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SETTING THE SCENE

THE DEBATE OVER SLUMS

It has often been observed that real estate is to New York what oil is to Texas. Indeed, since before 1850, the gladiators of New York City's political arena have waged battle over slums. Those who owned slum properties wished to exercise their property rights, which meant, for them, continuing to rent at as high a rate as possible and to invest as little as possible in construction and maintenance. The vast number of slum properties on potentially high-value land in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx were seen as a paradoxical economic condition to be set right.^{1,2} Banks, insurance companies, owners of other properties, and real estate entrepreneurs, on the one hand, took the stance that slum conditions lowered the value of their properties and limited their opportunities for future income. Reformers, on the other hand, wanted slums upgraded because they saw them as breeding disease, drunkenness, promiscuity, and violence.^{3,4}

The battle lines were drawn: those who favored slum clearance for redevelopment versus those who defended owners' property rights and laws that limit evictions.⁵

At some point in their decay, slums can get out of hand and threaten the public health and order of outlying neighborhoods. Tuberculosis, for example, was the top-ranking cause of death for both the poor and the rich in most urban areas until about 1940 when the living and working conditions of the poor were improved to the point where even the poor experienced low risk of active disease.^{6,7}

Historically, slums have often been defined by bias. The neighborhood of Bushwick, Brooklyn, for example, consisted largely of brownstones and row-houses and was occupied by the upper-working and middle classes—bus drivers, plumbers, funeral home owners, etc. While the race of the residents,

mainly homeowners, remained white, the city planners saw it as a solid neighborhood. But when black bus drivers, black plumbers, black funeral home owners bought houses and moved into the pre-war apartment buildings in the late 1960s, suddenly the planners saw a slum.⁸ Then the city policies proceeded to turn Bushwick into a slum worthy of the name. Similarly, David Durk described how police corruption, organized crime, and real-estate racial steering created a slum in Crown Heights North.⁹

In fact, stable "slums," i.e. poor neighborhoods of old, mildly overcrowded housing that are not experiencing rapid deterioration physically or socially, are true communities, often with a history decades long. Clearance of this brand of "slum" will do more harm than good both to the residents and to the metropolitan region as a whole. Loren Hinkle in 1977 co-edited a very important book on public health and the built environment which was published by the United States Public Health Service. Hinkle observed:

It is the social environment and not the physical environment which is the primary determinant of the health and well-being of people who live in cities . . . Within wide limits it is not the physical condition of the house, neighborhood, or human settlement that determines a person's health so much as his own social background, his perception of his environment, his relation to the other people around him and to his social group

The importance of the social milieu is such that the dislocation and disruptions of social relations that are produced when one moves a family from a dilapidated dwelling [within a functioning community] to a modern apartment [outside that community] may have adverse effects upon health and behavior that are not offset by the clean, comfortable, and convenient new dwelling . . .¹⁰

Slums have long presented two distinct dilemmas: for government and citizens, the complex question of how to cure their physical and socioeconomic ills; for the inner circle of financial leaders, planners, and developers, the simpler question of how to clear them.

THE GREAT REFORM

After a slow beginning in the 1840s, the Great Reform entered its flowering in the 1880s. In the large cities of the United States, patrician do-gooders allied themselves with public-health physicians, religious leaders, labor union organizers, and community activists to develop and implement an agenda of uplift. Living and working conditions of the time were targets of the reform. Building codes were put in place. Sanitation standards, public-hygiene education, limits

on the workweek, and codes of workplace conditions were born during the Great Reform. The most intense period of this social movement was between 1880–1920.

The history of New York often seems like a series of battles over land. In this way, the Great Reform and other efforts at upgrading poor-people's housing rank as land-reform movements as surely as those in the various Latin American countries. Like them, the struggles in New York often left the poor in precarious conditions, as the hidden hand of the permanent government slowly corrupted reforms. Often, the consequence of slum clearance was a bigger, worse slum. On the other hand, the opportunities offered to the working class and working poor (but not the destitute) during these movements often gave them the social mobility to scramble into middle-class living and working conditions, relieving much pressure on the very poorest sector, so that some portion of it could position itself to make the leap.

Numerous histories recount the Great Reform in all its ambiguities: its rise, its dynamics, and its legacies. For our purposes, one important legacy was the precedent of setting limits to the property rights of landlords and the tenure rights of tenants when enough powerful factions moved to clear slums or to rehabilitate existing multiple dwellings.

One analysis of the Great Reform, *Hives of Sickness*, gathered chapters by several authors on different aspects of public health during various periods of New York's history. The debate described by Elizabeth Fee and Evelyn Hammonds between the sanitarian reformers and the "scientific" medical practitioners provides background for the debate now going on between those who demand an end to the war on the poor as necessary for general public health and public order and the medical establishment, which advocates control of diseases and mental health and public order problems by treatment of individuals medically, typically with drugs.¹¹ Another essay, by Elizabeth Blackmar, described the central role of stands of dilapidated, overcrowded, and unsanitary tenements as a threat to public health and public order.

John Griscom, the public-health physician who pushed hardest for reform, had the political dilemma of needing support from the large property owners.¹² He wrote the classic opening salvo in the very beginning of reform in 1845, *The Sanitary Condition of New York's Laboring Classes*, essential reading that established the impact of severe slum conditions on the health and well-being of residents. He described in detail slum living conditions and the role of the landlords not only in maintaining them but also in operating illegal grogshops right in the tenements. He created an agenda of physical and social reforms he believed would improve the health and intellectual status of the "laboring

classes.”¹³ Subsequent enactment of his proposals has generally proven the young physician correct.

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

However, by the 1920s, the Great Reform took a wrong turn in New York as the oil and auto industries teamed with the railroads and entered the New York real-estate market as major movers. Robert Fitch, in *The Assassination of New York*, describes the resulting programs of land clearance, beginning with the Regional Plan Association's 1929 Master Plan for New York City.¹⁴ Besides slum clearance, this Master Plan called for clearing industries out of Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn and Queens. Office buildings for the financial industry and high-rent apartment buildings would replace the factories and plants. Instead of workers living near their jobs, armies of suburban commuters would enter the City every workday by railroad and by automobile via the vast network of highways laid out in the Master Plan.

Under the succession of plans from 1929 through 1969, New York was to metamorphose from an industrial caterpillar into a financial and cultural butterfly. This change was motivated in part by a bias that saw manufacturing as a dirty undesirable way to use land, and by an invalidation of blue-collar, and especially minority, workers.¹⁵ The new desired source of jobs, the financial sector, required educated, skilled, white collar (and largely white) workers.

So between 1959 and 1989, over 600,000 manufacturing jobs disappeared,¹⁶ a loss that made New York the American city with the highest proportion of the population not in the workforce. It also transformed New York into one of the cheapest labor pools in America, with an average hourly wage below that of all major cities except for San Antonio.¹⁷

ROBERT MOSES AND THE HOUSING ACT OF 1949

Besides deindustrialization, the other driving force behind land clearance was the clearing of “slums.” Robert Moses was the central figure in this movement, pioneering the use of a wide variety of condemnation and financing laws and instruments to raise the value of land and redevelop large swaths of it, especially in Manhattan. Because of the many books written about Moses, including several best-sellers, his history will not be described here. Such immense projects as the United Nations and its accompanying apartments and hotels, Lincoln Center and

its accompanying apartments, Morningside Heights, and Stuyvesant Town were Moses projects. Because of the peculiar combination of racism and humanism endemic to New York liberalism, the "slum" clearances of his era resulted in both greater segregation and a larger number of housing units for the poor and middle classes, especially in public housing.¹⁸

Whether Robert Moses spearheaded this reshaping of New York or managed the process under orders from large financial and real-estate powers is subject to debate. Moses certainly didn't act in a vacuum. He bridged the interests of big real estate and the liberal middle class which viewed itself as humane and helpful to the poor. Perhaps his most important talent was seduction of the liberals into supporting his projects as helping the poor *and* arresting the spread of "slums." Liberals often saw the move of non-whites into their neighborhoods as "slum spread."¹⁹ Joel Schwartz in *The New York Approach* paints him as the leader;²⁰ Fitch sees him as the flunkey.²¹ There is little debate, however, about the results of his actions: he changed the color and class of many New York City communities by evicting poor and working-class blacks and Latinos; he ushered in the age of big ugly buildings; he planned and built the arteries which turned the car into a serious competitor with public transportation and into an urban plague.

Although Moses had a number of legal instruments at his disposal for condemnation and eviction, Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 was perhaps his favorite. He used it for many of his projects which cleared "slums" for middle-class housing. The federal Housing Act of 1949 gathered various housing programs into the Housing and Home Finance Agency and provided both funding and enabling legislation for new urban housing. Its two most important sections regarding new housing were Title I and Title III. Title I provided federal grants which would constitute two-thirds of a "write-down," with the other one-third provided by the local municipal government. A "write-down" was money provided to make up for the following costs: the dollar difference between market value of a land parcel in condemnation and the appraisal of the parcel's potential redeveloper, the cost of clearance, and the cost of site preparation. The market value nearly invariably exceeded the redeveloper's appraisal. Title I provided nothing for public housing but gave enormous support to private developers. Title III authorized 810,000 units of federally financed public housing.²²

Title I required a local public authority to choose the development sites in conformity to a master plan, get approval from the local government for site plans and site-preparation plans (including relocation), condemn the property, and provide the one-third local contribution. The local authority would then clear the site, relocate the tenants, and auction the site to private developers. The local authority could coordinate Title I and Title III projects under the city

master plan. The potential for abuse is obvious (cozy relationships with private developers, capricious evictions of tenants, bowing to political pressures) and was fulfilled in New York, where Title I projects never had an official master plan to which they had to conform.²³ The result was a vastly disproportionate targeting of communities of color for relocation.

The following projects were constructed between 1950 and 1964 under Title I, the percentages indicating the proportion of displaced tenants who were non-white: Corlears Hook (24%), Harlem (100%), North Harlem (100%), West Park (52%), Morningside Heights (65%), Columbus Circle (54%), Fort Greene (62%), Pratt Institute (36%), Hammels-Rockaway (67%), and Lincoln Square (7%). A total of sixteen Title I projects were realized out of 20 proposed.²⁴

Under Title I implementation, New York became one of the most segregated cities in the United States. From integrated neighborhoods in Greenwich Village and on the West Side of Manhattan, black and Latino families were evicted and shuttled into Harlem and the Bronx. Like Stuyvesant Town before them (a pre-Title I super-project that flatly refused to rent to nonwhites until civil rights laws on housing were passed in the 1960's), the middle class Title I projects typically had less than 1% nonwhite tenants, whereas the public housing projects, especially in Harlem, were over 90% nonwhite.²⁵

Title I projects built in Harlem uprooted old, solid black communities. The Protestant churches, especially the Episcopal archdiocese, suffered greatly from the disruption of community. Poor members no longer lived near their churches, which would often be the only buildings left for blocks around after the old houses were demolished. The pastors decided to bear witness to the devastation of community and family which Title I brought to the poor of Harlem. This was the beginning of the end of Title I displacement.²⁶ From the reports, testimony, and sit-ins, by 1961, even the "liberal" racists could no longer avert their eyes and pretend that the poor were benefiting from "slum" clearance and were being properly rehoused. So-called "self-relocation" was not working for those who didn't make it into public housing; those who made it into public housing suffered from loss of old social ties and became behavioral problems which threatened the viability of the new public housing.²⁷

During and right after World War II, but before Title I devastation, New York was one united city, relative to what followed. Everyone, by and large, wanted and tried to participate in civic duties. Judith Leavitt in *Hives of Sickness* described a smallpox outbreak in the city in 1947 and the massive vaccination program which kept it very small and brief.²⁸ The countless organizations in neighborhoods and citywide which had mobilized all sectors for the war effort

also mobilized them for the vaccination program. Neighborhood leaders had their pictures in the newspapers as they were vaccinated. Houses of worship, political clubs, block associations, Masonic lodges, and other social enterprises brought residents to neighborhood vaccination sites in the mobile vans and public health clinics. Within two weeks after the discovery of smallpox in the city, 5 million people had been vaccinated (within one month, 6,350,000), an achievement which would have been impossible without the citizen's trust, commitment to the city and its society, and active participation in that society. Despite everything that was wrong and imperfect at that time, the city aspired to function and did function as a unity for the last time.

IMAGES, VISIONS, DREAMS

The name of Moses's special agency, founded in 1944, was the Committee on Slum Clearance, and he successfully cast its role as humanitarian and reformist. Moses ran the committee by skillfully coopting any local or citywide groups with enough muscle to count. Many do-good groups were seduced into supporting CSC programs and projects because Moses offered them the opportunity to hobnob with the elite *and* help the poor at the same time. Moses knew how to flatter and make people feel as if they were wielding great power, even as he used them to create the illusion of popular support for his projects.

Even Hulan Jack, borough president of Manhattan in the late 1950's and early 1960's and a foxy politician himself, proved no match for Moses in the dickering over Lincoln Center. Moses had forged a vision: New York City as the world capital of culture. To take a stand against Lincoln Center meant being branded by Moses as anti-art, anti-culture, and grossly declass . The most Jack could do was save a section of housing from the immense project as simply too much of an eviction to sell to constituents.²⁹

The programs for slum clearance between 1945 and 1965 had taken a large toll in terms of family displacement, community disorganization, and loss of business and industry. Schwartz counted a displacement of between 100 and 200 thousand people from Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn (the main renewal areas), depending on how the process is viewed.³⁰ Reliance on re-housing the refugees in public-housing projects concentrated distraught families and individuals into smaller spaces, where they became "problems." The Housing Authority set up a social-services unit but was overwhelmed. A variety of methods were tried but the Authority had to settle for addressing grossly overt drug and prostitution activity.³¹

The land clearing had destroyed and weakened the community institutions

which normally would have buffered the outfall of displacement: churches, political clubs, social clubs, merchants, and small factories. At the same time that the evictees lost their homes, they often lost their social anchors and their jobs. The prospect of replacing their jobs had been greatly diminished.

Some evictees were even relocated into city-owned tenements in worse slums than they had originally inhabited. These tenements had been acquired to be cleared eventually for later redevelopment. Thus, some evictees wound up displaced more than once and experienced extended uncertainty and a synergism of losses between the two displacements.³²

Lopez in *Arctic Dreams*³³ and Stone in *Dreams of Amazonia*³⁴ related the history of European and American exploitation of vast wilderness areas and plans of exploitation, all driven by dreams, visions more bizarre than anything from a pipe or mushroom. The factories, homes, little stores, taverns—all these form an exploitable wilderness like the Arctic and the rainforest along the Amazon. The acme of this dreaming was the era of Robert Moses. Afterwards came the nightmares.

There is no doubt that Robert Moses inflicted great harm on the poor minority families and, possibly by himself, was responsible for the heroin epidemic of the 1950s and 1960s. But the health and crime statistics showed little or no effect of the disruption. The fundamental indicator of living and working conditions, active tuberculosis disease, continued its decline unabated. Violent crime such as murder, rape, and armed robbery simply followed population increase. Only heroin use showed that anything was amiss. Indeed, substance users formed the core of the pockets of new TB cases.

By the late 1960s, slum clearance had reached a standstill. What had been done during the previous two decades had strained public housing but did not cause any terrible outward signs of problems, especially problems which affected the other classes. The War on Poverty had created new organizations and funneled resources into poor neighborhoods. The black and brown neighborhoods watched the Southern civil-rights movement and waited for it to come north.

THE RISE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

By 1968, the War on Poverty had been in operation only about four years but was yielding surprising results in public-health status, education, housing, and political participation of poor neighborhoods. In New York, by 1968, for example, the Tuberculosis Task Force looked on TB as possible to eliminate, just a matter of mopping up in the shrinking poverty pockets, especially among substance

abusers (see Chapter 4). New fire companies were being opened, and fire inspections were keeping damage to a minimum. The Federal Model Cities programs of the mid-to-late 1960s included important tenant education modules on fire prevention, sanitation, and health.

Out of the multi-service centers, youth programs, senior-citizen organizations, churches, and clinics, organizing grew. Obstreperous political and community action grew. People from different neighborhoods and labor unions began visiting each other and pushing for needed programs along broad fronts. When the Vulcan Society (the organization of black firefighters) instituted a lawsuit against discriminatory hiring, a wave of broad support crashed down on City Hall. When Merrill Eisenbudd, Lindsay's first environmental commissioner, brushed aside an outcry about dead invertebrates coming out of the faucets in Harlem and the South Bronx, he didn't keep his position during Lindsay's next term.

By 1968, neither the local politicians nor the real-estate industry faced passive, disorganized low-income communities of color. Although the momentum began to slow by 1968, Sam Wright in Brownsville ignited the movement for community control of schools, and, in 1969, Herman Badillo, from a power base in the South Bronx, had a good run for the Democratic nomination for mayor (in 1973, he forced a run-off against Abe Beame). Voter-registration drives in the poor neighborhoods of Northern cities netted a rich harvest. In 1969, black mayors were elected in several cities, including Newark, just across the Hudson. The reins of power could end up in hands of the wrong color. In the view of politicians and the permanent government, something had to be done to develop poor neighborhoods and to disorganize the minorities and the poor. In this context, John Lindsay, who nearly lost his mayoralty in 1969, handed over vast powers to the New York City-Rand Institute, a public/private "thinktank."

THE NEW SLUM CLEARANCE

Although explicit policies of slum clearance ended in the late 1960s, the losses of both jobs and homes accelerated in the 1970s and remained rapid. Some abatement occurred during the 1980s but by 1990, job losses accelerated again³⁵ and housing overcrowding was at a very high incidence, about double that of 1970.³⁶ The poor communities suffered from a pincers movement with no relief or anchor. To our knowledge, no other urban scientists have seriously probed the withdrawal of municipal services from poor neighborhoods,

although some have looked at various aspects of the loss of jobs.

The vision of the City Beautiful contains a rationale or assumption mentioned by Schwartz but more fully explored by Roberts³⁷: that cities and their component neighborhoods have a life cycle. Indeed, Roger Starr supported his concept of "planned shrinkage" in terms of dying neighborhoods.³⁸ It is no secret that neighborhoods die because of public policies which kill them.

Successive mayors from Lindsay through Giuliani have enacted "slum" policies that make Robert Moses look good. They have cleared slums without any rebuilding policy, namely by targeting poor neighborhoods for the civilian version of firebombing. They reduced fire-control and fire-prevention resources to levels so inadequate that the effects even spilled over into the untargeted white middle-class neighborhoods. Jewish, Irish, and Italian neighborhoods which had thrived for nearly a century were dispersed into the suburbs. The political and social organizations based in these neighborhoods died and left the City armless, legless, and impotent. Between 1972 and 1980, we estimate that about two million people were displaced: 1.3 million whites documented by the Census as leaving the city (an unprecedented inter-census exodus) and about 600,000 African-Americans and Latinos driven out of their burned-out neighborhoods either to adjacent neighborhoods (for the very poor) or into the inner ring of suburbs (for those with some resources).

There is an extensive literature on migration and its disruptive impacts. South, for example, showed increased deviant behavior in communities with high rates of immigration or of emigration.³⁹ This disruption may lead to socioeconomic and behavioral deterioration. The community disruption from the Moses-era slum clearance programs, although documented as horrendous, was minor compared with the effects of policies of planned shrinkage which began in 1969. Fewer people were affected directly by the earlier clearance, and housing was built to replace what was demolished. But almost no housing replaced the 1970s destruction by planned shrinkage until about 1990. By then, hundreds of thousands of units had been burned or abandoned. A few tens of thousands of units were rehabbed to replace these, much too little, and much too late. The conditions which foster housing destruction remain in place even now, continuing to erode the remaining inadequate housing stock and generating increasing housing overcrowding and homelessness.

This new war on the poor had consequences which the previous planned and mitigated slum clearance did not: deterioration in public health, deterioration in public safety, and even serious decline in the life expectancy of elderly African-Americans citywide and of the young in particularly hard-hit communi-

ties. The housing destruction set contagious processes in motion which spilled over into middle-class neighborhoods, into the suburbs of the metropolitan region, and into the other metropolitan regions of the country. The following chapters depict the birth and growth of this nightmare.