

BLOCK SIGNS

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With passages by Shell Trap

If you could change one thing in this neighborhood, what would you change? If you had a magic button you could push that fixed something, what would it say on that button? That would be my pitch. You had to push, because most people had never been asked that question. They'd been told what was wrong, but they'd never been asked.

– Shell Trap, National Training and Information Center, interviewed May 2007

When you first see a typical Chicago block club sign you might think it rather bossy. The sign is an injunction, severe in tone:

NO DRUG SELLING. NO GAMBLING. NO DOGS UNLEASHED. NO AUTO REPAIRS.

While this list of prohibitions might pass in wealthier neighborhoods as unspoken norms of everyday life, they take on urgent meaning wherever the block clubs commit them to signage. Decades of neglect by civil authorities leave these working class and poor neighborhoods bearing the brunt of drug dealing, vandalism, dog fighting, stray animals, and rackets in gambling, prostitution, and auto parts fencing.



The signs point to the hope for a different kind of neighborhood – one that most Americans take for granted. Working with spray cans, fat permanent markers, sticky vinyl letters, and stencils on wood and metal, the sign makers translate communal frustrations for wide public consumption. Sometimes simple, sometimes elaborate, the block club signs artfully capture the blunt force of frank Chicago speech.

Staked into the ground at the end of each block, the signs seem to burst forth from the spontaneous will of an organic community. But this is not the case. Chicago's block club signs result from a deliberate and organized social movement, and they reflect a distinctively American style of civic action. As material culture and everyday art practice, they emerge directly from the contentious, rambunctious, messy, and democratic tradition of Chicago-style community organizing.

In the late 1930s, the Chicago Area Project, an anti-youth delinquency nonprofit run by sociologist Clifford Shaw, tapped the talented young criminologist Saul Alinsky to start a program in the Back-of-the-Yards – the industrial neighborhood featured in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Eventually, Alinsky decided that his work was merely tinkering in the margins of giant social problems instead of making significant change. To find more effective ways to organize disempowered urban communities, he began to compile tactics from older social movements like the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the Communist Party of the United States of America. Slowly, Alinsky found ways to apply the techniques developed by unions to organize communities.

Through the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in 1940, Alinsky and his trainees worked by identifying key players and power holders in communities, and then building consensus among churches, unions, and civic groups to directly challenge the authority of municipal agencies and politicians. The coalitions of institutions would pursue small wins – demands that were met – on a steady basis to build their power and make the changes they wanted to see. The successes enjoyed by workers through unions could now spread beyond the factory and into the world of urban politics.

The Alinskyite model took shape in the crucible of the modern industrial city, with working-class constituencies already primed by first or second-hand experience with unionization. The Industrial Areas Foundation functioned much like a central labor council, drawing its representatives from different institutions to service on the governing body: priests, rabbis, deacons, union bosses, and civic club officers. The presence of these institutions meant that Alinsky and his lieutenants could quickly identify and tap key players in a community, and rapidly mobilize support for the IAF and the constituents they served.

After World War II, these mass institutions and the civic culture they supported eroded significantly. Industries downsized and relocated to low-wage regions outside of cities, eliminating high-paying industrial jobs. At the same time, older White ethnic groups left the city in growing numbers, pulled to the suburbs by shifting job markets, and pushed by racial panic upon the arrival of African-Americans from the South. Panic-peddlers and blockbusters inflamed these fears to accelerate property turnover, loosen markets, and increase profits. As people moved, the institutions that catered to them changed. Without the mass institutions that once provided the IAF with their power base, community organizers found themselves operating in a more atomized culture, needing new methods to organize people power.

The National Training and Information Center is one organization that has built on the Alinskyite tradition while adjusting it to the realities of contemporary American cities. NTIC organizers start by knocking on doors, talking with people, and helping them to talk to each another. When people in a neighborhood talk, they share stories and commiserate over common frustrations. Hot-button issues emerge quickly.

So usually when I'd hit a block, I'd walk up and down through the alleys, looking for a pile of trash or a pothole or a bad building or an abandoned car. Because most of the time when you ask that question, people say, "Oh it's a nice neighborhood, no problems." So I'd say, well, I'd lie and say, "Your neighbor mentioned that pothole at the end of the block," and they'd say, "Oh yeah! I always tear up my tire. That is pretty bad."

Organizers work with local residents, coaching them, role playing, and building their confidence to run a meeting. The enabling works both ways: the organizer gains legitimacy by knocking on doors in the company of a recognized community member. The community member develops leadership capacity and rallies people around issues of concern to them. This process of organizing builds the neighborhood's capacity to solve problems; in the process, organizers leave behind a stronger neighborhood with community leaders that live there.

When organizers begin their work in a community, the problems are small. Organizers call these "winnable issues," demands that can usually be met by holding negligent municipal agencies accountable for things like rat abating and pothole filling. Small initial victories fuel the future success of the organization, and the organizer works hard to deliver them while taking care to let residents lead meetings and accountability sessions with city officials and landlords. The organizer facilitates by providing information, strategies, and ideas on running meetings and getting people out to participate.

My first boss sent me to Austin because he thought maybe I could take the block clubs in the area to the next level, which we called civic groups. Basically Chicago is laid out on a grid, every four blocks you have a major street, and out of those eight square blocks between the major streets, we formed civic groups that could take on bigger issues like slum buildings in the area. The idea of a block club is to find good leaders you can kick up to the next level of the civic group, where you can take on bigger issues, and have the power of 200 or 300 people.

By knocking on doors and pulling people together, NTIC builds neighborhood organizations literally from the ground up, starting with the basic urban unit of the block. With time and hard work, block clubs combine into civic clubs, civic clubs form neighborhood organizations, and these in turn coalesce into larger citywide federations. The glue that holds it all together is the meeting – the face-to-face interactions where residents argue, deliberate, consent and dissent in true grass roots democratic form.

We were crazy on block clubs. My turf was the railroad tracks on the east, Lake Street on the north, the expressway on the south, and Austin Avenue on the west. I had 48 block clubs that met every month, 12 street clubs, which were four blocks in a row that met every month, and I had three civics that met once a month. I went to all these meetings. I had block club meetings Monday to Friday nights. If a block club met on Saturday night, I said I wouldn't come.

By combining the power and bodies of individual blocks, groups build their ability to make demands of city and state governments – and ultimately courts, federal agencies, and Congress. The block sign signals the beginning of this community power, phase one for a collectively controlled living environment. The history of the block sign shows that collective power requires a patiently built and locally based social structure for its exercise, and that the process of building and nurturing this structure can be taught and disseminated. The serial aesthetic of the block sign, unity in difference, springs from this each-one-teach-one mode of transmission.

So next time you're walking down Austin Avenue and come upon a block sign, don't take offense at the NO! You've got to read that list of prohibitions as the terms of a temporary truce in a larger struggle, a public agreement in service of larger goals. Ultimately, whenever you see a block sign, you are looking at a community that hopes one day to have no need for that sign.

RESPECT OUR HOMES. HAVE A NICE DAY. GOD BLESS YOU.

BLOCK CLUB SIGNS – Chicago

These photos were taken between 2000 and 2008.





600 N. RIDGEWAY
Welcome To 600 N. Ridgeway
Where Our Children are Our
Greatest Concern! Psalm 29:11
(Please)

- 1 No Speeding
 - 2 No Drugs
 - 3 No Loud Music OR Noises
 - 4 No Washing OF Cars
 - 5 No Loitering
 - 6 No Littering
 - 7 No Repairing OF Cars
 - 8 No Gambling On Side Walk
 - 9 No Ball Playing IN Street
- God Bless You Have A Great Day!







