

# Race, Place and Waste: Community Planning in New York City

Tom Angotti

Neighborhood-based planning is perhaps nowhere more developed and diverse than in New York City. But it did not get that way because government made a commitment to involve communities in decisionmaking. It began with protest and organizing at the grass roots. Today, although there is an extensive official structure for neighborhood planning, many neighborhoods, especially low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, must still exercise their influence through protest and organizing. Today's most salient issues are waste transfer stations, community gardens, auto-dependence, and access to public space.

## The Official Structure of Planning

In this city of 7.5 million people and over 100 neighborhoods, the official structure for neighborhood planning is honored more in the breach than in practice. The official structure also leaves uncorrected the substantial political and economic inequalities among neighborhoods. Because better-off neighborhoods are usually able to show more muscle, their influence is greater, and their methods for organizing more discreet.

New York City has had an official neighborhood planning structure for almost four decades, longer than any other major city in the U.S. The city's five boroughs have 59 community districts, each

of which is represented by a board of 50 members. Board members are appointed by the borough president in consultation with city council members. Under the city Charter, the community boards review and vote on land use applications, including applications for zoning changes, special permits, urban renewal areas, acquisition and disposition of city-owned property, and the siting of major community facilities. Their vote is advisory to the City Planning Commission and City Council, which make the final decisions; sometimes the vote influences the higher bodies and sometimes not. Community boards also review and comment on agency budget requests.

## "197-a" Plans

The land use review process tends to be short-term and focused on individual projects. Community boards can also prepare general long-range plans, called "197-a plans" because authority comes from Section 197-a of the City Charter. After extensive pressure from community activists, a 1990 Charter revision gave the boards explicit authority to prepare plans and submit them to the Planning Commission and City Council for approval. Before that, some neighborhoods produced their own plans but the absence of explicit authority in the Charter provided an excuse for Planning Commission indifference

Top: Coop City in the Bronx, the largest housing coop in the nation, with 15,000 residents.

Bottom, NY skyline seen from lower East side.  
Photo by Ejlat Feuer.



to community plans. To date, five neighborhood 197-a plans have been approved and about a dozen are in preparation.

A 197-a plan, like most official plans, can at best have a limited impact on neighborhoods. The plan is a policy statement and advisory. It only obligates city agencies to consider the plan recommendations in making future decisions. This is not, however, the main problem. All plans are advisory to some extent, and plans that are specific and mandate narrow actions can also be ignored or changed.

The problem is that city government does not support or promote community planning in general, and 197-a plans in particular. The average community board covers an area of 100,000 people with a staff of two or three people who spend most of their time dealing with minor complaints ranging from potholes to traffic lights. They receive no funds for planning. The City Planning Department does not provide planners to work for them. And when the few communities that complete plans send them to City Planning for approval, they find themselves subjected to extensive scrutiny and may have changes imposed on them without community review.

## Unofficial Grass Roots Planning

The real success stories of community-based planning are more likely to be





Red Hook plan, one of the first community plans approved by the city planning commission.

found in the many unofficial movements, particularly in neighborhoods whose official institutions have less access to decision-making power — low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. These include grassroots efforts in housing, open space, environment, public health and community services.

Participatory planning started with community organizing. In the 1930's, New York City was the site of militant tenant actions linked with the unemployed and labor movements. When marshalls evicted tenants and moved all their furniture onto the streets, neighbors organized to move it back in again. After the War, tenants were able to secure the continuation of war-time rent controls.

Highlights of militancy in the post-War era include the Harlem rent strike in the 1950s and the Coop City rent strike in the 1970s, and extensive squatting and homesteading. A strong housing movement has helped make New York the U.S. city with the largest stock of rental housing, limited-equity coops, public housing, and the largest stock of municipally-owned housing. About 15% of all housing units in the city are still protected by some form of public or social ownership although deregulation and privatization, spurred by the current real estate boom and an intense wave of gentrification, are making this stock unaffordable for people with low and moderate incomes, and widespread abandonment has destroyed significant amounts of private rental housing.

#### Housing Movements

In the 1960s and 1970s, the largest community-based organizations were started by squatters and tenants in city-owned buildings. The massive neighborhood abandonment in the 1970s left 150,000 private dwelling units in the hands of city government. Due to the flight of industry and white workers to the suburbs, redlining by banks and insurance companies, and the official neglect of neighborhoods occupied by

people of color, landlords either torched their buildings for the insurance money or abandoned them completely.

Under pressure from communities (and the real estate industry), New York City launched the largest-ever municipal housing program in the nation, resulting in the improvement of the vast majority of city-owned buildings. These efforts fed the creation of more than 100 community development corporations, neighborhood-based developers that own and/or manage over 10,000 units of housing. The city's many innovative programs that encourage tenant management and involvement, however, have now been eclipsed by efforts to sell everything to the highest bidder. Neighborhood solidarity has been gradually eroded by the enticements of gentrification, and community development corporations have too often lost sight of their service mandate and act like landlords. Therefore, the housing movement is in a difficult place — as indicated by a recent, nearly successful effort by the real estate industry to eliminate rent regulations in the city.

In the predominantly middle class neighborhoods, militant community organizing helped lay to rest the spirit of Robert Moses, the planner responsible for massive urban renewal and highway pro-

## The Urban Revolution

Klaus Toepfer

In less than a year, at the dawn of the new millennium, an urban revolution is set to take place: for the first time in human history, one half of the world's population will be urban.

This urban revolution will escalate over the next three decades when urban populations will grow to twice the size of rural populations. The bulk of this new urban population will be African and Asian, joining the vast pool of urban citizens in Europe, North America and Latin America, where three-quarters of the population is already urbanized. Africa, currently the least urbanized continent, will have two-thirds of its population living in cities by the year 2020. And the biggest, most densely populated megacities with populations of over 10 million will be located in the South, not the North.

Although cities are — and will remain — the centers of global



finance, industry and communications, home to a wealth of cultural diversity and political dynamism, immensely productive, creative and innovative, they have also become breeding grounds for poverty, violence, pollution and congestion. Unsustainable patterns of consumption among dense city populations, concentration of industries, intense economic activities, increased motorization and inefficient waste management all suggest that the major environmental problems of the future will be city problems.

At least 600 million urban residents in developing countries — and the numbers are growing — already live in housing of such poor quality and with such inadequate provision of water, sanitation and drainage, that their lives and health are under continuous threat. For many millions of people around the world, urban living has become a nightmare, far removed from the dream of safety and prosperity held out by city visionaries, especially for the young, who will inherit

grams that displaced and divided neighborhoods. The fight to stop the Lower Manhattan Expressway, and the 25-year-long struggle against Westway, a major highway on Manhattan's west side, impressed city planners with the power of community opposition.

A final note on community-based organizations. Not all of them have helped in the move toward more equitable policies. In fact, many a neighborhood and block association, especially in the more affluent areas, work overtime to preserve their territorial privileges. These are the neighborhoods for whom NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) is a vocation.

### Environmental Justice

Today the most important contributions to community planning come from efforts to improve the environment in communities that have the most serious public health and environmental problems.

In the 1980s, the city proposed to build a sewage treatment plant in West Harlem after real estate interests in the adjacent (mostly white) Upper West Side neigh-

borhood successfully defeated the proposal. Harlem residents organized but were unable to stop the plant. But they won some concessions, notably a new state park built on top of the sewage plant. Out of this struggle, and similar ones against waste transfer stations, polluting industries and heavy truck traffic in the city's poor neighborhoods and communities of color, has arisen the environmental justice movement in New York City. This movement is as critical to urban justice as the housing movement was in the 1960s and 1970s.

What has happened in recent decades that spurred this new movement? First of all, the city has undergone a massive process of deindustrialization. The neighborhoods around the derelict, industrially zoned land tend to be disproportionately working class and minority neighborhoods. Historically, people in these neighborhoods have suffered the worst consequences of industrial pollution. They have been exposed to toxic substances both as workers inside factories and as neighbors living near them. Now much of the land

vacated by industry is being taken over by waste facilities, which perpetuate the historic patterns of environmental injustice. Add to this the problems attendant to poverty and discrimination, such as lack of access to adequate health care, housing and education, and we have high rates of disease and infant mortality, as well as lower life expectancy in these neighborhoods.

### Waste and Race

The central issue feeding demands for community planning in New York City today is waste disposal. Several of the city's poorest neighborhoods are saturated with waste transfer stations, which bring with them unsanitary conditions, heavy truck traffic, air pollution, and odor pollution. Many of these neighborhoods are on the Brooklyn and Bronx waterfronts, where garbage is being shipped out.

Waste-related conflict intensified recently when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced that the city would close its last remaining landfill by the year 2002 — the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Is-

Left, Ocean Parkway Greenway, linking Brooklyn's Prospect Park with Coney Island, is now part of a growing greenway/bikeway network in New York City. Center and right, transportation alternatives help to make the annual Bike-to-Work Week a success.



the urban millennium.

Not only are we living in an urbanizing world, we are also experiencing an unprecedented urbanization of poverty. In most cities of the developing world, up to one half of the urban population lives in "informal" slum and squatter settlements, which are neither legally recognized nor serviced by city authorities. The informal parts of the city do not enjoy many of the benefits of urban life, including access to basic services, health care and clean running water. Residents live in constant fear of eviction and most do not have access to formal finance and loan schemes which could enable them to improve their living conditions. Yet, this invisible majority is indispensable to the economy of the city.

The "formal city," in contrast, enjoys the advantages of city life, often at the expense of the informal city. This modern tale of two cities within one city is one of the greatest failures of the urban revolution, as it alienates and marginalizes one part of the urban population from the other.

Yet, despite all its problems and challenges, cities continue to grow; history has shown that all attempts to limit urbanization have failed. It is now widely accepted that urbanization is not only inevitable, but is a positive phenomenon. Cities exist because they offer opportunities and the promise of a better life. In cities it is possible to integrate human, economic and technological resources to maximum effect. Well-functioning cities are also a pre-condition for successful rural development.

But poor governance and bad policies have led to severe environmental degradation and deteriorating living conditions in many cities around the world. There is no doubt that cities have the potential to be safe and healthy for all their residents. The biggest challenge lies in focusing on the social dimension of urban poverty, in designing new strategies and approaches in the management of urban areas, as well as in proposing innovative methods to improve the physical environment and infrastructure.

It is apparent that many governments are under-prepared and

land. This is seen as a payback to Staten Island's (mostly white) voters who strongly backed Giuliani. While the closure helps the mayor pay off a political debt and promises to end an environmental nightmare for many Staten Island residents, the nightmare will soon be transferred to a few waterfront communities with working class and minority populations. After the closing of Fresh Kills, domestic waste disposal will be privatized, and it appears as though most of it will be exported by way of the industrially-zoned waterfront neighborhoods where large amounts of waste can be managed. It is no mere accident that the new neighbors of waste transfer are predominantly communities of color and low-income working class communities in Brooklyn and the Bronx, constituencies to whom this mayor owes no political debts.

It is also no accident that a good proportion of the 197-a plans underway are in industrial waterfront communities. In Brooklyn, community plans are underway in the waterfront neighborhoods of Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Vinegar Hill and Sunset Park, and one was completed in Red Hook.

#### Community Gardens

Another major community struggle

was spurred by a Giuliani administration privatization scheme. This is the movement to preserve and develop the 700 community gardens on city-owned land. The administration recently announced its intention to sell the community gardens. The city is running out of housing development sites and is being pressed by some to cash in on rising real estate values throughout the city. This move would especially affect low-income communities where community gardens tend to be concentrated. Few residents in these neighborhoods have the luxury of vacationing in the Adirondack Mountains or enclosing themselves in air-conditioned apartments. Many gardeners and civic groups are outraged by the city's proposal because they feel that their gardening work helped improve the neighborhood and raise land values.

New York City has the lowest ratio of open space per person of any city in the country. Large parks like Central Park are very intensively used. But this mayor, like the last two mayors, has severely cut the Parks Department budget and encouraged the encroachment of private concessions and advertising in the parks. Some concessions like the up-scale Tavern on the Green restaurant in Central Park charge more than the average family budget can

bear. In Brooklyn, Drier-Offerman Park will soon be filled with batting cages and driving ranges, and part of Ferry Point Park in the Bronx is to become a private golf course, the 15th golfing facility to be subsidized by city government.

Community gardens in New York are valuable to residents as a source of fresh produce and aesthetic enjoyment. But gardens also bring together people of different age and ethnic groups and help build community spirit. [For the complete story on New York City community gardens, see "The Death of Little Puerto Rico," page 50.]

#### Auto dependence and public places

New York watchers have read of Mayor Giuliani's campaign to crack down on jaywalkers, bicyclists, taxi drivers and street peddlers. But what they usually don't hear about is the substantial movement to preserve the city's vibrant street life and improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists. This diverse movement involves block associations that want safer streets, environmentalists who understand the global consequences and public health effects of auto dependence, and public transit, cycling and pedestrian advocacy groups.

The legendary New York street life that

under-resourced in anticipating, planning and preparing for an urbanizing world. The City Summit, held in Istanbul in 1996, grappled with this reality and concluded that the onus of addressing the urban challenge rests not only with governments, but with other urban actors, such as local authorities and civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector. This inclusive approach ensures that no urban group is left out of the decision-making process and that all residents have equal rights to the city.

As the Istanbul Conference demonstrated, citizens of cities are demanding to be seen and heard and to be given the authority to make decisions about their living environment. The urban poor, who will constitute a majority of the urban population in the 21st century, should have a voice and a choice in where and how to live.

Although many countries lack the financial resources and the legal and the institutional framework to respond to rapid urbanization, many local authorities have already begun to take on this new approach by adopting more open, accountable and transparent sys-

tems of urban governance. Efficient urban managers are relying less on top-down processes based on blueprints and masterplans and more on interactive, dynamic processes built on partnerships.

These processes have been further strengthened by the growing trend towards decentralization, which has dramatically altered the role and working methods of local authorities. Democratic debate and participatory decision-making have already transformed the ways in which some city councils and municipalities plan and manage cities. By involving all residents, both rich and poor, men and women, in the city's agenda-setting processes, city authorities can create a sense of ownership and responsibility among all inhabitants of the city. Through such processes, cities of the future can truly become cities for all.

Humanity's future lies in cities. If we take action now, cities of despair can become cities of hope and joy.

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Klaus Toepfer is Under-Secretary-General and Acting Executive Director of United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). © Copyright UNCHS.

attracts shoppers and tourists from all over the world is threatened by the unrestricted rule of the private auto. The city's powerful downtown businesses and auto lobby have doggedly opposed sensible proposals to limit parking, put tolls on all the bridges going in to Manhattan, and close streets to traffic. Federal and state transportation funds overwhelmingly support travel by auto. Pedestrian and cyclist fatalities occur at the rate of almost one a day.

The movement against auto dominance has won some significant victories. This year the city issued its first-ever Bicycle Master Plan, and new bike lanes are slowly appearing on city streets. "Traffic calming" is now in the vocabulary of community groups and city officials. For the first time, the city has installed speed humps on residential blocks. Legislation has been introduced in the state legislature to allow the city to post lower speed limits on residential blocks. And the current administration's promised crackdown on errant taxis and speeders would not have been initiated if not for the widespread opposition to the mayor's grandstands against jaywalking and cyclists.

The movement against auto dependence has grown in reaction to the city administration's campaign to bring "superstores" — large suburban-style re-

tail chains — to the city. Unlike the city's older department stores, these "big box" retailers bring acres of parking, thus more cars and air pollution, and are designed in a way that neglects the street and its life. A broad coalition of forces defeated the City Planning Department's recent proposal to modify zoning regulations to allow superstores to locate without planning review in most industrial areas. There have been other victories, but there are also more big boxes now than there should be.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has consistently tried to limit access to public places in pursuit of privatization and his undemocratic interpretation of "quality of life." A federal judge recently rebuked the mayor for withholding permission for demonstrations he doesn't favor. A small demonstration in Harlem met with an army of armed police, and a peaceful vigil against anti-gay violence was violently attacked by police. Street vendors and artists have been banned from large sections of Manhattan. The administration has announced plans to restrict permits for block parties and street festivals. However, whether it's to save community gardens or protect the right to assemble, the city's communities are organizing to protect their public places.

## Conclusion

The mayor's heralded improvements in the quality of life have occurred mostly in neighborhoods where three-piece suits and Starbucks are the norm. The drop in crime? It's a national trend and in New York it started four years before Giuliani came into office. The decline in vacant storefronts and apartments? It's the economy. The disappearance of the homeless? They're still homeless, but out of sight of Wall Street and the Six O'clock News. The movements I have described have done more in the long run to improve the quality of life for the greatest number of people in the city. They are working for a cleaner environment, public places and an end to environmental inequities. They more than government are advocates of planning — participatory, democratic planning.

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## Community Planning in New York City

### Reading:

Thomas Angotti, "New York City's 197- a community planning experience: Power to the people or less work for planners?" *Planning Practice & Research*, Feb. 1997

Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York*, NY: Routledge, 1993

### Organizations:

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Hell's Kitchen Online  
http://hellskitchen.net

Inner City Press / Community on the Move  
community advocacy organization based in the Bronx  
http://www.innercitypress.org

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