

## **In Search of a Home: The Fight for Open Housing in Seattle**

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There are few places in Seattle that black residents can call home. For almost 70 years, the heart of Seattle's black culture has resided within the walls of the Central District. I can vividly recall walking the streets of MLK and 23rd Avenue at times throughout my childhood, feeling an ownership rarely felt elsewhere in our city—a sense of pride and freedom passed down to me from my mother, her mother, and our family's history on the blocks that produced generations of activists, poets, musicians and leaders that have shaped all who've come from here. This sense of admiration and love for the place many have called home, was born from the history of greed, hate and segregation that forced them there—not too dissimilar from the forces that continue to push many from their homes today. It has become clear that the same efforts of resistance used by our predecessors to allow us all to move freely from beyond the walls of the Central District, will be needed to preserve our collective rights to stay in our neighborhoods today.

Seattle has an extensive history of racial segregation and restrictive covenants governing the movements of many communities of color in our city. These covenants are rooted in the days following the Supreme Court's ruling against city segregation ordinances, which then encouraged private developers to work their way around the statutes of the Fourteenth Amendment rather than enforcing legal ordinances at the state and provincial level. The major tool in these efforts was a practice commonly known as "redlining," when lines were drawn throughout cities across America, dictating which families would be eligible to receive bank loans to purchase homes, and which would be forced to live elsewhere. This policy came to form Seattle's prominent neighborhoods, where many residents worked tirelessly to ensure that their streets weren't welcome to non-white families (Silva).

In the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s, Seattle's housing discrimination practices came center stage in the City Council. Although some small

efforts to integrate neighborhood housing had been in place in the early portion of the 1950's, it wasn't until 1956 that the city established the Greater Seattle Housing Council to encourage dialogue between open housing advocates and the real estate industry. This joint partnership was only a small success, as open housing advocates continued to face animosity from the apartment and real estate industries within the city who had no interest in altering their policies (Seattle Municipal Archives). In 1961, the Seattle branch of the NAACP proposed that the city pass an ordinance to end housing discrimination once and for all. Reverend Samuel McKinney, then pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, was one of several speakers at a public hearing held in support of the idea, demanding that the city take swift action to address the issue (Seattle Post-Intelligencer).

The efforts of the new "Open Housing" activists in pressuring the City led to then Mayor Gordon S. Clinton's appointment of the Citizen's Advisory Committee on Minority Housing who would both recommend passage of an open housing ordinance and also the creation of a Human Rights Commission. Despite these efforts, Mayor Clinton and the City Council delayed action on the committee's recommendations for over a year, and on July 1, 1963, hundreds marched to City Hall to protest the Local Government's inaction and the fact that both committees formed by Mayor Clinton consisted only of white males (Seattle Municipal Archives). The City Council meeting held that day was attended by more than 300 community members, activists and civic leaders, though perhaps the most important attendees were a contingent of youth from Seattle's Central District who belonged to the Central District Youth Club. Contrasting many of the older, white organizations who fought for housing rights at the time, the Central District Youth Club was comprised of an interracial grouping of Central District students and young adults that came together to fight for the rights of their community (Silva).

One student commented that "as citizens of Seattle and members of the Central District Youth Club, we feel humiliated by the slow process of the City of Seattle to adopt

open housing. We are past the stage of patience, we also are past the stage of committees and subcommittees. We want open housing today” (Seattle Post-Intelligencer). Following their demonstration at the rally, the young protesters occupied Mayor Clinton’s office in what is widely considered to be Seattle’s first sit-in. The members of the Central District Youth Club would remain in the Mayor’s office for almost 24 hours, relinquishing their position only after an hour-long meeting with Rev. Jackson and McKinney, with CDYC Spokesman Eddie Givens stating that the action "had achieved our purpose in demonstrating that we want immediate action to bring us equal rights" (Stevens).

Their actions on that day served as an undeniable act of civic courage and resistance, and they succeeded in convincing the City Council to commit to the creation of a human rights commission, with the mandate of drafting an open housing ordinance within 90 days. Though Seattle voters would eventually defeat the open housing ordinance in March of 1964, and truly open housing would not be passed in law until April of 1968, the sit in by 35 Central Area youth would be remembered as a catalyst for the movement, and a reminder of the power of civil disobedience (Seattle Municipal Archives). In a city where animosity boiled between open housing activists, real estate agents and other large segments of the overwhelmingly white Seattle, these students placed their safety and security on the line in support of a movement much larger than any one of them individually. Though many have never heard of the Central District Youth Club, some see them as the key figures in forcing Mayor Clinton and the City Council to put equal housing at the forefront of their agenda. The Central District Youth Club serve as examples of the importance of engaging youth in civic conversations, and promoting environments where our voices can be heard and our demands taken seriously (Wilma).

Today, gentrification is quickly sweeping the streets of the Central District and leaving few traces of the once sprawling neighborhood that many of us remember. Recent census data highlighted in *The Seattle Times* showed that the black population in the CD

has plummeted from 51 percent to 21 percent over the past 20 years, and many project that it will half again in another 10 years from now. The redevelopment of main arterials running through the neighborhood, and the recent purchase of the historic Promenade via billionaire Paul Allen's company Vulcan, have dug deeply into the pockets of several black-owned businesses (The Seattle Times). Many business owners are left watching in awe as much of their clientele relocate, or prices rise far too high to continue making a livable profit. With many businesses on the brink of closing down due to such heavy losses, without swift and substantial intervention more black faces will continue to be forced to leave.

Much like the landscape for housing almost 50 years ago, the power of altering the market for real estate and development is not in the hands of the City Council, but rather the land developers and real estate agencies that have been given the power to freely design our city as they see fit. *Black Past* notes that the transformation of Seattle's Central District isn't dissimilar from the stories of many other black neighborhoods across the states; Harlem, Chicago's South Side, South Central Los Angeles and San Francisco's Filmore District, all have seen an increase in "white flighters" in recent years (McGee). These suburban migrants, craving the social and economic capital gained from urban living, move in to their traditionally poorer neighborhoods and increase the property taxes to the detriment of those who lived there. In these cities as well, Civil Rights organizations and intersectional communities of color and their allies, banded together in resistance, demanding equal rights to housing and an end to the redlining of our country's cities.

The civic courage exhibited in 1963 by the Central District Youth Club shows the power that our city's youth have in demanding that our leaders uphold the rights they pledge themselves to when sworn into office. These students show us that at the risk of their own safety, security, and livelihood, they were unafraid to stand up for a cause they so deeply believed in. As today's Central District youth continue to protest, whether demanding the respect of black lives, calling for equal and adequate education at Garfield High School, or

an end to gentrification and modern day redlining practices, we are reminded that the spirit of those 35 individuals lives on today, even as their generation leaves the CD.



The Central District Youth Club in Mayor Clinton's Office, July 1st, 1963  
Photo: Tom Brownell, Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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