

PHOTO VIGNETTE

People Power



Shirley Chan addresses one of the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association's community meetings in the spring of 1973. Note the bilingual agenda on the blackboard. Photo by Hayne Wai.

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What does change look like? If this photo is any indication, it looks like a meeting in the gym at the old Pender Street Y. The bell-bottomed young woman standing at the front of the room is Shirley Chan, who in 1973 was a member of the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA), a grassroots organization on Vancouver's east side. She, along with other members of the executive, was there to update people on redevelopment activities in the area and, in particular, on the progress of the Strathcona Rehabilitation Program.

The rehabilitation program was the outcome of SPOTA's successful efforts in the late 1960s to stop "urban renewal." While portions of the

east side had been cleared, including Hogan's Alley, where the city's small black population lived, Strathcona remained. SPOTA managed to convince the federal government to use funds earmarked for renewing this allegedly "blighted" area to finance the rehabilitation of its residential buildings instead.

Rehabilitation let people continue to live where they felt comfortable and secure and in the kinds of housing they were used to but couldn't afford elsewhere. This was no small consideration given Strathcona's social composition: it was home to a largely poor and working-class, non-Anglo European population as well as a significant number of Chinese Canadians, including Shirley Chan and her family. For the latter group, Strathcona's proximity to the services and social life Chinatown offered was especially important.

SPOTA's success was due in large part to its composition, alliances, and tactics. As the blackboard to Shirley Chan's left suggests, SPOTA was a multicultural, multilingual group. Whereas the Chinese had led the earlier protests against urban renewal in the east end, SPOTA's membership reflected the neighbourhood's diversity. In addition to Chinese immigrants, Italian, Greek, Ukrainian, Jewish, and British immigrants also lived in the area, attracted to it by the lower cost of housing and the proximity to downtown.

The group's strength was also reinforced by the relationships it forged with professionals and organizations both inside and outside the area, and with key federal politicians and municipal bureaucrats. For instance, future mayor and premier of British Columbia Mike Harcourt was SPOTA's legal advisor. The Vancouver architectural firm Birmingham Wood lent its expertise to help SPOTA frame a neighbourhood rehabilitation program. And future NDP MP Margaret Mitchell, then a social worker at Alexandra Neighbourhood House, helped SPOTA engage residents on the issue of urban renewal. A member of the city's social planning department, Darlene Marzari, did the same thing, even as her colleagues in other city departments might have preferred otherwise. Marzari was also in a position to help SPOTA gain access to federal politicians like Paul Hellyer and Robert Andras, both of whom oversaw housing and urban renewal.

If its composition and alliances made SPOTA "a new breed of group," it was also novel because of its tactics. Its protests were non-confrontational, taking the form of escorting unsuspecting politicians and bureaucrats on early morning walking tours of Strathcona, where they could speak with residents and see for themselves that the neighbourhood wasn't a slum.

They also involved eating and drinking. Building on the Chinese custom of gift exchange, or *guanxi*, SPOTA hosted banquets, plying those who had decision-making power with food and booze and then pitching its case. SPOTA also used its members' social capital to mobilize people on a block-by-block basis. Individual residents, often older women, were given the responsibility of knocking on doors or chatting over their back gardens to inform their neighbours about upcoming meetings of SPOTA and city council and to encourage them to attend.

These tactics were enormously successful: the federal government agreed to stop urban renewal, fund neighbourhood rehabilitation, and give SPOTA a role alongside the federal, provincial, and municipal representatives in overseeing the disbursement of funds. The group was elated and considered itself a "fourth level of government."

What SPOTA achieved was remarkable, the product of commitment and hard work. It's an example of community organizing in the 1960s, a time when ordinary people demanded and took power, making a place for themselves in political institutions and processes that, historically, had excluded them.

But Strathcona was also saved from the wrecking ball because times had changed and attitudes had as well: by the end of 1968, when SPOTA established itself, urban renewal had fallen into disfavour as a way of building better cities – even within planning circles. More broadly, top-down solutions to social, political, or economic problems and the experts who offered them were viewed with a new degree of skepticism. "People power" meant giving those who lived in places like Strathcona a say in the future of their neighbourhood. The Trudeau government had recently been elected on a platform of "citizen participation," and it's not surprising that ministers like Paul Hellyer and Robert Andras were keen to solicit people's opinions and act on what they heard.

Of course, there were limits to what SPOTA accomplished. But without groups like it and the people gathered in the Pender Y in 1973 to push for change and hold government to account, our vision of the future would be much narrower than what it is.