

Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State

By Claire Dunning
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Reviewed by:
Emily I. Nwagpuda

The nonprofit sector, also known as the third sector, develops and builds communities, helps shape public policy, and directly impacts society. External policy influences often dictate and constrain nonprofits' advocacy strategies and techniques. To examine how the interests of governmental institutions in America shape nonprofits, Dunning (2022) introduces readers to her conceptualization of nonprofit neighborhoods, defined as “places where neighborhood-based nonprofit organizations controlled access to the levers of political, economic, and social power and mediated the local manifestations of the state and market” (Dunning 2022, 14). She uses a historical lens to highlight nonprofit neighborhoods as “neglected terrain” at the intersections between nonprofits, governmental funding, and analyses of race and its subsequent influence on urban governance (Dunning 2022, 13). Archival data from news articles, press releases, and governmental documents fortify this manuscript's efforts to enlighten nonprofit professionals, civil servants, academics, community members, and funders on nonprofit neighborhoods as a unique aspect of American history.

The reader of this text will appreciate how Dunning addresses critical topics from several perspectives to provide a thorough understanding of the history, evolution, and policy implications of nonprofit neighborhoods. The book substantiates the existence of nonprofit neighborhoods in seven chapters that cover the City of Boston, grantees, residents, bureaucrats,

lenders, partners, and coalitions, respectively. Starting with the introduction, the author informs readers of the unfinished business in understanding the history of government grantmaking to nonprofits. Using examples ranging from parks to community-led infrastructure building, Dunning presents diverse neighborhood contexts as being interwoven within her conception of nonprofit neighborhoods and many issues at the heart of the urban crisis throughout this manuscript. The concluding chapter offers readers an assessment of the historical and modern issues ingrained in the history of nonprofit neighborhoods and the nonprofit sector, as a whole.

The author highlights the case of nonprofit neighborhoods in Boston, a city charting a course for economic prosperity through coproduction of public goods using government-nonprofit partnerships. Dunning (2022) anchors her explanation of nonprofit neighborhoods in a rich depiction of Boston in the latter half of the 20th century, steeped in social welfare experimentation, the strategic will of governmental leaders, and deep commitments to the idea of a public-private partnership that shaped the urban renaissance in Boston. So many of these meaningful stories and perspectives were unknown and hidden from the public eye. The author then bookends the narrative with historical perspectives essential for a modern understanding of nonprofit neighborhoods, shedding light on the processes underpinning multimillion-dollar public-private partnerships and the efforts of federal

agencies that ultimately impact communities. The reader will quickly see nonprofit neighborhoods as policy tools in which governmental dollars position nonprofits to do the work of community building.

Dunning offers a profound conclusion early on to substantiate topics covered in the book—the strategic governmental relationship between nonprofit neighborhoods reinforces racial discrimination and segregation in American life. Therefore, Dunning broaches the issue of race in a manner that exceeds the classic understanding of race as a social construction (Lopez 1994). The nature of nonprofit neighborhoods as vehicles to mitigate and reinforce social biases attached to racial status depends on who leads these entities and the state of politics at any given time.

The characteristics of nonprofit neighborhoods, especially the racial profile of staff and community members within individual nonprofits, directly change the trajectory of how these organizations influence urban governance, democracy, and the obtainment of civil rights. Dunning introduces readers to unsung Boston nonprofit leaders to help characterize the complexity of nonprofit neighborhoods and showcase their efforts to advance their nonprofit missions while seeking to capitalize on governmental grants despite the associated barriers to social equity. Dunning demonstrates the interplay between nonprofit, city, and resident leaders to maximize this reality. For instance, the story of Mel King, a youth employment advocate and local nonprofit worker, overlapped with that of leaders of the Action for Boston Community Development, a preferred nonprofit entity for governmental funding (Dunning 2022). Wealthy Boston elites and policymakers, such as former Boston Mayor John Collins, were aware of community leaders and local advocates to gauge their working relationships within nonprofit neighborhoods and claim credit for helping to secure funding and any subsequent success (Dunning 2022). Similar patterns of influence persist in modern society (e.g., Brown 2024).

Nonprofit neighborhoods allow diverse residents to take on new positions and leadership roles within the communities that underpin nonprofit neighborhoods. However, Dunning discusses explicit governmental funding strategies with ambitions to outsource projects and control away from nonprofit neighborhoods. She investigates Boston's local government leaders' efforts to intentionally and exclusively hire professionals, typically white men with college educations, to be city liaisons.

These liaisons, hired to work and negotiate with nonprofit neighborhoods, temper the need for equity and civil rights within communities by blocking or ignoring community demands to eliminate racialized social barriers and restrictions (Dunning 2022).

Despite the positive potential of nonprofit neighborhoods, their perpetuation of racial discrimination was a grim reality. This reality was especially concerning due to the severe need for housing access and affordable housing in Boston. For example, the Boston Housing Partnership was comprised of government, financial institutions, and community development corporations. These new entities attracted wealthy donors to their causes, but their roots were in Black Power and community control groups seeking fair housing. The presence of diverse board members did not negate the Boston Housing Partnership's path of dependence on resources and methods that aligned with external business goals. The interests of funders and developers often overshadowed community members desperate for new housing through organizations like the Boston Housing Partnership (Dunning 2022).

Readers will find several surprising revelations throughout the book. For instance, despite the racial implications of this period, all Boston residents could access local decision-making authority by forming new nonprofit entities to function within the nonprofit neighborhood framework. More specifically, governmental dollars to address poverty in Boston were granted through nonprofits, even minority-led nonprofits, regardless of historically discriminatory treatment. Government grants created opportunities for racial minorities to circumvent racial and ethnic discrimination while also keeping the standardized framework of racism, racially coded language, and race-based outcomes in place. African Americans and Caribbean immigrants being subject to the ramifications of the Jim Crow era of discrimination and poor treatment of non-White racial minorities in Boston continued during the city's redevelopment era. The constraints nonprofit neighborhoods put on black residents, in particular, created what Dunning called "new manifestations of an old discrimination" (Dunning 2022, 16).

This book offers a grand but accessible story of Boston, its racialized history, and the nonprofit neighborhoods that helped form the foundation of this city's modern prosperity, for which it has garnered fame. Dunning outlines arguments, aims, and research ques-

tions that ultimately draw attention to nonprofits' dependence on government support to help center the exploration of the case of nonprofit neighborhoods. The author clarifies that mythical notions of an independent voluntary and charitable sector are just a fixture of U.S. policy, especially regarding funding nonprofits and nonprofit neighborhoods. This reality should influence community and nonprofit leaders to be highly aware of funders' demands for their organizations. Furthermore, Dunning's use of data and the tracking of governmental dollars into nonprofits signal fundamental opportunities for scholars to deepen their understanding of the complexity of nonprofit neighborhoods and the nonprofit sector in general. Nonprofit and community leaders also have an opportunity to become adept strategists based on data to capitalize on governmental promises for funding and navigate historical racial barriers associated with governmental funding.

In sum, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* made good on its early promise to draw attention to a neglected segment of nonprofits while also demonstrating how unequal treatment due to racism persisted and grew despite the potential for nonprofit neighborhoods to stop this trend. Unlike some classic texts on the history of nonprofits (e.g., Anheier 2014; O'Neill 2002), the author makes refreshing efforts to explicitly make the issue of race and social equity a significant aspect of this book and the history of nonprofits in America. *Nonprofit Neighborhoods* concludes with the author's final thoughts on nonprofit neighborhoods and their relevance to structural and systemic change in society at large. However, Dunning stops short of offering strategies to dismantle institutional and structural racism (e.g., Bearfield, Humphrey,

Portillo, and Riccucci 2023) which reinforces the limits on change. Ultimately, the author concludes with a tone that expresses hope for nonprofit neighborhoods despite the potential drawbacks, but readers will decide if that optimism is warranted.

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Emily I. Nwakpuda (she/her) (emily.nwakpuda@uta.edu) is an assistant professor of public affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research focuses on nonprofits and philanthropy, social equity, community development, homelessness, and social innovation. She received her doctorate in public policy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.