

Community Alliance of Tenants:

Challenging the Politics of Race and Place from the Inside Out

By Holly Pruett

Where people are allowed to live is part of a plan. It doesn't happen accidentally.

Hop Hopkins

About thirty folks gather in a North Portland storefront office on a rainy Saturday morning. Split into small groups, they're asked a series of questions.

What does gentrification mean to you?

Loss of cultural diversity. Loss of control. A power play. Decisions made by money, not people. A tidal wave of white wealth.

What does displacement mean to you?

More students dropping out of high school because of family economic crisis. Repeat of history: forced migration. Loss of community.

What are some signs of gentrification and displacement in North and Northeast Portland?

Starbucks and everything it represents: a changed landscape, a changed clientele, money being funneled out of the community, low wage jobs. Increased police presence for white, middle class comfort. Neighborhood associations dominated by newcomers, not longtime residents. Increased property taxes. Jacked up housing prices. Relationships among institutions of

power — police, business, development agencies — promoting corporate interests. Apartments converted into condominiums. Reconstruction and sale of houses. City investment. Public art. Changing demographics.

Hop Hopkins, an organizer with the Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT) feeds off the energy in the room as participants develop a collective definition and analysis of the social and economic transformation of their neighborhood.

“The focus of urban renewal is on economics. But where's the talk of the *people*?” he asks. “We're here today to *change that*.” Participants confirm their agreement with loud applause.

Later in the day they will go door to door with a survey developed by an eleven-organization coalition fighting displacement in the neighborhoods surrounding Interstate Avenue in North and Northeast Portland. The City's decision to construct a major regional light rail system through the heart of Portland's historically African American neighborhoods led to the declaration of an Urban Renewal District (URD). The arrival of Interstate light rail and the URD promises dramatic change of the sort identified by today's training participants.

The survey, funded by a City grant, is a tool to identify households at risk for displacement and link them to resources, and to provide information on the public meeting mechanics of the urban renewal process. For CAT, the survey serves an additional purpose: to identify potential leaders who will organize to address the racial and economic justice issues in what could become Portland's latest “Urban Removal” project.

A Tidal Wave of White Wealth

For decades, government housing and transportation policies enforced racial segregation of neighborhoods and subsidized “white flight” to the suburbs. But today many cities are hot spots for a new wave of gentrification. Portland's inner-city neighborhoods, with their “vintage” houses and easy access to downtown, have become a desirable commodity. With the white middle class moving in, government investment has been fast-tracked back into urban neighborhoods whose historically African American residents suffered decades of disinvestment.

The people now threatened by *dis*-placement were “purposely placed,” Hopkins reminds the group. “Where people are allowed to live is part of a plan. It doesn't happen accidentally.”

African Americans were banned from residing in Oregon by exclusion laws that were upheld repeatedly by popular vote until their ultimate repeal in 1926. Shipyard jobs during World War II brought a



credit: CAT

large influx of African-American workers to Portland. Concentrated in the company town of Vanport until it was consumed by floodwaters in 1948, blacks were relocated to designated areas of North and Northeast Portland that were “red-lined” by lenders as suitably disposable for people of color and other low-income groups. “Urban renewal” in the ‘60s and ‘70s fractured the community yet again, replacing thriving residential blocks and small, locally owned businesses with massive infrastructure projects like the Memorial Coliseum.

With Portland's current wave of gentrification, low income renters and homeowners — many of them immigrants and people of color — are being forced to move to the city's more affordable outer boundaries and neighboring suburbs. “For these families, displacement means more time commuting, less public transportation, increased car expenses, fewer services, broken access to neighbors and churches that helped with childcare or other assistance, and disrupted schooling — never mind the increased debt and lost savings that come with moving,” according to Hopkins.

CAT's Hotline takes calls from renters in suddenly “hot” neighborhoods who are experiencing as much as a doubling in their monthly rent. Of the 146 households who completed CAT's survey, 73% of the renters indicated that they had moved twice or more in the past two years, and that housing costs were a primary reason. There are few legal tools to use against this growing phenomenon. No-cause evictions are a well-established practice, and rent control is prohibited under state law. Low-income homeowners are at risk too: faced with skyrocketing property taxes, they are targeted by predatory investors offering fast cash for quick buy-outs.

In addition to the regulatory gaps that make forced displacement possible, CAT has made the explicit decision to target the underlying but unacknowledged racism that both enables and is strengthened by housing inequities.



credit: CAT

Megan Dorton, one of the white organizers and activists who make up just under half of this day's training participants, reminds the group that “Only thirty-five years ago, the Realtors Code of Ethics contained guidelines to prevent race mixing in neighborhoods. *This is about racism.* For white people, this is about doing anti-racism work.”

Prioritizing Racial Justice

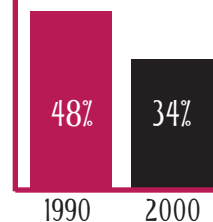
CAT, a grassroots tenants' rights organization with an organizing mission, was founded in 1996 by leaders of the advocacy group Oregon Housing Now. “We realized that true change would only come about if people with a stake in the issue were leading it,” says founder Dana Brown. “CAT works to support and equip tenants to make demands and achieve victories.”

Five years of building-based and issue organizing led to a string of solid victories that advanced basic protections and equity issues for renters (*see sidebar, page 17*). But CAT's vision of justice demanded confrontation with one of the root causes of housing inequities: racism. CAT's early focus on organizing in low-income housing complexes had developed a base of 800 tenant members who were predominantly white. Board, staff, and campaign leaders were not exclusively, but also predominantly, white. Deepening its base and shifting its leadership to reflect its entire low-income constituency meant becoming a fully multi-racial organization. This transformation would require CAT to be, first, a fully anti-racist organization.

The decision to prioritize racial justice had deep implications for both the internal development of CAT, and for its external work in the community.

Local resident talks with Organizer Hop Hopkins and Dorothy and Robert Hatchet, leaders of Residents Organizing Against Removal (ROAR).

AFRICAN AMERICAN RESIDENTS IN PORTLAND'S HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS



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"We began looking for an opportunity to move a campaign that was about both racial and economic justice," says CAT Director Anita Rodgers. CAT recognized that some of the neighborhoods targeted by the new Interstate Urban Renewal District had the highest concentration of people of color and low-income renters in the city. This profile reflected CAT's target organizing base. But it also raised the stakes. "We knew it meant doing things differently," says Hopkins. "It meant changes in the culture of the organization."

CAT leaders turned to Western States Centers' Dismantling Racism Project (see *Views* # 21, Winter 2001) for support in structuring the transformation they knew was necessary. "Western States Center provided the facilitation and expertise to help us envision CAT as a truly anti-racist, anti-oppression organization, and to proceed with as much integrity as possible," says Rodgers.

According to Rodgers, this work has acted as a magnifying lens, both enlarging the values already inherent in CAT, and bringing them into clearer focus. "We've always valued justice, equality, mutual empowerment," she says. "But the Dismantling Racism work has given us additional skills to achieve this vision internally."

Leaders cite specific changes at CAT including:

- a shared, organization-wide analysis of racism that's being moved beyond staff and Board into the membership
- framing and naming the connection between specific issue work and the larger dynamics and impacts of institutional racism.
- prioritizing organizational resources towards a campaign explicitly designed to advance racial justice

- a commitment to specific, measurable anti-racism goals in everything from planning and budgeting to education and organizing; for example, regular political education segments are now part of all membership meetings.

The Possibilities of Power

Working internally on change has not meant a break from the pace of external organizing. The anti-displacement campaign in N/NE Portland has, in six months trained 93 volunteers who knocked on 881 doors, held three public actions, and developed a neighborhood leadership group called ROAR, Residents Organizing Against Removal.

Dorothy Hatchet is typical of ROAR members. African American renters, she and her husband are longtime neighborhood residents. The home they have lived in for 13 years was recently purchased by a white couple who have already bought and sold a couple of other homes in the neighborhood. They immediately announced a rent increase of almost \$400 while providing no improvements in a house that needs them. "The kind of people that are moving in makes you wonder: are they here to build the community or take advantage of us?" Hatchet says. "I feel that they want us out. But CAT supports my neighborhood.

Together we can defend our homes and our community. If we let it go, we will lose our voice. We need to bond together."

Hopkins makes one of CAT's objectives clear: "We're out to flip the neighborhood associations on their asses." Portland has long been known for the political power of its neighborhood associations, which are funded through City Hall. Dominated by homeowners, they have rarely represented the rights or concerns of renters. With gentrification, participating homeowners are increasingly newcomers, typically not representative of the majority of residents. In a city renowned for its declared dedication



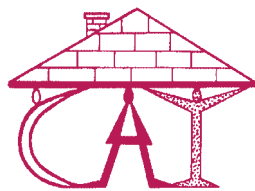
Organizer Tomás Garduño with ROAR coordinators Sydney Most and Mickey Ann Parker.

credit: CAT

More wealthy U.S. families receive housing subsidies than all low- and middle-income households combined. For every \$1 of low-income housing aid assisting the poorest 40% of households, \$2.81 in homeowner deductions subsidizes the wealthiest 20%.

Robert Landauer,
The Oregonian, 5/26/01

to public participation (*see Sisters in Action, page 8*), Hopkins says the city's "public involvement" processes need to go much deeper and broader than the neighborhood associations.



By developing the leadership of low income renters and people of color in the neighborhoods affected by urban renewal, CAT aims to put power in the hands of people who — following in the footsteps of CAT's building-based leaders — will usher in what organizers call "a new era of community control." CAT's commitment to racial justice organizing has led them to expand their definition of community control to include people of color homeowners at risk of displacement, while remaining equally committed to tenants.

Residents of North and Northeast Portland got a taste of their potential power when they succeeded in inserting concrete affordable housing goals into the urban renewal plan forwarded to the Portland City Council, including:

- prioritizing funds for affordable housing for low-income people currently living in the area.
- maintaining the affordability of 1,400 units of currently subsidized rental housing.
- developing 2,000 more units of affordable rental housing for low-income people.
- ensuring that new housing developed will have long-term affordability requirements.

The rest of the anti-displacement agenda is emerging as organizing proceeds. CAT is in contact with anti-displacement organizers around the country, learning what they can about strategies being used in cities like New York City and San Francisco. As neighborhood leaders gain skills and confidence in grassroots organizing, research, and policy development, they will help shape CAT's issue campaigns to fit the particular realities of Portland. These issue campaigns will in turn strengthen the capacity of the neighborhood organizing drive. The new leaders who emerge from Portland's heavily African American and immigrant neighborhoods will contribute to the further transformation of CAT.



CAT Organizer Hop Hopkins is a member of the Center's Board and a graduate of Western States' advanced organizer training program (WILD), which helped to field test the displacement survey instrument. For more information on CAT's Anti-Displacement Campaign, contact Hop Hopkins or Tomás Garduño, former VISTA volunteer and former Western States Center intern, now on CAT's organizing staff. (503) 460.9702 or www.aracnet.com/~cat.

CAT Organizing Victories

CAT's ability to mobilize thousands of tenants and allies to attend hearings and actions, circulate petitions, and send postcards and letters has resulted in a string of grassroots victories. Many of the tenants involved in these issue organizing campaigns are from groups that are traditionally marginalized and had never before been involved as community change agents.

1997 Convinced the City not only to increase **finances against landlords** who refused to make needed repairs, but to also double those fines after six months if repairs had still not been made.

1998 Campaign to **end discrimination against tenants with Section 8 vouchers**, resulted in increased efforts to recruit landlords. The number of Section 8 tenants unable to find housing was cut from one-third to one-sixth of those given vouchers.

1998 Set a national precedent with the adoption of Portland's **Affordable Housing Preservation Ordinance** to preserve federally-subsidized housing at risk because landlords desired to sell or gentrify the property. Saved the homes of 5,000 low-income families — many of whom are elderly or disabled.

1999 Held back state-level efforts to gut Portland's Preservation Ordinance and to legalize discrimination by exempting some landlords from having to comply with fair housing laws. For the first time ever, tenants sat at the negotiating table with landlords to negotiate improvements in Oregon's **Landlord-Tenant Act**.

2000 Won \$4 million in a one-time allocation and a half-million dollars in an ongoing allocation in the Portland City **General Fund budget** for affordable housing — the first time in the City's history that there has been an on-going commitment of general funds.

2001 Forced inclusion of strong affordable housing goals in the Interstate **Urban Renewal District Plan** forwarded to the Portland City Council.