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Introduction

ON A SWEATY June afternoon in 2011, fifty professionally dressed men and women gathered at a construction site in Codman Square, a low-income neighborhood in Boston. Two events were on the day's agenda. The first was a groundbreaking for a new transit station on a 9-mile commuter rail line known as the Fairmount Line. The tracks bisected some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, yet no train had stopped in Codman Square in more than sixty years. Local nonprofit leaders considered this an injustice, and in the early 2000s, they urged the state to expand access to the transit line. In 2005, state officials committed to four new stations, including the one in Codman Square.

The second event was a ribbon cutting for an affordable housing development located two blocks from the new transit station. The proximity was no coincidence. Nonprofit developers and city government officials saw the new stations as an opportunity to concentrate housing and commercial development within walking distance to public transit, all with an eye toward environmental sustainability—a form of urban planning generally referred to as “community development.” The project was one of dozens developed by a coalition of nonprofit organizations in neighborhoods adjacent to the rail line. By the late 2000s, these nonprofit leaders and their funders began calling the area “the Fairmount Corridor” as a way to organize their collective efforts. Together, the two events represented their vision for the Corridor, a vision at the forefront of US urban policy.

Notable figures from Boston's redevelopment community were in attendance that day. Highly visible state representatives and city councilors mingled with lesser-known bureaucrats from city, state, and federal departments. Program officers from philanthropic foundations chatted with community organizers and consultants who had offered technical or strategic expertise. A slight majority were white—an inversion of the neighborhood's majority non-white demographics. Most people knew each other; others introduced themselves by listing their current and previous affiliations.

The star of the show was Gail Latimore, executive director of the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation (CSNDC). Gail and her staff had advocated strongly for the new train station and developed the new housing alongside a coalition of additional nonprofits. She may not have been recognizable to most Bostonians, but Gail, a prominent Black nonprofit director, was as well-known as anyone in Codman Square that day.

The site in Codman Square was perfectly prepared for a photo op. A podium bearing the state seal was placed in front of a large construction vehicle. A line of speakers—elected representatives, appointed government bureaucrats, and nonprofit leaders—stood side by side behind the podium. To their left, fifteen bright silver shovels had been planted in a pile of light brown dirt. To their right, passenger trains slowly rumbled down the Fairmount Line tracks.

As the sun beat down, the formal speaking program began. “We are here to celebrate the revitalization of the Fairmount Corridor,” a state transportation official began, “and continued good progress on an important project that we committed to many years ago and are delivering on today.” Deval Patrick, the state’s first Black governor, followed. “This is an exciting project,” he beamed. “A long time coming.”

Mayor Thomas Menino, serving his fifth term in office, spoke next. Not known for his way with words, the mayor nevertheless captured the occasion well. “What a great day in the neighborhood, right?” he observed with pride. “Long awaited, and today we have the day.” He singled out Gail and her organization for “bringing economic opportunity to the people who live in our neighborhoods.” He also extolled the virtue of intergovernmental collaboration, thanking “the team at the state . . . [and] the folks in the federal government. All of us working together, with your legislators and City Council.” But ultimate credit went to Gail, who “kept our feet to the fire on this project. And today that reality is here.”

Word of these accomplishments would spread beyond Boston. As the regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) later told the crowd, federal officials would “keep talking about this wherever we go throughout the country so this becomes the model of how we do environmental policy, housing policy, and transit policy in America.”

Once the formal speaking portion ended, it was time to “break ground” on the new station. The speakers lined up behind the shovels, scooped up small piles of dirt, and, on the count of three, tossed the dirt in the air. Everyone smiled as photographers snapped photos and TV cameras rolled. Afterward, the group walked down the street to the site of the new housing development. Gail and five representatives from private funding organizations posed for pictures alongside the mayor as he cut a large red ribbon.



Celebrations like the ones in Codman Square typically occur at the end of a project’s life cycle. Yet before any celebration—before the smiles and photos

and collective back patting—officials first host a series of public meetings in which residents vet plans for their neighborhoods. These meetings see more contestation than celebration as the public learns the details of a proposed project and expresses any reservations about its impact.

One such meeting occurred six days before the events in Codman Square. About thirty people gathered at a public library in the low-income neighborhood of Mattapan. A mix of white and Latino state officials moderated, while a handful of Black nonprofit organizers and residents sat in the audience. The topic was the placement of another proposed station on the Fairmount Line—this one not yet under construction.

State officials had intended to present a construction schedule and, if necessary, alleviate any concerns about noise or other minor inconveniences. But residents had a different agenda. A small group of older, middle-class Black women whose homes abutted the proposed construction area bitterly contested the new station. One, Barbara, had come to the meeting not to discuss particulars of construction, but to resist the station altogether. “I just want it to be publicly known that [we are] opposed to it, as we were from the beginning,” she announced. “So that people don’t get the impression that you are moving forward with our approval. We still feel the same way and we will still continue to oppose it any way we can.” Barbara and her neighbors were not opposed to the train that traveled behind their backyards, but they feared that the new station would negatively impact their property values and disrupt their quality of life.

Barbara’s comments were a blow to the nonprofit community organizers who had advocated for better public transit access along the Fairmount Corridor. To them, the proposed station represented an important opportunity for low-income, carless Mattapan residents to quickly and cheaply reach jobs and other resources located in downtown Boston. More practically, they knew that “community consensus” was necessary for the project to move forward. Barbara’s firm opposition posed a significant threat to their advocacy.

After the meeting, the organizers huddled in the back of the room. They dismissed the opposition as a product of insufficient community organizing, vowing to do a better job “organizing for a ‘yes’ on the station in Mattapan,” as one Black nonprofit director later put it. The idea was to stack future meetings with supporters and convince state officials that the community did, in fact, approve of the new station—even though Barbara and her neighbors were the only community members who had collectively expressed any opinion, one way or another. Private conversations with state bureaucrats, they added, could help solidify support outside the bounds of public meetings.

Barbara and her neighbors strategized, too. Instead of targeting state bureaucrats, they met privately with two elected officials—a white city councilor and a white state senator—who, in turn, advocated against the station on their behalf. They had limited options to align with nonprofit organizations in the neighborhood; the sole community development nonprofit was barely

keeping its lights on and would formally file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection the following year.

Initially, it appeared as though the residents would be successful in blocking the station. Years passed and plans for the station languished. But their elected advocates soon left office. The state senator, who had served on the Ways and Means Committee, became partner at a downtown law firm. And after a failed bid for mayor, the city councilor took a job in gas sales for a utility company.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit organizers continued their behind-the-scenes advocacy. Their persistence paid off. In public follow-up meetings, state officials explained that they had considered, but ultimately rejected, alternative sites. During a public event in October 2014, Governor Patrick formally announced the new station's construction schedule. Barbara attended the celebration and held strong in her opposition. The local press acknowledged her disapproval, but nevertheless concluded that "[c]ommunity members . . . praised the news."¹



Residents attend public meetings expecting to influence plans for their neighborhoods. But before any idea or proposal is presented in public, plans are created and debated in private. Consider another meeting, held two months before the scenes in Codman Square and Mattapan. No television cameras or reporters were on hand to document the discussion. No members of the general public were invited to voice concerns. No representatives from government departments or agencies provided public oversight. Indeed, the only people who knew about the meeting were the nonprofit employees, foundation funders, and ethnographer in attendance.

Even if members of the public somehow found out about it, they would not have gained entry; the site of the meeting, a nondescript office building in downtown Boston, was a labyrinth of security barriers. Participants first lined up at a large wooden desk inside a ground floor atrium. A security guard collected their driver's licenses and crosschecked their names against a predetermined visitor list. Each was issued a small paper pass, which they showed to a second security guard in order to gain access to the building's elevators. Upon reaching the tenth floor, they approached a third checkpoint, where smiling staff from The Boston Foundation provided clip-on name badges and folders filled with colorful maps of the Fairmount Corridor.

About forty middle-aged men and women of varying ethnic backgrounds, all dressed in plain, unremarkable business-casual attire, filed into a large conference room. Robert, the fifty-something Black vice president of the foundation, welcomed the crowd. Grant-making is not a vehicle to solve problems, he said; it is a process. And, he added, that process depends on the leaders—the men and women gathered in the conference room—who represent their organizations and their communities. The purpose of the day's convening was to

channel that leadership into policies and program proposals for residents of the Fairmount Corridor. Geeta, an Indian American immigrant and the foundation's associate vice president of programs, added that it is not grants that end poverty, but the collective wisdom and energy of nonprofit leaders. Put simply, this meeting was an opportunity to "come up with solutions to problems."

The group met behind closed doors for three hours. They pored over maps shaded by income, race, and other demographic characteristics. They discussed one another's development projects and social service programs. And they proposed metrics to define "impact" and strategized ways to increase it. After the meeting ended, they slowly trickled out of the conference room, returning to their own offices to make follow-up phone calls, send emails, and schedule more meetings. Later, concrete proposals in hand, they would meet with public officials who, in turn, would share their own plans with the nonprofit leaders.

Before any ceremonial ribbon could be cut, before any resident could hear about a plan for a development project, dozens of these discussions played out in conference rooms throughout the city.



These scenes reflect the current moment in cities—a moment that has many names. Some describe urban policymaking as increasingly collaborative and networked. Others critique what they see as neoliberal or austerity urbanism: public budget cuts coinciding with the privatization of public responsibilities. Still others portray a hollow state shored up by a system of third-party service providers. And for others, it is an era characterized by new models of consensus planning and collective impact.²

Despite disconnected intellectual histories, scholarship from sociology, political science, urban planning, nonprofit studies, public administration, and geography nevertheless shares a set of core empirical observations: A wide range of organizations and institutions make and implement the policies that matter for city residents. Horizontal collaboration replaced top-down hierarchical authority. Boundaries separating the public, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors blurred to the point of imperceptibility. In theory, everyone is seen as a potential partner, not an adversary, and the goal is consensus, not political conflict.³ In short, urban policy is no longer exclusively a *government* affair, but more accurately described as urban *governance*.⁴

The present moment is defined as much by what it is as what it is not. And what it is not, quite simply, is urban renewal. Between the late 1940s and early 1970s, the federal government provided funds for city governments and newly established Redevelopment Authorities to "revitalize" and "renew" so-called slums located near central business districts. Urban renewal essentially entailed the systematic demolition of homes that had fallen into disrepair and the displacement of poor urban residents who had little power to contest

government decisions. Entire neighborhoods, such as Boston's West End, were wiped out. Urban renewal was especially devastating for poor Black neighborhoods. In 1963, James Baldwin famously equated it with "moving the Negroes out. It means Negro removal, that is what it means."⁵

Subsequent changes in American politics and civil society created a very different urban policy environment. Today, Americans across all income levels are currently in the midst of a "participatory revolution." Formal government regulations and informal political norms institutionalized public meetings and other forms of engagement so that participation is now common in domains ranging from public budgeting to education policy. It is especially common in community development politics. Opportunities for residents like Barbara and her neighbors to "have a say" and play a role in public decision-making seem endless, and urban policymaking appears—at least on the surface—more democratic than ever before.⁶

New norms of participation rely on nonprofit organizations to mobilize citizens and facilitate public engagement. This relates to a second important change: the rapid expansion of the nonprofit sector. Between the 1980s and 2000s, the number of community-based organizations (CBOs) like CSNDC grew 130 percent, and the number of foundations like The Boston Foundation grew 64 percent.⁷ Figure I.1 depicts the annual growth rate of CBOs across 264 US cities. Since 1995, cities have consistently gained an average of 1.5 to 2 CBOs per 1,000 urban residents each year. These organizations engage in a range of activities, from public art installations to prisoner reentry programs. They are also responsible for a sizable share of the country's affordable housing development. According to the National Alliance of Community Economic Development Associations, as of 2008, nonprofits had developed, rehabbed, or acquired 1.61 million units of low- and moderate-income housing—approximately one-third of all federally subsidized housing.⁸

Foundations and other private funders are devoting more and more resources to these various projects. Between 2002 and 2015, total foundation grants grew 58 percent, from \$39.8 billion to just under \$63 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars. Grants from community foundations, a subset of foundations that distribute grants locally rather than nationally, grew 110 percent during this same time period.⁹ Their presence in cities also expanded; the number of community foundations grew 20 percent, reaching nearly 800 in operation in 2015 (see figure I.2).

Foundation grants are largely *competitive*, and competition contributed to sector-wide professionalization. Both philanthropic and community-based organizations became more managerial, bureaucratic, and market-driven. Paid professionals and management consultants replaced volunteers and activists; market logics replaced radical agendas.¹⁰ To a greater extent than ever before, a highly professionalized nonprofit sector finances and implements community development projects in poor neighborhoods.

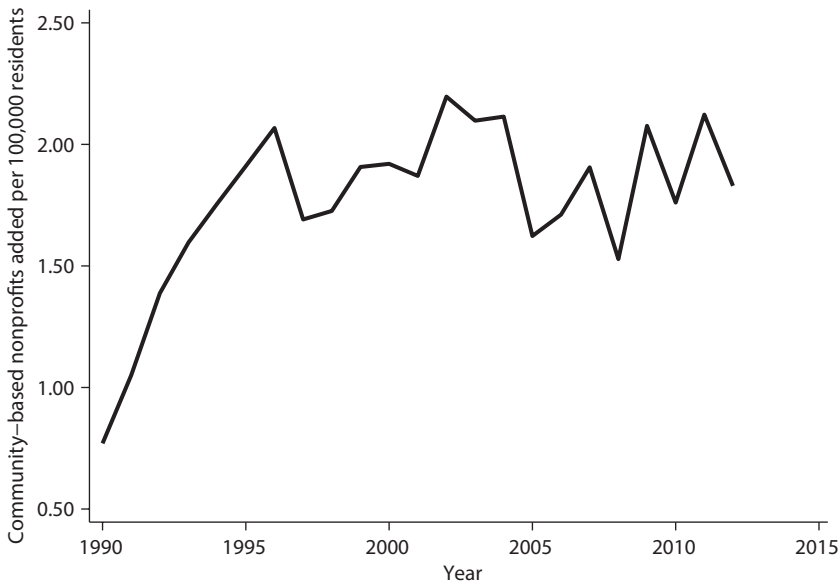


FIGURE I.1. Annual Growth Rate for Community-Based Nonprofits, 1990–2013

Notes: Based on a sample of 264 US cities. Includes organizations focused on crime prevention, neighborhood development, substance abuse, workforce development, and youth programs.

Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200409084628/https://nccs-data.urban.org/index.php>).

I thank Patrick Sharkey, Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, and Delaram Takyar for sharing data and code. See Sharkey et al. (2017).

Over time, governments became increasingly reliant on these and other private organizations to take on the responsibilities of public governance. Massive government funding in the 1960s helped the community development field grow; subsequent funding cuts left government dependent on the field. One major source of federal funding, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), declined 79 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars at precisely the same time community development nonprofits grew in number and assets (see figure I.3). Escalating responsibilities allowed nonprofit leaders to become active co-producers of urban policy, working alongside government executives like Mayor Menino and Governor Patrick. Indeed, collaboration between public agencies (from various levels of government) and private organizations (from various sectors) is now ubiquitous.

Through a case study of the Fairmount Corridor, *Constructing Community* asks how these major institutional changes affect democratic representation and neighborhood inequality. Over the course of four years, I gained unique access to the agencies and organizations that planned community development projects in the Corridor. I observed local nonprofit leaders' and consultants'

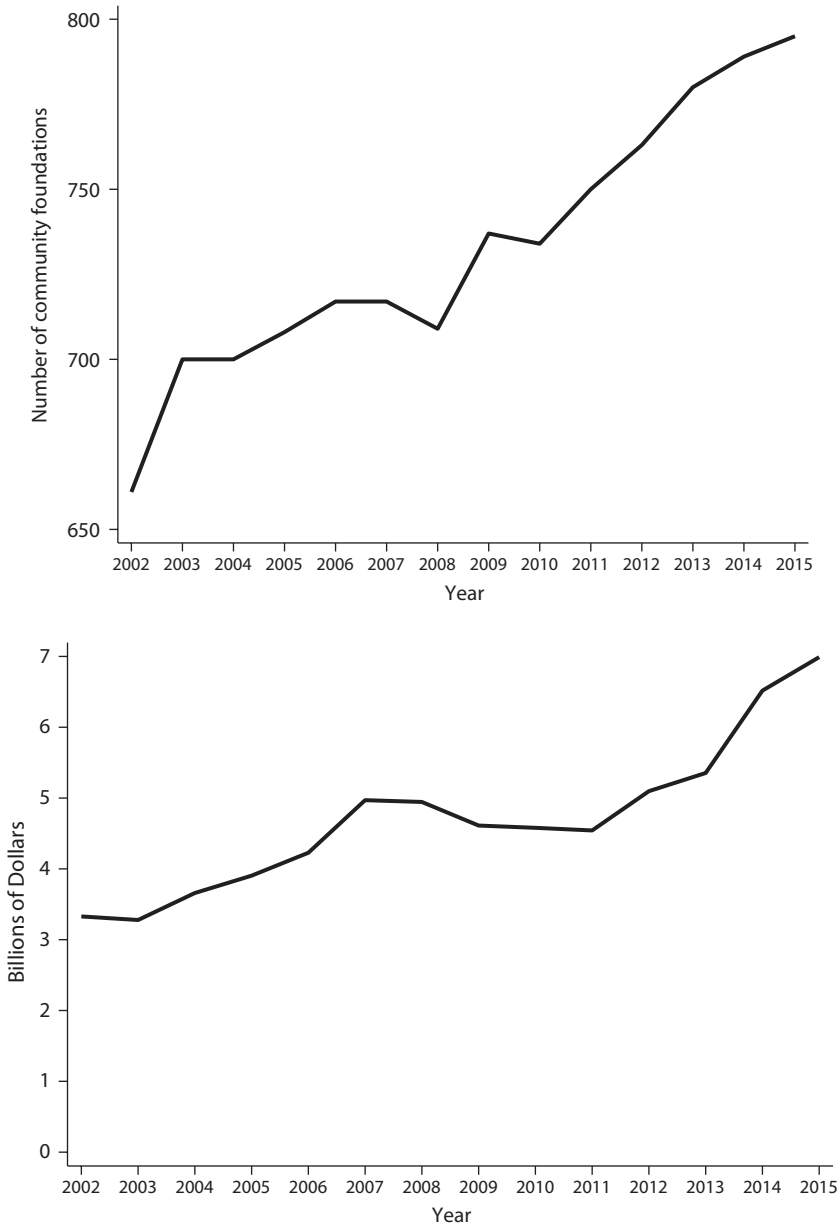


FIGURE 1.2. Growth of Community Foundations in Number and Funding, 2002–2015

Notes: All figures in inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars. Not *all* community foundation funding supports the activities depicted in this book, but all activities depicted in this book can be supported by community foundations. The chart is therefore a rough approximation of increased private funding for community development.

Source: Author's tabulations. Community foundation data come from the Foundation Center (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200503035432/http://data.foundationcenter.org/>).

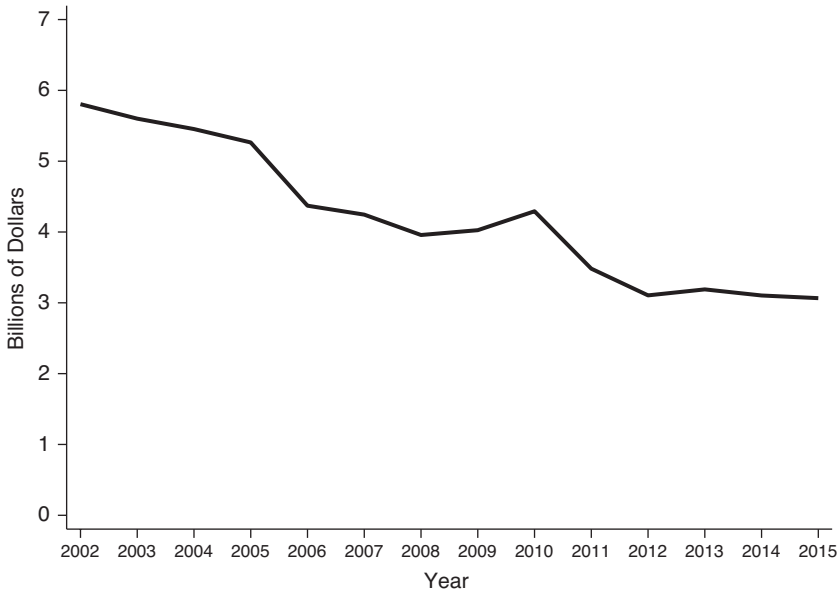


FIGURE 1.3. CDBG Allocations, 2002–2015

Notes: All figures in inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars. Not *all* CDBG appropriations support the activities depicted in this book, but many of the activities depicted in this book can be supported by CDBG grants. The chart is therefore a rough approximation of decreased public funding for community development.

Sources: Author's tabulations. CDBG appropriations come from HUD (https://web.archive.org/web/20190618110215/https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/comm_planning/about/budget).

private strategy sessions, worked inside Boston City Hall, served as a consultant for a local foundation, and attended dozens of public meetings in which residents heard and reacted to plans for their neighborhoods. My research questions focused on understanding how urban governance unfolds on the ground in poor neighborhoods. Who governs? What does it mean for democratic representation? And to what extent do these political dynamics reverse, reinforce, or simply reconfigure familiar patterns of urban inequality?

In this book, I make two arguments. The first is that the growing presence of private nonprofits in urban governance—including community organizations, foundations, funding intermediaries, and their many consultants—fundamentally altered local democracy. In earlier decades, local government officials and district politicians controlled local development projects from start to finish. But declines in public funding reduced local politicians' influence, while government bureaucracies' reliance on the private sector elevated the political status of nonprofit CBOs and their private funders. As a result, CBO leaders are now seen as more authentic neighborhood representatives than democratically elected politicians.

While CBOs help bring resources to poor neighborhoods, the privatization of political representation is not without significant costs. For one, professionalization in the nonprofit sector means that neighborhood *representatives* are not always neighborhood *residents*; Gail, for example, remained director of CSNDC even after she moved out of Codman Square. More generally, when private organizations supersede elected politicians, residents of poor neighborhoods sacrifice the ability to elect, appoint, or impeach their representatives in politics—a significant challenge to the tenets of representative democracy.

My second contention is that these institutional arrangements introduced new, unintended mechanisms of inequality. Social scientists typically attribute the urban poor's lack of political power to their limited economic, social, and cultural capital: Poor residents are denied access to the money, social network ties, and cultural know-how necessary to successfully contest powerful elites. Government reforms seemed to level the playing field, incorporating community organizations into decision-making and institutionalizing public participation. But participation can fail to empower poor residents if government decision-makers deploy strategies to undermine it. And nonprofits can't transfer power to poor residents if they don't exist. Neighborhoods without CBOs, or neighborhoods in which CBOs lack sufficient capacity, will be at a structural disadvantage as they compete for scarce resources. The fact that these are finite resources distributed on a competitive basis further complicates matters. Because CBOs are private organizations competing for organizational survival, CBO leaders and their funders will tend to focus their efforts in neighborhoods most likely to show success—ignoring, at times, the people and places in greatest need.

Together, these insights point to a more diverse yet still stubbornly unequal system of urban governance. Public participation has not replaced private gatherings like the one described at the beginning of this chapter. Similarly, community organizations may be key decision-makers, but there is no stipulation requiring directors to live in the neighborhoods they represent. And so, the players around the table now look different—pushing us to rethink scholarly assumptions about who governs—yet both the lack of public transparency and limited empowerment of urban residents remain.

Private Organizations and Public Governance

In 1961, political scientist Robert Dahl asked a simple yet profound question about US cities: Who governs? At the time, sociologists argued that a small group of economic elites controlled city policy. In his groundbreaking study of New Haven, Dahl agreed that direct political decision-making power was once, and continued to be, concentrated among a few important people. But to say that big business runs cities was to downplay the constraints of democratic politics. Organized stakeholders can *indirectly* influence decisions through

elections, Dahl reasoned, even if *direct* influence ultimately rests in the hands of a few key players.¹¹ Rather than one group pulling the levers of city policy, the particular people with decision-making power will vary depending on the issue area and relative electoral power of interest groups. In the “community power debate” that followed, Dahl and his students pushed their theory of pluralist urban governance, while other social scientists countered with continued evidence of a ruling power elite.¹²

Subsequent research proposed new names for city power brokers and developed new typologies of urban governance. For sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch, cities are “growth machines” controlled by “growth coalitions” of politicians, developers, and other ancillary actors like labor unions and sports franchises. Growth coalitions dominate urban politics and steer urban policy toward growth, enriching developers and filling city coffers but ignoring the needs of the urban poor.¹³ Clarence Stone’s regime theory takes a more general view, depicting city governance as a productive accomplishment of coordination and cooperation between public agencies and private interests. Scholars working in the growth machine and regime traditions classify entire cities based on who seems to make important governance decisions.¹⁴

These perspectives generally fall into what sociologists Hillary Angelo and David Wachsmuth call “methodological cityism”: Scholars equate “urban governance” with “local government,” conflating the political *process* of governance with a *place* where governance unfolds.¹⁵ But “urban” policies do not necessarily begin or even end in City Hall. As political scientist Paul Peterson argues, city governments do not control urban policy alone; macroeconomic forces limit available policy options, and the United States’ political system of federalism prevents cities from functioning as independent nation-states.¹⁶ Offering complementary arguments, legal scholars show how constitutional law limits city governments’ formal control over many of the resources and policies that matter to city residents. City government is, in short, “bound” by legal powers vested in state and federal government.¹⁷

Scholars of the nonprofit sector extend this line of thinking a step further.¹⁸ It is impossible to fully capture the structure of urban governance without considering multiple levels of government. It is also impossible to ignore *nongovernmental* institutions and organizational fields. Tax law restricts nonprofits’ engagement in politics; in order to maintain tax-exempt status, community-based organizations cannot endorse particular candidates for office and must limit lobbying to “an insubstantial part” of their activities. Philanthropic foundations face additional restrictions that prohibit lobbying altogether.¹⁹ The purpose of these laws is to limit public subsidies for partisan politics, and more abstractly, to maintain a nonpartisan civil society. But formal restrictions have not impeded deeper, more consequential involvement in everyday governance decisions. Understanding how nonprofits engage in

politics *on the ground* matters just as much as understanding what the law formally restricts.

Americans have in fact debated the appropriate role of nonprofit organizations in democratic politics since the founding of the republic. Influential thinkers such as James Madison and George Washington worried that private associations, which flourished around the time of the American Revolution, “made some citizens ‘more equal’ than others and threatened to undermine the egalitarian foundation of the new governmental order.”²⁰ As wealth grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, private philanthropy received special scrutiny. Business titans like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller may have established charitable foundations and pledged to “promote the well-being of mankind,” but some worried that those foundations were little more than publicly subsidized vehicles for personal political influence. In 1915, a blistering report by the United States Commission on Industrial Relations concluded that distributing personal wealth through foundations created a “hereditary aristocracy, which is foreign to every conception of American Government and menacing to the welfare of the people and the existence of the Nation as a democracy.”²¹

These debates persist today. In the early 2000s, a new generation of “philanthro-capitalists” ushered in a model of giving driven by “returns” on “social investment.”²² The movement reinvigorated questions about whether private wealth can truly serve a broader public good. Billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Mark Zuckerberg face criticisms echoing those from a century ago. In 2015, when Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan announced plans to devote 99 percent of their Facebook shares to charity, a journalist lamented America’s transformation into “a society of oligarchs” in which billionaires set public priorities without any form of democratic accountability.²³

The behavior of nonprofit leaders and philanthropists is only one side of the issue; the state has also taken actions to blur the distinction between private organizations and public governance. In the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty programs helped build a private welfare state, shifting the burden of service provision to the nonprofit sector. Federal funding cuts in the 1970s and 1980s deepened government’s reliance on nonprofit service organizations.²⁴ Contracting for services became common. At its most basic level, contracting reconfigured the relationship between nonprofits and government into a system of mutual dependence: Government needs nonprofits to deliver services, and nonprofits need government for funding. While contracting is more common among social service providers than community development organizations, the symbiotic relationship is notably similar. Across the board, it is increasingly unclear where the state ends and private service providers begin.²⁵

And this is not happening only in the United States. Concerns about private interests and the public good extend to large international nongovernmental

organizations (INGOs), such as Oxfam and Amnesty International. These groups claim to represent marginalized populations across the globe and negotiate with governments on their behalf. But as *The Economist* pointedly asked in 2000, “Who elected Oxfam?” The rhetorical question underscores a fundamental tension: While nonprofits represent the public, the public did not elect them to do so, and the public lacks traditional democratic mechanisms to hold these groups accountable if they fail to accurately reflect the public interest.²⁶

These dilemmas spilled over into the Fairmount Corridor, where nonprofit CBOs were central players in urban governance. Government policymakers expected CBOs to speak on behalf of urban neighborhoods. CBOs, in turn, superseded elected politicians and acted as the *de facto* representatives of Corridor neighborhoods. I refer to these organizations as *nonelected neighborhood representatives*: CBO leaders adopted the language of political representation while eschewing electoral politics; claimed to represent neighborhoods’ interests and were legitimated by funders and government officials; and negotiated directly with government executives rather than through elected intermediaries.²⁷

Philanthropic foundations were central political players, as well. These and other private funders collaborated extensively with government officials and supported CBOs through grants. Like government officials, they deferred to CBO leaders as neighborhood representatives. The reason was structural: Funders neither implement community development projects nor have the ability to fund neighborhoods directly. Instead, they need *CBOs* to accept the money and manage the funds. As such, funders’ success *depended on the accomplishments of their grantees*. These conditions put nonprofit CBOs, funders, and government agencies into a system of mutual dependence, reorganizing the structure of urban governance.

None of this is to suggest *mayors* lack power, particularly in a strong-mayor city like Boston. My argument instead focuses on the diminished role of district-based state and local politicians. Nonprofit leaders can now come close to resembling a co-equal branch of government alongside mayors, governors, and public agency staff—assuming positions we might otherwise expect to be occupied by elected city councilors and state legislators. In this new equation, the legislative side governs less, and nonprofits govern more.²⁸

The particulars no doubt vary across cities. In Chicago, for instance, city councilors, called aldermen, can veto development projects in their districts, a special power known as aldermanic prerogative. Yet even in Chicago’s context of strong city council power, urban planning scholar John Betancur and colleagues argue that “aldermanic prerogative is not absolute” because “city government is often not where neighborhood policy is conceived” and “the civic arena has become more important” than ever before. Ward politics still affects neighborhood development in cities like Chicago. But it is “a blended

model of neighborhood policymaking” including foundations and other non-profit groups as well.²⁹

Returning to Dahl’s famous question, I argue that the relationship between public agencies and nonprofit organizations has a profound effect on local democracy and representation. My argument is not simply “nonprofits matter”—though this is a reasonable top-line takeaway. More precisely, I show *how* community organizations and philanthropic foundations matter, use the tools of ethnography to make sense of their place in urban governance, and grapple with the unique tensions and tradeoffs that emerge when private nonprofits assume important public responsibilities.

Politics, Organizations, and Urban Inequality

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson laid out an ambitious theory of urban inequality, inspiring generations of sociologists. For Wilson, urban inequality had both structural and cultural roots. On the structural side, government policies, economic shifts, and racial discrimination facilitated the flight of jobs and middle-class residents away from cities. The result was a concentration of poverty in urban neighborhoods and the urban poor’s social isolation from mainstream institutions and middle-class social networks. Structural and cultural forces combine to restrict the kinds of resources available to the urban poor as well as their opportunities for upward mobility.³⁰

Wilson’s theory is largely at the macro level, documenting major changes over time and revealing their effects on social organization in poor neighborhoods. Another, more recent body of work takes a meso-level approach to illustrate how formal organizations mediate the conditions of urban poverty. Childcare centers, for instance, can reduce social isolation by connecting poor mothers to other organizational resources.³¹ Organizations can also offset *neighborhood*-level isolation by facilitating collective action and helping residents solve neighborhood problems.³² Beyond the presence of organizations in a neighborhood and the opportunities for social interaction they provide, their political actions also affect inequality. For instance, sociologists Nicole Marwell and Robert Vargas each show how community organizations strategically align with local elected officials in order to influence public resource distribution and give poor residents a stronger voice in politics.³³

This book brings together Wilson’s macro structural approach with the recent focus on organizations in urban poverty research. I make the case for considering *organizations’ place in macro governance structures* as an important but underexplored mechanism of urban inequality. We can think of governance structures as a field, or “a set of interorganizational relationships, sometimes collaborative, sometimes antagonistic, in a particular area of action.”³⁴ Organizations’ structural position in the field affords certain powers and opens

up particular roles in politics. Most important, the structure of the field affects how resources are distributed and which neighborhoods benefit as a result.

Over the last three decades, public funding declines opened the door for private funders to fill budget gaps and initiate new relationships with government officials. And political reforms created new relationships of mutual dependence between government and community-based organizations. The community development field grew into a sprawling network of government agencies, community-based nonprofits, development professionals, philanthropic foundations, consultants, and other intermediaries linking funders with developers.

Mutual dependence facilitated the political ascent of CBOs—something that was both a blessing and a curse for poor neighborhoods in the Fairmount Corridor. The system benefited neighborhoods like Codman Square, where Gail and CSNDC converted public and private funding into new housing and environmentally sustainable commercial development. At the same time, it disadvantaged neighborhoods like Mattapan, where CSNDC's counterpart, the Mattapan Community Development Corporation (MCDC), confronted severe fundraising challenges. Facing budget shortfalls in the fall of 2011, the organization's interim director met with three private funders in a failed attempt to prevent insolvency. The funders explained in no uncertain terms that supporting a low-capacity organization would make *them* appear weak and ineffectual as funders. They are in the business of funding successful projects, they said, not keeping a struggling organization afloat. MCDC filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection six months later. Without a local nonprofit willing and able to accept and manage grants, progress on community development projects in Mattapan ground to a halt.

The rise of public participation was another institutional change intended to reduce inequality and provide poor residents with greater decision-making power. Here, too, nonprofits affected power and resource distribution in unexpected ways. Recall Barbara and her Mattapan neighbors, who aligned with local elected officials but failed to block the construction of a new train station in their backyards. By contrast, at the northern end of the Corridor, in Upham's Corner, poor residents aligned with local nonprofit leaders rather than politicians. They successfully blocked city government's plans to convert an abandoned factory into a Public Works storage facility, ultimately persuading officials to pursue an alternative development project in their neighborhood. In both cases, residents participated. But because the current institutional context favors nonprofits over elected politicians, organizational allies were more effective at translating their participation into actual political influence.

On the surface, political reforms leveled the playing field. Yet rather than eliminate unequal access to resources, new institutional arrangements *reconfigured* mechanisms of neighborhood inequality. The structure of urban governance increased government's reliance on nonprofit community-based

organizations, such that nonprofit leaders could assume some of the responsibilities of political representation. Neighborhoods lacking CBOs (or lacking CBOs with sufficient capacity) were at a competitive disadvantage for grants and failed to have their needs accurately reflected in political decision-making. Because CBOs and their private funders *compete* for grants, there was less incentive to support the neighborhoods in greatest need. Norms of participation were no panacea, because here, too, the presence and behavior of local organizations affected which participating residents were empowered. This is a fuzzier depiction of urban inequality than Wilson's canonical depiction, but the effects are no less consequential.

Constructing Community

The idea of community has long motivated sociologists. Classical theorists worried that industrialization and urbanization would dissolve personal associations and undermine traditional family life. Not surprisingly, *community* emerged as an especially important topic in urban sociology. As cities grew and became more diverse, urban sociologists debated the degree of community organization in poor neighborhoods. Are poor neighborhoods disadvantaged because they lack community? Or are poor neighborhoods rich in communal bonds despite poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and other supposedly "disorganizing" features?³⁵

Research on life in urban communities sidestepped the more basic question: What *is* community? Sociologist George Hillery identified ninety-four distinct definitions of the concept in 1955.³⁶ Is it a spatial territory? When we study "social organization in an urban community," we mean relationships between people living in a spatially bounded place. Is it a group linked by a shared identity? When we speak of cultural traditions in "the Black community," we mean a diasporic ethnic group, unbound by any specific territory.³⁷ Or does it mean intimate social bonds? When we speak of religion providing a "sense of community," we mean feelings of social solidarity and cohesion, transcending both time and space. And what does community mean when it is used as an adjective in phrases like "community policing" or "community development"? Community policing refers to strategic partnerships between police officers and citizens, but community development refers to housing, commercial, and economic development in urban neighborhoods. The objects of reference are distinct: In the former, people matter more than the place; in the latter, places matter more than the people.

To make things even more complicated, objects of reference can change over time and across contexts. "Community development" offers a case in point. In the 1960s, advocates and policymakers defined community development in racial terms: Rooted in the Black Power Movement's ideas of community control, community development was understood as a project of racial uplift and Black

empowerment.³⁸ By the 1990s, a more mundane definition emerged: Community development became a catchall term for place-based urban policy. The “community” in community development shifted from a reference to a specific racial group (Black residents) to a deracialized place (urban neighborhoods).

What unites all of these definitions is that community invariably means something good. Community is something positive and valued, a goal to be achieved and a moral state to which we can aspire. The multiple definitions of community are consistent only with respect to the normative belief that community represents the common good, that collectivity and communal benefits are superior to individual interests or elite domination. Community is *significant* without signifying a singular group or place, *meaningful* without a stable meaning.

“But if community has come to mean everything good,” sociologist Robert Sampson worries, “as a concept it loses its analytical bite and therefore means nothing.”³⁹ The issue is that ambiguity makes it difficult to pinpoint the specific benefits of community and harder still to improve community through social policy. In this book, I take a different approach. It is *precisely* because community “has come to mean everything good” that the concept is so important. A parsimonious definition is beside the point. As the book’s title implies, community is a *political construct*, a symbolic vehicle of meaning used to pursue certain political ends.⁴⁰ I am less concerned with describing what community is, analyzing levels of community organization, or arguing whether some nonprofit organizations are more “community-based” than others. I am more interested in understanding how particular people marshal the idea and rhetoric of community—and for what political purposes.

When viewed through this lens, the symbolic boundaries that determine membership in “the community” become especially important. Symbolic boundaries are cultural processes of categorization that reinforce the unequal distribution of resources, value, and status. With respect to the symbolic boundary surrounding “the community,” varying definitions of the concept make the boundary unstable; it can shift based on who is speaking, who is listening, and for what purpose the concept is invoked.

Thinking about community in these terms helps us better understand how urban governance unfolds and why nonprofit leaders have achieved special status. Everyone involved in Corridor development in some way appealed to community, whether it was CBO leaders claiming to represent the community or government officials claiming to value the needs of the community. The *performance* of community—“doing” community, as it were—gave actors legitimacy. And it legitimized this particular *system* of urban governance, answering not only the question of who governs, but also how they came to govern and who got to speak for the urban poor.

Government reforms designed to reduce urban inequality are predicated on a very different understanding of community. Relying on community-based

organizations and public participation to elevate the community's voice assumes that there is such a thing as *a* community voice. According to this perspective, the challenge is to find the right organization to advocate on the community's behalf or the best method to solicit community input. Community development professionals make similar assumptions: Community-based organizations are organizations based in *a* community, community organizers organize *a* community, and the ideal outcome is to incorporate *a* community's vision into a particular project or issue area. Because they assume unified, self-contained communities, they also assume that community-based organizations can be more or less tied to communities.

An overarching goal of this book is to show how no organization or participatory process can accurately reflect the community's voice, no matter how accountable or well run. There will never be a definitive answer to the question of true, authentic community representation, because *there is no such thing as a single, cohesive community voice*. Challenging that implicit assumption will help us better understand inequality in neighborhood politics, and moreover, explain why some reforms consistently fail to meet lofty expectations.

A Note on Race and Gentrification

Two issues of vital importance to cities are noticeably absent from my discussion so far: race (and racism) and gentrification. Racism is an omnipresent backdrop to everything discussed in this book. The entire system I describe—the important role of nonprofit leaders and the consequences for democratic representation and inequality—is a feature of poor, segregated neighborhoods for a reason. Generations of political neglect and disinvestment created intersecting inequalities of race, class, and space. There would be no calls for “community development policy” without racial segregation and the concentration of poverty in urban centers. Race affects urban governance and debates over community development today as well, albeit in complex ways. Some practitioners attempt to deracialize community development as “place-based” urban policy, while others push back by pointing out how this approach ignores racialized power differentials between white neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. All of which is to say: Race continues to matter in cities generally and community development policy specifically.

In terms of my specific arguments about representation and inequality, I did not observe consistent patterns with respect to race. If anything, funders and government officials generally preferred working with organizations that looked like their vision of “the community.” And that meant, all else equal, Black CBO leaders in predominantly Black neighborhoods were considered more authentic and worthier of resources than their white peers—though the number in my study is too small to make strong claims. I do not assume residents and/or people of color are necessarily better representatives of “the

community,” nor do I assume white and Black middle-class CBO leaders are, by virtue of their race and/or class, worse representatives of “the community.” Indeed, I argue such claims are specious: This thinking homogenizes poor neighborhoods and, in effect, reifies the misguided idea that an individual nonprofit leader can singularly represent an entire neighborhood. And so, while my main arguments described above do not explicitly reference race or racism, I analyze these dynamics as important contextual factors throughout the book.

Similarly, gentrification was a constant subtext during discussions of community development in the Corridor. Nearly everyone depicted in this book saw their work as resisting gentrification and doing a different kind of urban renewal. The extent to which they succeeded is very much up for debate. Some advocates and scholars argue nonprofit developers materially benefit from gentrification; others worry that community development projects merely facilitate gentrification by inadvertently making poor neighborhoods attractive to speculators and for-profit interests. A deep tension between people and place animates concerns around gentrification: What does it mean for higher-income, typically white people to move into a lower-income, typically Black or Latino neighborhood? A parallel tension animates debates over community development policy and the meaning of community: How do community development resources for the community as a *place* affect the community as *current residents*? The threat of gentrification loomed large in the Fairmount Corridor, even when it went unmentioned. In what follows, I show how a particular group of community development professionals confronted neighborhood change and understood the resulting tension between supporting poor people and improving poor neighborhoods.

The Fairmount Corridor

This book shows how the rise of nonprofit organizations in urban governance affects representation and inequality through a case study of the Fairmount Corridor. The Corridor gets its name from the Fairmount Commuter Rail Line, sometimes referred to as the Fairmount-Indigo Line (a reference to Boston’s color-coded transit lines) or the Fairmount Line, for short. Commuter rail is typically designed to bring workers from the suburbs, where they live, to the city, where they work. And so, unlike Boston’s rapid rail lines, the Fairmount Line was more expensive to ride and offered little to no service during off-peak times. Today, however, the fare for most of the line is the same as the city’s subway system, a result of events described in chapter 4.⁴¹ It is the only commuter rail line located entirely within Boston city limits, and it runs directly through an impoverished area of the city underserved by alternative rapid rail options.

The idea of a redevelopment “corridor” derives from urban planning practices. Planners and policymakers believe that poor urban residents benefit most when housing, jobs, and social services are coordinated and sited in close

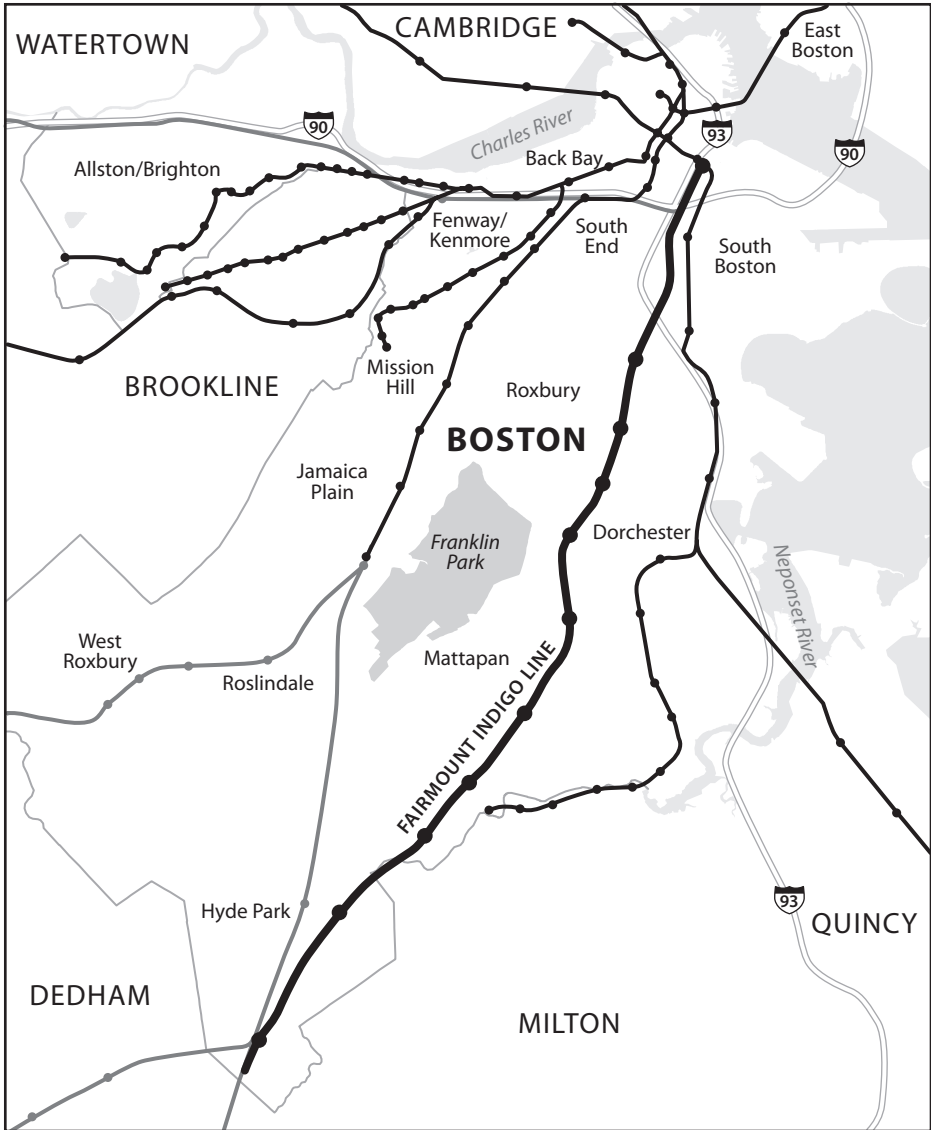


FIGURE I.4. Map of Boston's Public Transit Lines

Notes: Includes rapid rail and select commuter rail lines. Neighborhood names are also labeled.

proximity to public transit stations. In general terms, then, the “Corridor” is the area within a half-mile radius of the rail line—the standard definition of residential “walking distance” to public transit.

The Corridor includes sections of eight neighborhoods. Significant portions of the endpoints—Newmarket and Readville—are industrial.⁴² A large

suburban-style shopping center is located steps from the Newmarket stop, featuring Target, Marshalls, Home Depot, and Panera Bread, among other stores. The six remaining neighborhoods—Upham’s Corner, Grove Hall, Four Corners, Codman Square, Mattapan, and Logan Square—are primarily residential, and are the focus of community development efforts.

A note on neighborhoods: “Neighborhood” is an inherently tricky concept. Commonly evoked, it lacks a standardized definition.⁴³ In Boston, like many other cities, one’s neighborhood is like a Russian nesting doll of increasingly large, overlapping geographical areas. In this book, I refer to eight “neighborhoods,” but these areas are nested within the larger, more familiar districts of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hyde Park. Newmarket, Upham’s Corner, and Grove Hall straddle Boston’s Dorchester and Roxbury districts. Four Corners and Codman Square are within the Dorchester district, and Logan Square and Readville fall within Hyde Park.

When I began this research in 2010, the 88,698 Corridor residents were 61 percent Black, 21 percent Latino, 9 percent white, and 1 percent Asian. Thirty-five percent were foreign-born. The Corridor included 14 percent of Boston’s total population, 39 percent of the city’s Black population, and 50 percent of the city’s population with Caribbean ancestry. Nearly half of all households earned less than \$40,000 annually, and according to 2006–2010 American Community Survey estimates, the Corridor’s 14.9 percent unemployment rate was significantly higher than the citywide rate of 9.3 percent.⁴⁴

A central organizing feature of the Fairmount Corridor was a \$200 million state investment in new rail stations. In 1999, Marvin Martin, executive director of a CBO in Four Corners, raised concerns about the neighborhood’s limited access to public transportation. Together with other nonprofit advocates, Marvin persuaded the state transportation authority to study the feasibility of new stations along the Fairmount Line. In 2005, the state committed financing for four new stations, and between November 2012 and July 2013, three new stations opened in Four Corners, Codman Square, and Newmarket, respectively. A fourth station, located in Mattapan, opened in 2019.

During my fieldwork, nine CBOs in the Corridor were the key actors planning development projects. Between 2000 and 2008, these organizations formed three overlapping coalitions: a development coalition focused on affordable housing and economic development; a transit coalition focused on improving the Fairmount Line transit service; and an environmental coalition focused on planning a “greenway”—a collection of parks, bike paths, and community gardens alongside the rail line.

Institutional support came from both the public and philanthropic sectors. Nonprofit organizations in the Corridor received significant funding from foundations and other funding intermediaries, including The Boston Foundation. In 2009, The Boston Foundation reorganized its internal strategic framework to include a focus on community development in the Corridor.

The Corridor caught the attention of federal policymakers that same year, when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of Transportation (DOT), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) named it a “pilot project” for a newly created interagency partnership. Two years later, the official White House blog featured a four-minute YouTube video and accompanying text cataloguing federal support for the Corridor and plans for future development—support that included Promise and Choice Neighborhoods grants (\$26 million in total), two of the Obama administration’s highly publicized urban policy programs. Following the federal attention, city officials placed their own mark on community development in the area. In early 2012, the Boston Redevelopment Authority formally announced a Corridor planning initiative. The Boston Foundation supplied \$100,000 for the \$350,000 initiative.

Public agencies and nonprofit organizations planned fifty-one projects in the Fairmount Corridor and managed eleven urban planning processes during my fieldwork.⁴⁵ These projects ranged from new transit stations to affordable housing development, public art to community gardens. In total, the projects included 1,077 new apartments or townhouses, 105,965 square feet of commercial development, and 523,058 square feet of vacant land development.

The Study

From January 2010 to May 2014, I immersed myself in the politics of community development along the Fairmount Corridor. Decentralized urban policy poses challenges for traditional ethnographic approaches, which often focus on single neighborhoods, street corners, social groups, or organizations. The interconnected web of agencies and organizations in the Fairmount Corridor required a nimbler technique.⁴⁶ All told, my fieldwork took me to foundation offices, nonprofit conference rooms, community centers, government departments, and nearly every other imaginable meeting place in between. I observed private nonprofit coalition meetings, received two fellowships to work inside Boston City Hall, and was part of a team hired by The Boston Foundation to evaluate its role in the Corridor. The core of my fieldwork consisted of sitting in on private meetings (nearly 200), listening in on conference calls (nearly 70), and attending forums open to the public (nearly 100).

Outside of meetings, I engaged in informal interactions, like going out to lunch with a consultant or getting coffee with a government official. I used the fact that I didn’t own a car as an excuse to get rides before and after meetings. During these trips, I asked follow-up questions and tested out hunches as my fieldwork progressed. I collected additional supplemental data, including approximately 900 news articles; more than 2,000 emails between nonprofit directors, consultants, and government officials;⁴⁷ and all reports, agendas, and presentations focused on the Fairmount Corridor.

This approach to fieldwork forced me to bounce between multiple research settings. After observing a meeting between nonprofit developers and government officials in City Hall, I would walk out of the building with the developers—observing their post-meeting debrief—only to circle back to City Hall and return to my cubicle next to the Mayor’s Advisor to Housing. I viewed drafts of grant applications as nonprofits tweaked their progress reports, and I reviewed internal strategy memos from grant providers. I attended meetings where nonprofits asked foundations for grants, meetings where they were granted funding, and meetings where they were unceremoniously denied support. I would catch a ride with city officials to an event, then ask a nonprofit director for a ride to the train station when it ended. Above all, access to these various groups depended on a relatively simple, but nevertheless time-consuming act: showing up to meeting after meeting, even if I was not formally invited. If I was invited to a meeting, I showed up. If during a meeting someone happened to mention another meeting, I showed up to that one, too. And I kept showing up for four years, until I reached saturation.⁴⁸

Ingratiating myself into a complex web of actors—and justifying my presence in their closed-door meetings—required an ever-shifting researcher identity. Throughout my fieldwork, I was variously confused for a state official, a member of the press, a community organizer, a nonprofit employee, and (twice) a resident of Dorchester. Perhaps most telling were the affiliations assigned to me during private “stakeholder meetings” convened by The Boston Foundation. Name tags were distributed for easy introductions, and my affiliation on them changed from being associated with a nonprofit coalition in 2011, to my university affiliation in 2012, to a blank space near the end of my fieldwork when assigning a single affiliation proved too complicated. Mike, executive director of a Hyde Park nonprofit, compared me to the chameleon-like title character in the 1983 film *Zelig*. “It’s about a guy who is *everywhere*,” Mike told me. “And I think that’s what I’m going to start calling you.” Around the same time, a consultant referred to me as “Dr. Shadow” in an email to a city government official.⁴⁹ Both nicknames signaled my constant presence as a “fly on the wall”—noticeable to anyone paying attention, but more as a voyeur than active participant-observer.

Why choose to study urban community development, and why the Fairmount Corridor? I was initially drawn to community development policy because it encompasses a wide range of substantively consequential projects—activities that affect the quality of housing, availability of jobs, presence of social services, and quality of life in poor neighborhoods. As sociologist Harvey Molotch argues, the politics of urban development “determines who, *in material terms*, gets what, where, and how.”⁵⁰

Studying a corridor (as opposed to a single neighborhood) was analytically useful. While much of my analysis treats the Corridor as a single case, the fact that it is actually composed of eight distinct neighborhoods allowed me to

conduct within-case comparisons. When possible, I exploit variation across Corridor neighborhoods in order to reveal how particular structures or processes produced divergent outcomes.

Above all else, I chose this case because, when I began this project, the Corridor was emerging as an exemplar of US urban policy. CBO leaders presented their accomplishments at national urban planning conferences coast to coast, from North Carolina to California. Local foundations hosted out-of-town funders from Pittsburgh to pass on grant-making lessons. And federal officials brought grantees from eleven Connecticut cities to take a bus tour of the Corridor and meet with local CBO leaders. The ideas and organizational structures present in the Corridor were being actively promoted across the country and legitimated by institutions as powerful as the federal government and presidential administration. The Corridor's outsized policy significance made it an especially attractive research site.

This raises the question of generalizability. As an ethnographic study, my observations are limited by both time and space. Yet there are reasons to believe that the processes I discuss in this book are not unique to Boston—or even the Fairmount Corridor, for that matter. The local government officials I studied, for example, work on similar projects in other Boston neighborhoods. State officials work on similar projects in other Massachusetts cities, and federal officials work on similar projects throughout the country. The same logic holds for local, regional, and national funders; I have no reason to believe these agencies and organizations approached community development differently in the Fairmount Corridor than in other US cities and neighborhoods.

Nor is each aspect of the Corridor necessarily unique. The specific projects—like a twenty-seven-unit apartment complex, a community garden, or a public mural—are remarkably unremarkable. Community-based organizations and philanthropic foundations play important roles in urban development throughout North America. Development near transit is common—in fact, it is a priority in US urban policy. Transit corridors can be found throughout the world. One could point to research based in a number of cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Flint, Houston, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Toronto, to name just a few—and find some similarities with the Fairmount Corridor.⁵¹

Yet the *combination* of these elements in a single case may seem unusual relative to existing scholarship. That may be because the political processes I discuss are unique to Boston, to community development, to transit corridors, or to some other element of the study. Or it may be because scholars haven't known what to look for. I can't say for certain, and so I will do my best to flag certain findings or arguments that may not be generalizable and let the reader decide how much it matters for the story I want to tell.

The Fairmount Corridor reflects broader historical changes to urban governance—changes that at least partially affected poor neighborhoods throughout the United States. If the particulars of community development politics vary across cities or neighborhoods, I would argue that it is a matter of degree, not kind.

Plan of the Book

This book analyzes the role of private nonprofits in urban governance and the unintended consequences for democratic representation and inequality. Part I sets the stage—the who, what, where, and when. Chapter 1 situates the Fairmount Corridor within the context of national, state, and local urban policy changes. The social and political failure of urban renewal in the postwar period gave way to new community-based approaches to urban policy in the 1960s. These institutional reforms empowered local nonprofit organizations and carved out novel political roles for private foundations. Community-based organizations grew substantially following federal retrenchment in the 1980s and 1990s, further cementing their place in the community development field. The Obama administration's emphasis on public-private partnerships would become the capstone to a trend that was decades in the making, providing grants directly to nonprofits and developing policy ideas hand in hand with private foundations. It is impossible to understand urban governance today without understanding how it has changed over time.

Chapter 2 moves to contemporary processes of urban governance in the Fairmount Corridor: Who governs, and how did they get a seat at the table? I introduce each of the players in the community development field, from government agencies to consultants and foundations. Taking a top-down view, one might characterize these public and private organizations as a powerful coalition that collectively decided what got built and where. And one might assume those with power and influence were the ones who had the most money, political connections, or elite network ties. Getting closer to the ground revealed quite different dynamics. This was an urban policy context that privileged collaboration, partnership, and that oft-used concept: *community*. As a result, influence over plans for the Corridor depended on one's ability to negotiate a role as a partner with or on behalf of the community. That did not mean one's status as a partner was a fixed identity. People *performed* their partner bonafides for others in the field—sometimes successfully, other times less so. Thus, I observed a fairly fluid and loosely connected policy network, one in which private nonprofit leaders who represented or funded “the community” were just as involved as public officials.

Chapter 3 asks how, once at the table, individuals and organizations defined “the Fairmount Corridor” and puzzled over its malleable spatial boundaries. Like any neighborhood or region, the Corridor's boundaries were

subjectively demarcated. Still, “the Fairmount Corridor” had political salience as a place. I show how private actors like consultants and nonprofit leaders defined and redefined the Corridor’s spatial boundaries to fit their particular political objectives. The seemingly banal practice of rationalizing the Corridor’s geography nevertheless had important consequences for resource allocation: Making the Corridor legible—defining what is (and what is not) “in” the Corridor—ultimately created neighborhood winners and losers.

Part II dives deeper into the central argument of the book: the unintended consequences of this public-private governance arrangement for democratic representation and neighborhood inequality. In chapter 4, I show how CBOs in the Corridor superseded elected politicians as *de facto* neighborhood representatives. Local elected officials were, at best, marginal players in the broader community development field. It was not necessarily the case that *residents* viewed CBOs as more authentic than elected representatives; in fact, *regardless of resident perceptions*, government officials and foundation funders viewed nonprofit CBOs as the legitimate representatives of poor neighborhoods. The privatization of political representation is a double-edged sword for the urban poor: CBOs can bring much needed resources to poor neighborhoods but are not subject to the same systems of accountability as democratically elected politicians.

Chapter 5 follows the money. Consistent with a burgeoning body of research on philanthropy and public policy, funders in the Corridor saw themselves as strategic political actors who successfully influenced urban policy-making. But their power had limits. Because large grants were hard to come by, funders often pooled and repackaged grants from *other* funders before providing a grant to a local nonprofit or city agency. The dense network of grant distributions and redistributions reduced individual funders’ leverage and created a system whereby grantees could, surprisingly, push back against funder priorities. It also incentivized funders to embellish grantee accomplishments because their own fulfillment of grant requirements was tied to grantees’ successes. Funders prioritized neighborhoods with high-capacity organizations—those most likely to show success—over neighborhoods lacking a strong local organizational presence. Taken-for-granted funding practices, as a result, inadvertently contributed to neighborhood inequality.

The voices of the urban poor are almost entirely absent in the preceding chapters. Chapter 6 offers an explanation. In the Fairmount Corridor, resident involvement in community development was limited to “the community process,” a series of public meetings that ostensibly democratized public decision-making. But these meetings were held long after plans had already been created, and as such, functioned less like a vehicle for influence and more like a bureaucratic box to check at the end of a long to-do list. Coming full circle, I show how poor residents were most effective in exercising their political voice *when they aligned with local nonprofit organizations* during these meetings.

Channeling their interests through legitimated nonprofits was more effective than threats of collective mobilization or alliances with elected politicians. Put more critically, community control was realized to the extent that residents' interests aligned with the interests of local community organizations.



The pages that follow tell a specific story about community development and inequality in one part of one city. But *Constructing Community* is also a larger account of the structure of urban governance and the dilemmas associated with the inclusion of private nonprofits in public policy. It is about the people who make policy decisions and set policy priorities—and all the messiness their interdependent relationships and organizational incentives entail. At its core, this is a book about the unintended consequences of (mostly) well-intentioned efforts: how attempts to empower the urban poor can inadvertently create more inequality, not less.

Housing, transportation, environmental protection, social welfare, private foundation, and public charity policies are deeply interconnected in the United States. Collectively, these and other policy arenas circumscribe opportunities for the urban poor. Yet policies are only as good as they work on the ground. This book, then, tells a story about *urban policy in practice*: the tensions in current approaches, unanticipated shortcomings, and most important, opportunities for change. If urban policy is to be an engine for equity and make life better for people living in poverty, we must first understand how, and why, it sometimes falls short.

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