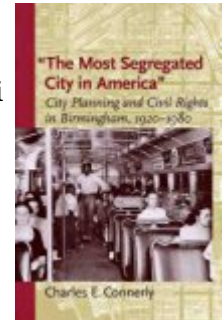


Charles E. Connerly. *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005. xvi + 360 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2334-5.



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Published on H-Urban (March, 2006)

For the first time, in *The Most Segregated City in America*, an historical connection is delineated between civil rights and planning practices in Birmingham. Author Charles Connerly demonstrates in detail how planning practices were used to maintain the racial status quo. It is not coincidental that a city that became known as the most segregated city in America and the place for one of the most significant battles for civil rights in America, also was the South's most industrial city. For the early part of the twentieth century, a significant part of Birmingham's labor force consisted of blacks who migrated from the black belt region of the South to work in the coal and ore mines. These new inhabitants needed housing and Birmingham planners made sure that white housing was segregated from that for black people.

Birmingham had applied the logic of protecting property values (that propelled the zoning movement in America) to the legal separation of black and white neighborhoods. In the 1940s, black homeowners launched the struggle for civil rights by violating the city's racial zoning ordi-

nance, which had been adopted in 1926. Not until 1951 was Birmingham's racial zoning declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, resulting in "the South's longest-standing racial zoning law." (p .3).

Connerly poses a critical question: why did it take so long to declare the city's zoning law unconstitutional, when the courts had already declared racial zoning in many southern cities, including Atlanta, unconstitutional? In answering this question, Connerly distinguishes the planning practices in Birmingham from other southern cities. Racial zoning ordinances were often prepared by planners. To challenge Birmingham's racial zoning was to challenge the city's comprehensive plan. But more important, black citizens of Birmingham who wanted change were impaired by the intimidating strength of the white power structure, the organizational weakness of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the absence of black voting power. Not until after World War II did the NAACP take up the zoning issue. The city also made wide use of the "separate but equal" doc-

trine, which remained legally intact until the 1954 *Brown* decision. By invoking a "separate but equal" clause in its zoning enabling statute, the city took advantage of the fact that the Supreme Court had not ruled that doctrine unconstitutional.

Although the city invoked the "separate but equal" clause in its zoning statute, there was no equality in racial zoning. The uniqueness of lots and neighborhoods made them inherently unequal, reinforcing inequality between black and white neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods were more likely than white neighborhoods to be located in or near flood-prone areas and industrial sites and were four times more likely than white neighborhoods to contain heavy industry. Birmingham argued that its racial zoning only restricted access to the property, not the purchase and ownership of the property, and therefore the rights of an individual to participate in the marketplace were not violated. But such legal reasoning on the part of Birmingham was not consistent with what the court said in *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), which tied the right of ownership to the use and occupation of the property.

Connerly argues that racial zoning undermined urban housing markets and this eventually led to its downfall. The 1926 zoning code provided only one black neighborhood for single-family housing and little or no new housing opportunities for black citizens. There was no "filtering" or "trickle down" of houses and neighborhoods from whites to blacks. As early as 1923, Birmingham prevented the entry of blacks into white neighborhoods, resulting in a dual housing market, one black, one white. After 1945, neighborhoods zoned for blacks could not accommodate the growth of the black population.

Urban renewal provided Birmingham with the means to relocate blacks (p. 103), a capability that racial zoning had not offered. The city had no problem in identifying neighborhoods with blighted conditions that fit the federal govern-

ment's requirement for urban renewal. Highway development reinforced racial boundaries. Interstate 65, for example, became a buffer between the city's west side black neighborhoods and the central business district. Connerly is quick to note, however, that there is no evidence that city leaders, including Bull Connor, deliberately used highways as buffers between black and white neighborhoods. Yet, the effect of highway development was to reinforce some of the boundaries on the 1926 racial zoning map, such as part of the I-65 corridor. Due to significant dislocation of the city's black population by urban renewal and highway development, racial change in neighborhoods began to take place in the 1960s. By 1980, the majority of the city's inhabitants were black, the opposite of what white residents wanted.

The black community did not remain passive toward these racialized planning practices. As agents, blacks were capable of doing things that made a difference, that is, to exercise some sort of power and self-reliance. In his discussion of the black planning tradition and neighborhood empowerment in Birmingham, Connerly might have found Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* useful to put his historical discussion into a theoretical framework [1]. In analyzing everyday practices, de Certeau made a distinction between "strategy," which requires its own space, and "tactic," which lacks its own space. Black citizens in Birmingham often did not have the means to keep to themselves, to withdraw and plan a general strategy. Blacks were intimidated in their neighborhoods and churches. There was no space to withdraw to for strategizing. In exercising power, blacks, therefore, had to operate tactically, manipulating and diverting the space of the other, the white-dominated space. We learn that Birmingham's history of terrorist bombing began with blacks' tactical resistance to racial zoning. Connerly explains that black leaders and the NAACP waited for the right test case to end racial zoning, the legalized landscape of segregation. De Certeau would have called this a tactical move, playing by

the rules to divert the white-dominated space for one's own use.

In exercising power, blacks also attempted to produce their own space, where they could strategize responses to threats from the white power structure. According to de Certeau, to have a strategy is to postulate a place that can be delimited as one's own and serve as a base from which targets or threats from the outside can be managed.[2] Neighborhood-based civic leagues, which had existed in Birmingham since the 1920s, provided this space for blacks. These civic leagues chiefly relied on two strategies for improved services: petitioning local government and self-help.

With adoption of the 1974 Citizen Participation Plan, Birmingham developed one of most comprehensive neighborhood-based citizen participation programs in America, reversing "the city's longtime tradition of denying its black citizens the opportunity to participate in the planning process" (p. 241). From these Citizen Participation Program neighborhood associations, blacks were able to develop a political strategy that led to the election of Richard Arrington as the first black mayor of Birmingham.

Readers not familiar with the local history of Birmingham may get lost in some of the details provided in this work, but students of race and planning will come away with a better understanding of how planning practices constructed and reinforced race-connected practices in Birmingham, "America's Johannesburg."

Notes

[1]. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 36.

[2]. Ibid.

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Citation: Bobby Wilson. Review of Connerly, Charles E. *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

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