others argue that urban spatial politics can be manipulated by local organizations in order to increase their agency and influence. Community organizations might subvert state control over the planning process by resisting efforts to limit their involvement to a particular spatial scale, or build powerful coalitions by jumping scale, redefining a problem in their local area as part of broader political or economic inequities (Martin 2000, 2003b).

Similar debates revolve around the production and communication of spatial meanings in urban politics and their significance for community organizations. Wilson and Wouters (2003), Newman and Lake (2004), and

Stoecker (2004) argue that discourses representing neighborhoods as unhealthy and decaying or as opportunities for capital investment and profit can diminish community organizations' control over planning, policymaking, and development. In contrast, Martin (2003a) argues that efforts to assign meaning to a neighborhood (which she terms "place framing") can serve as a powerful way for community organizations to enhance the legitimacy and power of their agendas for change. In sum, the spatial scaling of participation, policymaking, or contestation, and the production of spatial meanings, are understood as key determinants of the agency and autonomy of local actors such as community organizations.

Institutional Politics

Other research has focused on the institutional politics of urban planning and problem solving as a central arena in which the role and power of community organizations is negotiated. This aspect of urban politics might include lines of authority between different actors in urban government, strategies that these institutions can use to try to influence one another, and allowable terms of negotiation over urban spatial change. Such institutional politics are sometimes explicitly defined through bureaucratic structures, such as positions on a planning board formally allocated to elected officials or community organization representatives. Alternatively they may be developed through the repeated practices and interactions among these actors, as in the case of a community organization expecting to review property development proposals in their neighborhood because elected representatives usually ask them to do so. Given the sweeping changes in the institutional structures and relationships of urban government, planning, and revitalization over the past decade, this aspect of urban politics has received a great deal of attention, though with little agreement about the implications for community organizations.

Two important shifts in institutional politics that have affected community organizations are altered organizational structures and funding practices. An increasing number of community organizations, for instance, receive a significant portion of their operating funds through contracts to deliver local state-service programs and from philanthropic agencies, which some researchers argue can limit their capacity to pursue agendas not in line with the priorities of these other institutions (Lake and Newman 2002; Martin 2004). Well documented across the United States, the structure of community organizations has shifted toward professionalized organ-

izations with greatly expanded budgets, ranges of activities, and numbers of paid staff (Vidal 1997; Gittell and Walker 1999; Stoecker 2003). Stoecker (1997, 2004) contends that this shift in organizational structure is part of a broader change in community organizations' approaches to urban improvement. Characterizing this as a shift from a "community organizing approach" to a "community development approach," he argues that the new approach limits the flexibility of these organizations to work toward a diverse range of goals, focusing them instead on capital investment in the built urban landscape. In contrast, other scholars argue that the greater financial capacity and expanded agendas of these larger organizations expands their ability to implement positive change in their communities and affords them a more powerful voice in urban planning and policy making (Bright 2003; Smock 2004).

Changes in the institutional politics of urban planning and decision making also include new forums for decision making and the devolution of responsibilities to community organizations, both of which are frequently characterized by local government as opportunities for participation. Some researchers argue that this devolution of responsibilities has not been accompanied by sufficient resources nor any actual power to shape agendas for urban planning and decision making. From this perspective, institutional politics is understood as a means by which community organizations are incorporated into state agendas (Lustiger-Thaler and Shragge 1998; Raco 2000; Peck 2001). In contrast, other researchers have provided examples of ways that community organizations have used these restructured institutional politics to insert their priorities and knowledge into local decision making. They suggest that the discourse of participation that characterizes these new decision-making forums provides an opportunity for community groups to insist on an influential role (Mitlin 2004; Taylor 2000; DeFilippis and North 2004).

Knowledge Politics

Planning, urban geography, and critical GIS research have highlighted knowledge politics as another key arena in which the role and power of community organizations is negotiated. This interdisciplinary body of research has shown that different types of knowledge and ways of representing the needs and conditions of a place influence the power and legitimacy of different actors' claims in spatial decision making. For instance, Gaventa (1993), Lake (1994), and Heiman (1997) have illustrated the greater power and relevance assigned to certain types of quantitative data and "scientific" or

“expert” knowledge in spatial decision making, compared with the experiential knowledge often gathered through community organizing efforts. Spatial knowledge and cartographic representations produced using a GIS and other digital technologies are often given greater weight in planning and policymaking than knowledge presented in other ways (Aitken and Michel 1995; Elwood and Leitner 2003). In navigating these political economies of knowledge within urban politics, community organizations and other institutions make choices about what knowledge to present and how, with the hope of influencing decisions or bolstering the perceived legitimacy of their claims. In the past ten years, the knowledge politics of urban planning and problem solving have been influenced by growing adoption and use of GIS and digital spatial data by a multitude of new users, especially community organizations (Goodchild 2000; Sui 2000; Crampton 2001; Elwood 2002a; Sawicki and Peterman 2002).² Debates about the impacts of these shifting knowledge politics on the role and power of community organizations offer divergent perspectives. Some researchers suggest that community organizations use these forms of expert data and technologies to navigate knowledge politics in ways that enhance their abilities to advance own priorities and agenda (Sieber 2000; McLafferty 2002; Elwood and Leitner 2003; Masucci and Gilbert 2004). Geographers’ work on “countermapping” highlights the ways that marginalized social groups have used maps to define and negotiate spatial goals, claims, and perceptions to their own advantage (Harley 1988, 1992; Wood 1992; Nash 1994; Rochleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Edmunds 1995; Sparke 1998). New approaches to GIS-based visualization have sought to include the spatial knowledge of marginalized and underrepresented social groups (Kwan 2002; Schuurman 2002; Sieber 2004). As well, there exist many examples of participatory GIS initiatives that have enabled community organizations and grassroots groups to disseminate their own spatial knowledge (Harris and Weiner 1998; Sieber 2000; Ghose 2001; Elwood 2002a, 2002b; Kyem 2002; McLafferty 2002; Elwood and Leitner 2003; Kyem 2004; Masucci and Gilbert 2004). Discussions of the knowledge politics of GIS and cartographic representation are also fraught with examples of their capacity to disempower and to constrain the range of spatial knowledge and perspectives that may be advanced. Hoeschele (2000) and Crampton (2003, 2004) provide examples of cartographic texts and GIS-based spatial knowledge being used by powerful social and political actors to exact top-down control and quash dissent. Others raise concerns that if community organizations advance their claims using forms of knowledge and information technologies

largely designed for and controlled by the state and private industry, they are vulnerable to incorporation of their agendas into those of the state, and a consequent devaluation of local experiential knowledge (Aitken and Michel 1995; Rundstrom 1995; Clark 1998; McCann 2001b; Hoeschele 2000; Crampton 2004).

In explaining the changing autonomy and authority of community organizations in urban politics, the existing literature offers a multifaceted conceptualization of the arenas in which these roles and power relations are determined. This existing research also documents ongoing changes in spatial, institutional, and knowledge politics in great detail. But there remains a significant difference between the dominant claims made about the effects of these shifts on community organizations. The persistence of such vastly different conclusions suggests a need to restructure the frameworks through which we conceptualize community organizations’ roles and relationships to the state and other structures. I contend that, in part, the divergent conclusions being made about community organizations stem from a tendency in the literature to debate their roles and contributions in terms of several oppositional dynamics: cooptation or resistance, an activist role or a service delivery role, expert knowledge versus experiential knowledge.

Community organizations have been represented as subject to state-controlled imperatives that mandate appropriate scales and spatial strategies for urban improvement efforts, or as enacting a resistant spatial politics by producing their own (necessarily different) spatial meanings and strategies. The role of community organizations within the institutional politics of urban planning and problem solving has been framed as either activism and resistance or as service delivery on behalf of the state. Discussions of knowledge politics have tended to understand the contributions of community organizations in similar terms, framing their engagement as either producing alternative knowledge or reinforcing hegemonic knowledge of the state and other powerful structures. Conceptualizing the role and power of community organizations in these terms is problematic for several reasons. It implies that community organizations adopt a single role as they navigate spatial, institutional, and knowledge politics. Further, it suggests that different roles within urban politics are mutually exclusive—that producing expert knowledge subverts the production and power of local knowledge, or that serving in a shadow state capacity precludes also maintaining an activist stance. Such conceptualizations overlook the possibility that the practices of community organizations might produce multiple and diverse roles, relationships, spatial meanings, and forms of knowledge. Just as urban

and political geographers have noted the difficulty of framing these complex politics and relationships through discrete categories of identification such as citizen or bureaucrat, state or civil society (Brown 1994), it is similarly difficult to understand community organizations' role and spatial knowledge production in singular terms.

Such framings of the role and knowledge of community organizations in urban planning and problem solving do not encompass the diverse range of their involvements and positioning within urban political processes. I will show here that these organizations simultaneously cultivate multiple roles as they participate in spatial, institutional, and knowledge politics. They are, for instance, actively working with and for state institutions and programs while simultaneously operating to mobilize protest. Far from being mutually exclusive, different roles and relationships are intentionally cultivated by community organizations as a strategy for increasing their autonomy and influence. In these practices, community organizations directly engage N. Fraser's (1992) notion that politics (and publics) must be understood as multiple or hybrid. In so doing, they create a flexible and multifaceted approach that targets emerging contradictions within the spatial, institutional, and knowledge politics of neoliberalism, devolution, and collaborative governance. Although neoliberal governance regimes frequently promote urban revitalization practices that try to involve community organizations in neighborhood-level interventions, the tremendous diversification of actors and institutions involved in urban governance affords community organizations a multiscalar set of potential allies and resources beyond this local level. Shifts in institutional politics of urban governance mean that community organizations relate to other actors and institutions in sometimes contradictory ways. The state and the private sector are resource providers, but also targets for grievances. Other community organizations are allies and partners, but also competitors for dwindling resources. With respect to knowledge politics, state and philanthropic agencies' current preoccupation with best practices standards, technical expertise, and accountability measures encourages community organizations to focus on production of expert knowledge. But, simultaneously, their access to these supposedly participatory decision-making forums is predicated on their perceived capacity to elicit and represent a diverse range of local knowledge and perspectives to these forums.

Some community organizations are able to recognize and exploit these ambiguities by adopting a variety of creative strategic approaches that work to the advantage of their communities. They produce multiple representations of community needs and priorities, in order to

engage a wide range of actors in urban governance. Production of spatial knowledge, particularly through the use of digital technologies such as GIS, is a critical element of this strategy. Organizations are using GIS to produce spatial narratives that represent community priorities and needs in shifting and flexible ways. These spatial narratives become a central part of their strategic enactment of multiple roles and relationships in the politics of urban planning, revitalization, and so-called community development.

These practices underscore a productive hybridity in community organization practices, as well as the rhetorical power and epistemological flexibility of GIS, even in the hands of relatively novice GIS users. It is also important to recognize, however, that these strategies are not wholly unproblematic and that they encompass an inevitably partial array of political strategies and spatial knowledges. For instance, the kinds of spatial narratives profiled here are shaped by the greater ease in GIS of representing the built environment than social relations, as well as the propensity of contemporary community development practices to focus on capital development. The politics and practices of urban planning, revitalization, and community development of course comprise only a small part of a larger realm of urban politics and represent only some of the ways that nonprofit organizations and community activists produce space, place, and knowledge. But even within this relatively small sphere, the significance of GIS-based spatial knowledge production in negotiating complex political practices is clearly evident.

In this article, these arguments are developed with evidence drawn from an ongoing case study of two Chicago community organizations that are broadly involved in urban planning and revitalization activities in an inner-city neighborhood northwest of the downtown area. This project is being conducted through a participatory research design that relies on ethnographic data collection and qualitative data analysis techniques. In addition to its research on the significance of GIS-based spatial knowledge for community organizations in urban spatial politics, the project has several interrelated educational and capacity-building goals involving university students and community organization participants. These goals include developing effective strategies for sustaining GIS capacities in community organizations through university-community collaborations, and enhancing student learning through integration of experiential service learning activities into GIS curricula. In this context of closely overlapping research, education, and capacity-building activities, developing reliable and robust answers to the project's research questions

involves careful attention to the role and daily activities of project participants. Participating students, research assistants, and I play technical facilitation and GIS instruction roles, such as tutoring community organization staff as they learn new GIS skills or assisting with data acquisition and preparation problems. The community participants direct the GIS application themselves, making choices about which spatial data will be acquired or developed, what analysis and mapping will be performed, and how the resulting output will be used by their organizations. In this manner, we hope to facilitate sustained GIS capacities in these organizations, while ensuring that the community participants are the ones shaping spatial knowledge production and application.

Project findings have been developed through collection and analysis of several types of ethnographic data. I conducted twenty-five semistructured interviews with community organization participants from April 2003 to June 2004. All of the interviewees were staff members or volunteer participants in one of the community organizations, and nearly all lived in the neighborhood. Reflecting similar demographics in the organizations' participants as a whole, the interviewees were primarily African American or Latino/Latina, and approximately half were male and half female. In addition to the interviews, I conducted approximately 160 hours of participant observation in several different settings, including public meetings and events convened by both organizations, staff meetings, and housing, safety, economic development, and other subcommittee meetings. I also conducted participant observation during weekly GIS tutorial visits at each agency's office. The arguments presented here are further informed by analysis of GIS-based maps produced by the community organizations, observation of their use of these maps and images, and analysis of strategic plans, meeting minutes, and community information documents. These data were analyzed through an interpretive analysis process informed by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Cope 2003), involving an iterative coding of field notes, maps, and interview transcripts around themes of spatial knowledge production, goals and strategies for urban spatial change, and the roles and relationships of different actors and institutions.

Urban Politics, Institutions, and Revitalization Efforts in Chicago's (West) Humboldt Park Neighborhood

The Near Northwest Neighborhood Network (NNNN) and the West Humboldt Park Family and

Community Development Council (WHPFCDC) are community organizations that work in a rapidly changing neighborhood on Chicago's northwest side (Figure 1). The area is characterized by a complicated range of social, economic, and infrastructural conditions. Growing rapidly in the early 1900s when linked to Chicago's downtown by streetcar, Humboldt Park comprised homes and light industrial and manufacturing activities, as well as retail services meeting the needs of its then mostly white working-class population. Beginning in the postwar years, the neighborhood was dramatically changed by suburban white flight, departure of its industrial and manufacturing employers, loss of many retail services, and concentration of increasingly impoverished households in its residential areas. For the past decade, the Humboldt Park area has been the focus of intensive efforts by local government, community organizations, and residents trying to improve quality of life in the neighborhood.

WHPFCDC and NNNN are two of many institutions through which these efforts are implemented. Both organizations try to address high levels of poverty, lack of affordable housing, poor structural conditions, and high levels of criminal activity. They work to retain the remaining industrial and manufacturing activities. Gentrification, most prominent in the eastern parts of Humboldt Park, is creating problems for some long-time residents and businesses as property values and housing costs increase dramatically. Both community organizations draw on long-standing activist traditions in their efforts to mobilize residents. In West Humboldt Park community participation has tended to occur through an informal network of block clubs and faith-based

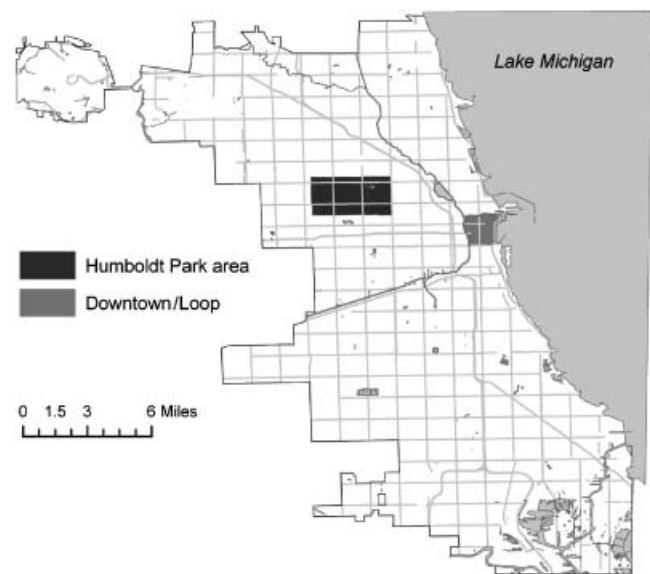


Figure 1. The greater Humboldt Park area of Chicago.

associations, whereas mobilization in Humboldt Park has tended to occur through formal organizations, many of them established through Puerto Rican nationalist activism (Ramos-Zayas 2003; Smock 2004).

The identification of Humboldt Park and West Humboldt Park as different neighborhoods and the attachment of meanings to these places are fraught with complexity around race, ethnicity, and income, and different characterizations of the dominant conditions in the two neighborhoods. The WHPFCDC and NNNN identify overlapping service areas, and neither group's service area or self-definition of neighborhood boundaries corresponds with boundaries defined by the City of Chicago as "Community Areas" or as electoral wards. The area identified as West Humboldt Park is primarily African-American and experiences higher levels of poverty and crime and lower gentrification pressures. The area identified as Humboldt Park is primarily Latino (though "Puerto Rican" is used in some forums), has higher income levels than areas to the west, and is experiencing significant displacement of residents and businesses due to rising property taxes and housing costs. Within the administrative geographies of the City of Chicago and within the target areas of NNNN and the WHPFCDC, the boundaries of these two neighborhoods are not clearly defined. Rather, the identifications Humboldt Park or West Humboldt Park tend to be used symbolically to connote differences in social, economic, and material characteristics.

WHPFCDC and NNNN frame their neighborhood improvement goals similarly, focusing on housing improvement, better access to affordable housing, employment training and job development, youth and family support, crime reduction, retention of employers, and prevention of residential and business displacement. The organizations differ in their structure, size, and scope. WHPFCDC has four staff members and three subcommittees focusing on revitalization of the area's main commercial corridor, crime and safety, and small business support. Participating residents tend to be active in block clubs in the neighborhood, though some have additional involvements in the neighborhood, as small business owners or operators of home-based businesses. NNNN has approximately ten staff members, multiple interns, and five subcommittees focusing on housing, economic development, employment, improvement of public schools, and neighborhood strategic planning. Nearly all participating residents have multi-layered involvement in the area, as business owners, community organizers, or employees for some of the many social service agencies and local government institutions active in Humboldt Park. NNNN serves as the

coordinating agency for an alliance of approximately 200 social service agencies and nonprofit organizations that plan and advocate for the needs and concerns of the greater Humboldt Park area. As this coalition, the Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP) is not a free-standing organization with its own staff, office, and programs; in practice, NNNN serves as the implementation agency for goals and plans identified by the larger HPEP constituency.³

NNNN and the WHPFCDC carry out their neighborhood improvement and advocacy efforts in an urban governance context that is fraught with ambiguities. The City of Chicago and other state structures are sources of funding and political advantage, as well as targets for grievances. The public, private, and philanthropic institutions they interact with promote a paradigm of inner-city revitalization focused on capital investment in the built landscape. Unsurprisingly, given the extent to which these powerful agents set the terms of debate and acceptable practices of neighborhood improvement in Chicago, the activities of NNNN and WHPFCDC involve some of these material interventions. However, both organizations also have a central goal of preserving the access of current residents to material and financial benefits from these interventions, and try to influence social relations in the neighborhood through activities that promote community organizing, popular education, and capacity building among residents.

Multiple Spatial Strategies for Advancing Community Organizations' Goals and Priorities

The NNNN and WHPFCDC organizations have developed complex strategies for negotiating spatial, knowledge, and institutional politics in ways that afford them greater influence over planning, revitalization, and policymaking in Humboldt Park. They demonstrate a keen awareness of certain tensions and fractures in urban politics, and cultivate flexible practices that allow them to exploit these ambiguities. This approach involves developing flexible forms of spatial knowledge that can be used to pursue multiple objectives and to engage other actors and institutions in multiple ways. Flexible spatial knowledge is a critical element of this approach because it allows them to represent the neighborhood and its needs and conditions in a variety of ways that may be shifted for different audiences or agendas. Later in this article I will show how NNNN and WHPFCDC use GIS to develop these spatial narratives.

In this section I detail the spatial strategies being enacted by the two groups as they cultivate multiple roles in urban politics. The roles that NNNN and WHPFCDC adopt in their activities, summarized in Table 1, are not intended to be coherent, singular, or complete, but, rather, are pursued simultaneously. In some activities, they may object to or try to disrupt state policies or public and private development efforts, in other activities they may deliver state-funded services or engage in their own capital investment strategies. NNNN and WHPFCDC are cultivating spatial and political strategies that are not solely about cooperation or resistance but engage elements of both, deconstructing any notion of a singular role for community organizations in urban planning, revitalization, and community development.

NNNN presents itself as a cooperative partner, while simultaneously acting in an objection/disruption role. One staff member explained their efforts to illustrate the organization’s readiness to work with local government, which she explained as central to their efforts to cultivate local government support for their activities:

First we put things on paper. The plan would be put on paper and sent to them. Then I’ll follow up to make sure

Table 1. NNNN and WHPFCDC roles and activities

Role	Activities/Strategies
Shadow state partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct service provision to residents. • Capital development efforts in collaboration with state institutions.
Objection/Disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilize residents to challenge state action, policy, or inaction. • Direct action. • Demand different action, priority, policy change.
Developer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing/economic development efforts that bypass state. • Direct negotiation with for-profit developers and financial institutions.
Community builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block clubs and other activities enriching ties between residents. • Conflict resolution among residents and neighborhood institutions. • Community education and skill building with residents.
Networking advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build networks with a wide range of public, private, and nongovernmental actors and institutions. • Use networks to garner material and political resources for the neighborhood. • Use networks to advocate for neighborhood priorities.

Notes: NNNN = Near Northwest Neighborhood Network; WHPFCDC = West Humboldt Park Family and Community Development Council.

they got it, what do they think about it, what needs to be changed. In that aspect we work with them: “Okay, we’ll change this here, so it would be better for you. But we want to change this over here.” So it’s a compromise.

—(Teresa, personal interview, 2004)

She went on to suggest that this conciliatory approach does not preclude a more aggressive protest role, arguing that the willingness of local government officials to negotiate is directly related to this potential for disruptive objections:

[City officials] know we’ll be out there and we’ll have the media and that kind of tells them the community really wants this. They think “how can we go against this? If we do, [the media will] be talking about it and we’re going to have bad feedback.” . . . Then the mayor’s going to sit there and say to them “Well, wait a minute—this is all they wanted and you gave them a big fight?” . . . So usually just sitting down at the table with the department we need works.

—(Teresa, personal interview, 2004)

The organization uses a similar combination of the two roles in their interactions with commercial and residential property developers, both cultivating active negotiations and generating actual or implied disruptive actions. Another staff member characterized the organization’s negotiations with developers over including affordable units in new housing projects as a process of compromise and conciliation, then went on to explain the utility of delaying tactics in pressuring developers to meet their expectations:

The whole team of developers just cares about the bottom line. You know, what they’re going walk away with. And a lot of them have high expectations. They want to walk away with at least 100 million in their pocket, and so we just start saying, “Well, you know, this is not going to fly. I’m sorry. Maybe you can go back and bring it back maybe in six months, eight months, or whatever,” and real quickly, they’re thinking about the money they’re going to lose [because of the delay].

—(Alonso, personal interview, 2004)

NNNN’s strategy illustrates an understanding of the interests and priorities of actors involved in urban governance and of the ability to exploit tensions within them. In the first example, they pressure cooperation by publicly challenging elected officials’ legitimacy as representatives of community concerns. In the second, they capitalize on developers’ profit goals, forcing capitulation by threatening costly delays in granting community approval for development projects.⁴

In pursuing multiple objectives within urban governance and revitalization processes, the community organizations engage with both the neighborhood's built environment and its social relations. In its role as developer, WHPFCDC is creating a community land trust through which it will build and market affordable housing, trying to retain control over housing development and affordability through the administrative powers of the land trust. Simultaneously the organization acts as a community builder through programs that promote relationship building, popular education, and critical consciousness-raising among residents. One of the organizers offered this example of a community arts project she organized with youth, artists, and local businesses whose owners tended to characterize teens as a neighborhood problem:

I see the artists as sort of the tool for doing popular education. I think organizing is not just about the bricks and mortar and getting the actual [material] things, but it's about opening people's minds and getting them to think critically about their lives and their experiences. That's really what drives people to take on these larger campaigns. You have to start with a critical thinking piece and that's what I'm trying to do with the youth for this project. . . . A lot of these things are really understanding things that community groups weren't trying to understand in the past, like how the City's actually spending its money, and how your tax dollars are being used.

—(Andrea, personal interview, 2004)

This emphasis on popular education, mobilization, and social cohesion does not preclude activities that focus on capital investment and return. Clearly, the land trust focuses on such capital investment in the neighborhood's built structures, but with emphasis on retaining community control over properties and revenues:

It's for economic development . . . pushing more toward [housing development] as opposed to these huge box retail stores. I think the land trust . . . it's really the only model I've seen that a community actually controls the parcels of land. [The community] can decide. When everything is a private deal, you don't really have much input into that. There's not much you can do unless [the developer] is getting subsidies from the City and then you can push the City to do something.

—(Andrea, personal interview, 2004)

The WHPFCDC also frames the community land trust as a critical component of its social and spatial strategies in the neighborhood, describing the trust as a way to strengthen social cohesion by reducing the high rate of household moves in the neighborhood and re-

ducing residents' vulnerability to displacement by potential future gentrification. In the land-trust initiative, WHPFCDC's roles as community builder and developer come together as a multifaceted spatial strategy in an attempt to foster community participation and control over neighborhood change. Staff members' explanations of these intersecting efforts illustrate a detailed understanding of institutional and spatial politics that shape community action, housing access, and housing development in West Humboldt Park.

Finally, both organizations combine their networking activities with other roles as a means of building ties and accessing resources that they hope will give them greater influence. For example, WHPFCDC supports its land-trust project by building ties with actors and institutions far beyond their usual neighborhood- and Chicago-focused networks. Through these new relationships they have obtained administrative advice from community land trusts across the United States, recruited a legal aid clinic to prepare the land trust's charter and bylaws, and sought guidance from participants at community planning and economic development conferences. NNNN builds similar advocacy networks alongside other roles as a means of assembling necessary expertise, financial resources, and political support for projects. Describing NNNN's housing development activities, an organizer explained:

Bickerdike, for example, we could partner up with them and they can be the contractors for a [housing development] project, because they have Humboldt Construction, which is a for-profit entity. Also sometimes they have been used in that sense for assisting, putting together financing for a project, getting support when needed to make projects move forward. . . . When you got that kind of unity with different groups, working on the same project, it gives you more leverage with whoever—with funders, with the City, with the Alderman.

—(Juan, personal interview, 2004)

This dual approach of network building as a means of ensuring the likelihood of success of other neighborhood revitalization roles and activities requires careful negotiation of institutional and spatial politics to create shared activities with institutions that may also be direct competitors. For instance, Bickerdike is a nonprofit housing developer that submits proposals for some of the same grants and housing projects as NNNN. Sustaining working partnerships among such community agencies is fraught with difficulties, but rests in part on creating shared narratives about the neighborhood. In the next section, I explore in more detail the significance of these spatial narratives.

GIS-Based Spatial Knowledge: Flexible Narratives of Space, Place, and Change

The production of spatial knowledge is a critical element in community organizations' efforts to pursue multiple objectives for neighborhood change. As illustrated above, groups such as NNNN and WHPFCDC shift their strategies for different audiences and agendas, and this approach involves conceptualizing and intervening in the neighborhood in very different ways. In this section, I shall illustrate that in this process, community organizations produce a variety of accounts and interpretations of neighborhood conditions, needs, goals, and activities. These spatial narratives are flexible frameworks that produce and reproduce the neighborhoods in different ways for different audiences, projects, or arguments. A growing number of community organizations develop spatial narratives through visual images such as photographs, maps, and charts. Staff members at NNNN and WHPFCDC commonly use all of these forms of visualization, but I focus here on their use of GIS to produce spatial narratives. Visualization is a way of expressing knowledge about place and spatial relations and also a way of creating spatial meaning through exploration and interpretation (Schuurman 2004; Knigge and Cope forthcoming). It is therefore a powerful means for community organizations to produce and communicate spatial knowledge supporting their activities. In their GIS-based maps, NNNN and WHPFCDC produce multiple narratives about neighborhoods, conditions, and capacities (summarized in Table 2), and use them to inform and strengthen a diverse range of projects, arguments, and decisions. In some senses, these narratives make visible the spatial stories (De Certeau 1984) of neighborhood that are being produced through the urban revitalization practices and negotiations of these two

organizations. Much like De Certeau's conceptualization of the coproductive interplay between spatial story and spatial practice, these GIS-based spatial narratives and the community organizations' spatial practices are mutually constitutive.

Both groups commonly produce *needs narratives*, with specific meanings designed to illustrate problems manifest in neighborhoods and structures or, occasionally, problematic activities of some residents. In contrast, *asset narratives* are designed to illustrate resources for positive neighborhood change, or existing opportunities for improvement. A map showing distribution of vacant lots in Humboldt Park might be presented through a needs narrative as sites of criminal activity. It could also be presented through an assets narrative as showing opportunities for building affordable housing. *Injustice narratives* are often comparative, seeking to demonstrate uneven development of many kinds and to frame these differences in neighborhood conditions as part of broader inequities experienced by a neighborhood and its residents. *Accomplishment narratives* are developed by both organizations to demonstrate their successful development and implementation of revitalization programming, and to show improved neighborhood conditions linked to these activities. These narratives are most commonly directed toward local government institutions and funding agencies to garner further support, but they may also be directed at neighborhood residents in an effort to build a reputation as a strong and effective advocate for the community. Finally, both groups produce *reinterpretation narratives*, in which they present official data or accounts of neighborhood needs and conditions, but interpret them to reach different conclusions. For instance, Chicago policymakers who establish cost thresholds for housing deemed affordable by low- to moderate-income families use median income data from

Table 2. Spatial narratives, purposes, and interpretive examples

Spatial narrative	Purpose	Interpretive examples
Needs	Show current or potential problems with neighborhood spaces, structures, or people.	Vacant lots as sites of problematic activities (drug dealing, violence, loitering).
Assets	Illustrate existing resources or opportunities for positive changes in neighborhood space, structures, people.	Vacant lots as sites for new houses or businesses.
Injustice	Show inequalities between neighborhood and other places/scales.	Vacant lots in multiple neighborhoods, to show unequal conditions.
Accomplishment	Illustrate community organization successes in neighborhood (programs, physical/material forms of development).	Vacant lots acquired for inclusion in community organizations' affordable housing land trust.
Reinterpretation	Present official data through new interpretive frames, to advance neighborhood priorities or agenda.	Lots designated as vacant in city database, but categorized by community group to differentiate community gardens from unused land.

the U.S. Census to set this threshold. Organizers at NNNN have used these same data to argue that existing thresholds are beyond the reach of many Humboldt Park households, doing so by shifting the spatial scale and resolution of their analysis.

Production of these spatial narratives involves more than simply creating a map of neighborhood conditions or organization activities. An essential aspect of these narratives is the interpretive frameworks through which the organizations present them and intend for them to be understood. This interpretive framing is what enables production of a diversity of spatial narratives, sometimes through re-presentation of the same maps, images, or data. That is, as illustrated in Table 2 in the example of vacant properties, a single map can be framed to develop several spatial narratives. This interpretive framing may be accomplished through titles and other text on a map, oral discussion or presentation of a map to different actors and audiences, discussion of the image in an accompanying document such as a grant proposal, or through many other types of interventions. NNNN and WHPFCDC transform their interpretive frames to produce and reproduce diverse spatial narratives. Their efforts to create flexible forms of spatial knowledge that can be adapted to address a range of arguments, situations, and audiences play a fundamental part in enabling them to enact multiple roles in urban politics. In the subsections that follow, I provide examples of two maps produced by NNNN and WHPFCDC organizers and used in this manner.

West Humboldt Park: Framing Spatial Narratives of Asset, Accomplishment, and Need

The map shown in Figure 2 has been used by organizers at WHPFCDC as part of several different spatial narratives. It was initially created to be part of WHPFCDC's display at a retailers' convention. Organizers hoped to attract retailers to the neighborhood's main commercial corridor, which contains many abandoned store fronts and vacant lots. Supporting WHPFCDC's role as a developer, this image develops an assets narrative, portraying the neighborhood as a place experiencing active investment in its institutional and retail landscapes and as a place full of large lots available to new businesses. Originally created for a single situation, this image and its narrative of neighborhood assets has been used in WHPFCDC's negotiations with other retailers, property developers, and financial institutions, in efforts both to spark and to direct new activity in its commercial core. A staff member offered this account of the organization's activities around one of the areas presented as a potential development site: "All the lots are for sale, so the Council has been marketing the site . . . as an opportunity to assemble quite a large parcel of land. . . . we're targeting commercial, but maybe mixed use as well. The council is looking at a more aggressive development role" (Randy, personal interview, 2004). He went on to discuss the importance of asset narratives as a means to counter media framings of West Humboldt Park as a place of danger, disinvestment, and decline.

Figure 2. West Humboldt Park Family and Community Development Council's (WHPFCDC) developments and opportunities map.



In other situations, this map has been framed as an accomplishment narrative, to try to gain support and influence with the local state, as WHPFCDC seeks a partnership role. Staff members at WHPFCDC described presenting it in negotiations with officials from the City of Chicago's planning and housing departments, seeking their financial and administrative assistance in developing a much-needed grocery store. They presented the map as an illustration of WHPFCDC's success in bringing to the neighborhood such needed establishments as a pharmacy and gas station. Staff members contend that cultivating a reputation as a good collaborative partner is essential to building community influence over land use and commercial activity on West Chicago Avenue. As one staff member said, "The Alderman now sends [retailers and developers] here first. He says, 'If the Council approves, then you come back to me here, then go back to the City. If the Council thinks it's okay . . . you can go ahead'" (Ana, personal interview, 2004).

In other situations, this map has been presented as a needs narrative, with organizers emphasizing to residents and local government officials the challenges that they face in efforts to bring needed services to the neighborhood:

[The map] shows them exactly why it is so hard to do commercial development on West Chicago Avenue. Twenty to thirty thousand square feet is the size of a typical big pharmacy. That means we have to assemble additional parcels . . . and that raises the costs. It's time, money, and politics when you talk about assembling multiple parcels, vacating alleys, and things like that.

—(Randy, personal interview, 2004)

These examples illustrate how a single image can be produced as multiple texts, presenting and re-presenting West Humboldt Park by applying different interpretive frames in its presentation and dissemination. Interpreted in one way, this image constructs West Humboldt Park as a place of limitations on reestablishing services and institutions needed by residents. Interpreted in another manner, the map constructs West Humboldt Park as a place of assets and opportunities. These constructions of neighborhood are oppositional in their messages but not necessarily contradictory in their goals. Although they forward different spatial meanings, both texts are directed at WHPFCDC's goal of developing resources and power to effect change in the neighborhood's landscapes. The organization attempts to do so by cultivating a variety of different roles in the processes of urban change and adapting its narratives to fit these roles.

The production and dissemination of this map warrants at least one caution with respect to its role and impact on the neighborhood. The interpretive frames applied to this map at the time of writing have supported only one perspective on what might constitute economic development in the neighborhood: attracting new businesses to the area. The map does not communicate the presence of active debate in West Humboldt Park about the need to also assist existing small businesses on West Chicago Avenue, even while attracting new services such as a grocery store or pharmacy. WHPFCDC participants continue to debate this issue vigorously, but there is certainly room to argue that this map, because of its wide use and powerful discursive presence, may eventually constrain diverse understandings of appropriate economic development in this place. At this moment there remain multiple understandings among West Humboldt Park residents and WHPFCDC staff about the kinds of spatial strategies that constitute appropriate economic development, in spite of the fact that this particular narrative adopts a commodified understanding of and approach to the neighborhood.

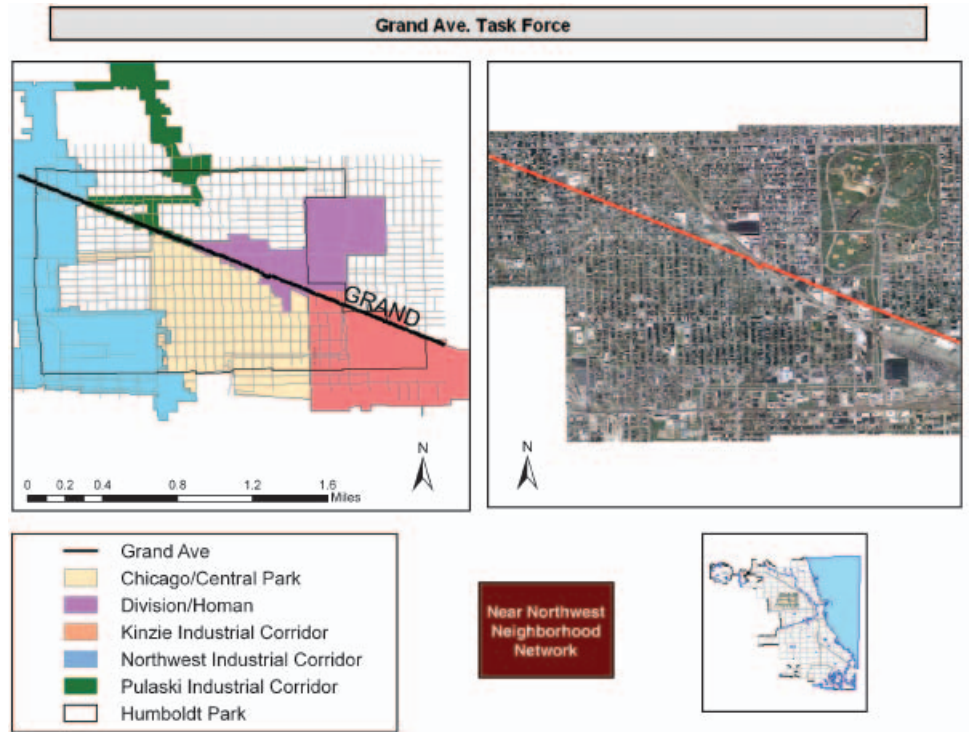
NNNN: Framing Spatial Narratives of Reinterpretation and Opportunities

NNNN has also used its GIS resources to create flexible spatial narratives that speak to different objectives. This effort is best exemplified in two maps (Figures 3 and 4) generated by an NNNN organizer.⁵ The area shown in these maps, Grand Avenue, is a major transportation corridor southwest of Humboldt Park. It is a key focus of NNNN's efforts to retain industrial and manufacturing employers and combat the conversion of vacant industrial structures into high-priced condominiums. New developments, industrial retention efforts, and land use or zoning changes on Grand Avenue are negotiated in the Grand Avenue Task Force, a non-binding planning group that includes business owners, residents, NNNN and other community organizations, and local government officials. In April 2004, two owners of vacant industrial properties appealed to the Task Force, seeking support for zoning changes necessary to enable sale of their properties to commercial retailers. NNNN organizers prepared a presentation and the maps in Figures 3 and 4 to advance a different agenda:

These two owners came with a plan for a mini-mall on Grand—a Foot Locker and a Subway and things like that. So we're going to make a presentation on preservation of the existing land use, to try to stop the mini-mall plan.

—(Ana, from author's field notes, 2004)

Figure 3. Near Northwest Neighborhood Network's (N4444) Grand Avenue land-use map.

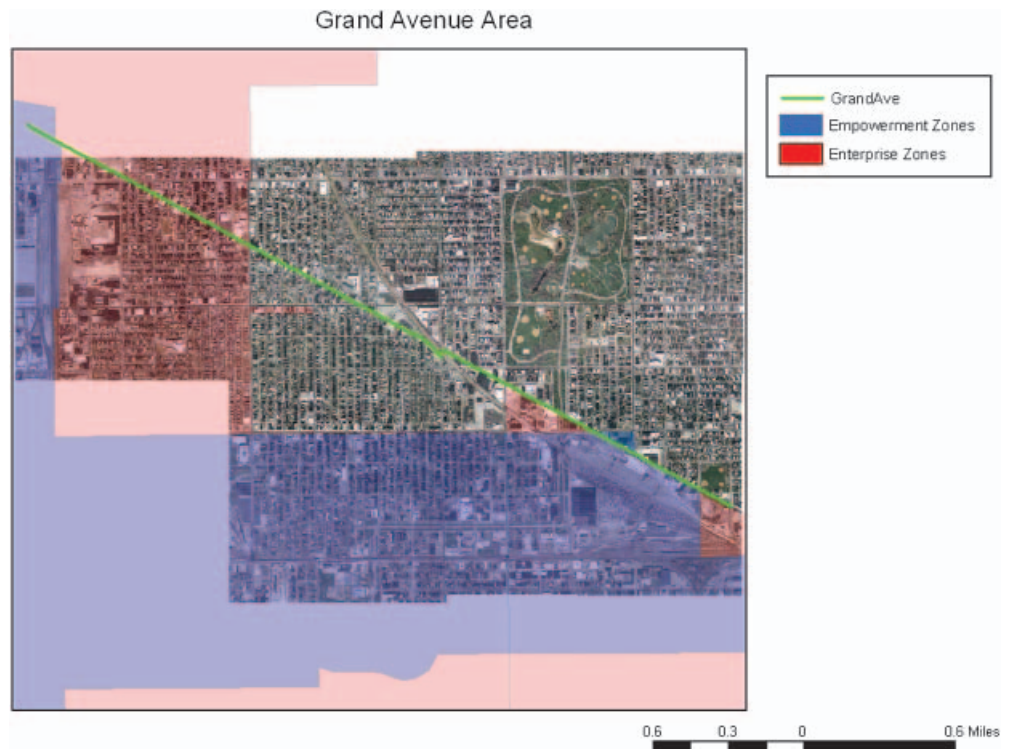


We're trying to stop the condos marching in here, along with the retail businesses. . . . If you look outside our neighborhood down by Grand and the river, you can see what could happen here. This western portion of our part

of Grand has slightly different issues. Here we are focusing on retention. We want to retain the industry and manufacturing that is already there.

—(Alonso, from author's field notes, 2004)

Figure 4. Near Northwest Neighborhood Network's (N4444) empowerment/enterprise zones map.



Several spatial narratives were advanced in this presentation, with the two maps used in tandem to support different arguments about appropriate land use and forms of neighborhood change in Humboldt Park. Each was intended to support a different priority and role that NNNN enacts through its activities in the Grand Avenue area.

Figure 3 was developed as a reinterpretation narrative to counter arguments by the two property owners and some Task Force participants that Grand Avenue is a mixed-use area of retail, manufacturing, and industrial activity. On the left side of Figure 3 the industrial character of Grand Avenue is emphasized by displaying the nearby city-designated industrial corridors. The organizers sought to underscore the legitimacy of their claim by showing the proximity of Grand Avenue to “Humboldt Park,” the area that NNNN is understood to represent. To this end, the image on the left includes the official boundaries of the Humboldt Park Community Area and the image on the right includes an air photo showing the park for which the neighborhood is named, highlighting Grand Avenue immediately to the south. This effort to reinterpret characterizations of mixed land use by presenting the area as industrial supports NNNN’s objection/disruption role, in which it argues against further retail and residential development and the policy changes that would allow it. The maps in Figure 3 present a different spatial narrative of the Grand Avenue area to support their objections and underscore the legitimacy of NNNN’s perspective by emphasizing its institutional and geographic connections to Humboldt Park.

In the same presentation to the Task Force, the map in Figure 4 framed the area around Grand Avenue through an opportunities narrative, to support a different role and set of activities. The organizers once again included Grand Avenue and an air photo of the surrounding area, but overlaid the image with the boundaries of areas eligible for business development funding and incentives from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Empowerment/Enterprise Zones program. Humboldt Park, they argued, has many opportunities for commercial development, with plenty of programmatic resources supporting these activities in other places near the Grand Avenue corridor. Acting in the role of networking advocate, NNNN sought to make the property owners aware of other sites and institutional resources for the kind of the retail development they sought. As one of the organizers said after the presentation, “[We showed them] you can’t do it here, but here’s a map where you can do it. You can’t do it at this certain spot, but you can move over here and do it at this other spot” (Maria, personal interview, 2004).

The spatial narratives forwarded in Figures 3 and 4 work to advance NNNN’s goals of retaining industrial employers and influencing the processes and outcomes of planning and revitalization efforts in Humboldt Park, but they do so through very different roles. Using a reinterpretation narrative, they directly object to an unwanted land-use change by presenting their own characterization of neighborhood land uses. With an opportunities narrative, they play a networking role, linking developers to information about alternative locations where the proposed project might be feasible.

For both NNNN and WHPFCDC, the use of GIS to produce and reproduce spatial narratives that advance different agendas for the neighborhood is an intentional political practice. It reveals a sophisticated understanding of the knowledge politics in which they are embedded and the complicated power of visual images and spatial technologies to produce narratives that are likely to be received as authoritative characterizations of the neighborhood. Specifically, they attempt to capitalize on both the discursive power of GIS-based visual images and the implied expertise suggested by their use of this technology. Participants in both organizations contend that the actors and institutions with whom they negotiate are likely to understand these maps as presenting an unassailable truth about a place. After the Grand Avenue presentation, Teresa reported back:

When you bring them a piece of paper that says, “Well, this is what is happening,” they’re like, “Okay. Now we know.” So we can *talk* about it, but some people don’t see it. . . . So that’s what [Alonso] did for the Grand Avenue Task Force. [He] did a presentation with maps and everything, so it’s not just verbal. . . . When [he] did the presentation, they’re like “But are you sure this is it?” And he’s like “Yes, it’s there. It’s on the map.”

—(Teresa, personal interview, 2004)

Teresa and other organizers feel that visual representations of the neighborhood are a powerful means of making their claims. Additionally, they believe that using computer technologies to produce these images is a potent strategy to bolster the legitimacy of their claims and to cast themselves as knowledgeable skilled actors in neighborhood decision making. This attempt to harness the power of visual images as authoritative portrayals of the neighborhood is based on an understanding of these spatial narratives as fluid and negotiable. Demonstrated through their use of GIS to produce multiple and often oppositional spatial texts, staff members at NNNN and WHPFCDC understand these narratives not as reality per se, but as strategic presentations advancing a particular perspective. Nonetheless, they also understand

that if flexible narratives are advanced through GIS-based maps, they are more likely to be received as authoritative representations and can also carry tremendous emotive power in highly charged debates about social and spatial change in their community.⁶

NNNN and WHPFCDC demonstrate an understanding of the discursive and technological authority of maps and GIS and of how this authority can be used to their advantage. They capitalize on the flexibility of GIS-based spatial texts to produce a variety of interpretive framings of their communities. These findings are important for critical and participatory GIS research on a number of levels. Debates about community organizations' use of GIS have tended to focus on how GIS facilitates their efforts to present agenda or knowledge alternative to that of the state. Additionally, these discussions have focused on whether GIS use limits community groups to producing spatial imaginaries that reinforce those of the state. This project suggests that neither framing alone can fully represent the complicated ways in which community-level organizations may engage with GIS. Some of the spatial texts produced by these groups foster different accounts of the neighborhood than those produced by the state, and are used to support activities that fall outside of dominant paradigms of urban planning and revitalization. But other spatial narratives do reflect these paradigms or enact urban political roles that look quite similar to those of state or private business actors. What is tremendously important is the strategic deployment of these spatial narratives and roles *together*. Community organizations' use of GIS for such flexible and strategic visualization suggests a need to continue efforts to understand better the fluid and flexible epistemologies and ontologies of GIS.

In sum, community organizations' use of GIS to produce visual representations of neighborhood must be seen as the complex outcome of a sophisticated socio-spatial approach to neighborhood change and deep experience producing a variety of spatial narratives. These narratives are part of the community organizations' effort to influence urban planning, problem solving, and neighborhood change through multiple roles and strategies. Part of this approach is their use of GIS to manipulate a complicated technology/society intersection in ways that afford them greater influence, resources, and legitimacy in processes that influence urban spatial change. So too is their enactment of multiple roles in the negotiation of institutional, spatial, and knowledge politics in these processes. NNNN, WHPFCDC, and similar community organizations are operating in a decision-making context in which they remain less powerful agents compared to the government and private devel-

opment actors with whom they negotiate. From this position, however, their pursuit of urban spatial change and their development of spatial narratives advancing their priorities and forms of engagement is neither solely cooptation and incorporation nor solely a form of resistance. Instead, they pursue a multifaceted approach in which contrasting approaches to neighborhood change are not necessarily understood by community organizations as contradictory or mutually exclusive. A great deal of existing research on neighborhood revitalization and community development has framed social and material strategies for improving local level quality of life as contradictory (Stoecker 1997), but this case suggests that some community organizations are engaging in politics of urban spatial change that intentionally engage both.

Constructing Spatial Narratives, Reconstructing Urban Politics

Community organizations enact roles that sometimes cooperate and sometimes disrupt, or portray their neighborhood as a space of opportunity and then as a space of need or deficit. It may be tempting to suggest that they are working at cross purposes, perhaps not realizing potential contradictions. Ethnographic study of these roles and spatial narratives suggest, however, that they are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive but, rather, are part of community organizations' strategic response to the changing circumstances in which they operate. Urban planning, problem solving, and service delivery are carried out by an ever-growing range of actors. Relationships are increasingly complex as public and private institutions are simultaneously the target of community organization grievances and increasingly an important source of financial and administrative support. Other community organizations are direct competitors in this entrepreneurial arena, but may also be important allies in challenging powerful state or business interests or accomplishing large projects. Navigating this institutional and political complexity requires operating in relationship to an extremely diverse range of actors, positioned at multiple levels, who may have competing or conflicting understanding of the neighborhood and its needs.

The strategic use of GIS to author flexible spatial narratives that further multiple objectives in urban planning and revitalization is best read not as an expansion or contraction of community organizations' agency and authority, but as a reconstitution of their engagement in spatial, institutional, and knowledge politics. They use such strategies to engage in a multi-

layered politics that produce and transform urban spaces in a way that cannot be fully characterized as either cooperation or resistance. Their approach is designed to try to maximize opportunities to insert their spatial knowledge into key decision-making practices, sustain working relationships with powerful agents in urban spatial politics, and adapt to the rapidly shifting context of resources and priorities in which community organizations are embedded. Of course, groups such as NNNN and WHPFCDC could pursue multiple roles and produce effective and adaptable spatial narratives without the use of digital information technologies like GIS. But, the flexible (and fast) visualization capacities of these technologies make them particularly attractive tools, as is the discursive and representational authority they afford their users. Digital technologies like GIS enable a user to try out different visualizations relatively easily and quickly, an invaluable capability for overtaxed community development institutions and staff members. Also important is the greater weight sometimes given to GIS-based representations of neighborhood or the greater expertise sometimes assumed of the individuals and organizations producing these representations.

This strategy is not without limitations and pitfalls. Organizations that pursue this approach are not positioning themselves as the agents of radical social and spatial change, nor do they necessarily tap a full range of possible spatial imaginaries or politics. Some roles work in close alignment with more powerful state and business actors, and deploy spatial narratives that reinforce these paradigms of so-called community development that privilege homeownership, new construction, profit motives, and disciplining of unruly places and people. Long-term sustainability of the complicated strategies presented here may be difficult amid ongoing retrenchment of funds. As has been well-documented in critical GIS research, an uncritical or absolute reliance on GIS for spatial decision making has the potential to exclude diverse priorities and social groups.

Nonetheless, evidence of the flexibility and multifaceted nature of community organizations' spatial practices and knowledge production efforts is central to understanding their role in urban planning and problem solving. Although community organizations are less powerful agents in terms of their access to capital and formal political power, they have a deep and detailed knowledge of the institutional, spatial, and knowledge politics of urban planning and problem solving, and the capacity to manipulate these in strategic ways. The complicated urban political roles and spatial narrative strategies that community organizations are producing provide an example of new forms of spatial and political

practice cultivated in response to shifting urban governance practices and new bureaucratic and institutional forms. In keeping with Castells's (1983) and Harvey's (1999) emphasis on the shifting tactics and relationships of urban social movements, this case highlights the productive mutability of community organizations' roles and practices in response to the changing political and spatial contexts in which they operate.

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Notes

1. Throughout, I use the term "community organizations" to refer to nongovernmental agencies whose activities are geographically specific within a locality—directed at fostering change within a defined area in a city—with no implication that the social community represented is singular, unchanging, or uncontested. In the diverse literature on community development, neighborhood organizing, and social movements, geographers suggest that designations like "neighborhood" or "community" have vastly divergent meanings to different social groups; multiple definitions as spatial areas, administrative units, and spaces of lived experience; and varying meanings for the voluntary organizations and civil society institutions that identify as neighborhood or community institutions (Harvey 1999; North 2000; Martin 2003a; Whitehead 2003). Here, I use "community organizations" in part because not all voluntary and civil organizations that work within a small part of an urban area identify with a neighborhood. Community organization is also a useful designation because of the practical difficulty of differentiating between community-based organizations and community development corporations. Some scholars characterize community-based organizations as having lower levels of funding, fewer paid staff, and a programmatic focus on fostering social cohesion; and community development corporations as having higher funding, paid staff, and a programmatic focus on capital development, often realized through investment in the built urban landscape (Stoecker 1997). However, increasingly, most local level nongovernment organizations engage in a variety of practices, making it difficult to situate them as one or the other (Bright 2003; Stoecker 2003; Smock 2004).
2. This is not to suggest that financial, time, and expertise barriers to GIS use by these organizations are no longer relevant. Many of the constraints on GIS use by community organizations and other nontraditional GIS users documented in Leitner et al. (2000) and Sieber (2000) continue. Access to hardware, software, data, and training resources

- needed for GIS are characterized by a high degree of uneven development from local to global scales.
3. The close relationship between the two entities is signified by the tendency of residents, staff, and local government officials to refer to them together as “NNNN/HPEP.” I will use the identifier NNNN throughout this paper because I focus on organizational roles and activities, and these are carried out by NNNN in pursuit of the broad goals framed by HPEP.
 4. Wilson, Wouters, and Grammenos (2004) provide supporting evidence that such threatened and enacted disruption by community actors is a significant disincentive to developers.
 5. For legibility of print size, the legend in Figure 3 has been enlarged from the original version.
 6. As Kwan (2002) and Kwan and Aitken (2004) note, it is important to consider the ways in which GIS can represent and communicate affect, emotion, and perceptions produced and experienced in particular spaces. I cannot fully address such a discussion here, but I am grateful for the suggestion from one of the reviewers that although research on social and political constructions of GIS has largely focused on its representative power and practices, GIS as an emotive/affective practice might be productively conceptualized through nonrepresentational theory.
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