

of limited-equity co-ops as a tool for providing persons of modest income attractive homes. Architectural critics, he complained, were more interested in superficial appearances than in his complexes' spacious, up-to-date, and thoughtfully designed interiors. Simplicity of design, he added, kept down costs, saving money for things that really mattered. Kazan's broader agenda went beyond housing, however. Although he realized his tenants were interested chiefly in good apartments at cheap prices, he saw limited-equity co-ops as beachheads of a cooperative economy superior to capitalism. At the very least they offered a crucial alternative to the harsh realities of the New York City housing market. PETER EISENSTADT

**Penn Station South** (1962, 2,820 units, Manhattan)

Sponsor: Title I, UHF, union (ILGWU)  
Program: limited-equity co-op  
Architect: Herman J. Jessor

Penn Station South is representative of a brief but dramatic era of below-market housing development that combined slum clearance coordinated by Robert Moses, cooperative enterprise spearheaded by Abraham Kazan, city tax abatements, and federal subsidies through the Title I urban renewal program. The joint effect of such powerful forces was a project that switched out tenements for towers in the park and politically engaged residents: a transformation that continues to shape Penn South and the surrounding neighborhood today.

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Penn South, officially called the Mutual Redevelopment Houses, was built as part of the Penn Station South Renewal Area. Under Title I of the National Housing Act of 1949, cities could apply for federal money to condemn, buy, and prepare "blighted" real estate for private redevelopment. Kazan was a pioneer in taking on such projects, setting up the United Housing Foundation to serve as a central clearinghouse for housing under the program, and developing housing at seven Title I areas. Penn South began in 1956, when Committee on Slum Clearance chairman Robert Moses had the idea to rebuild four blocks on the East Side. The partner Moses recruited, however, was Abraham Kazan's UHF, which brought it to the attention of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, whose leaders preferred a walk-to-work site closer to the Seventh Avenue garment district. Moses agreed and helped select a new one: six blocks on the West Side between West 23rd and 29th Streets, and Eighth and Ninth Avenues. Neighbors included rail yards, wholesale warehouses, auto-body shops, and, toward the river, the freight High Line railroad and elevated West Side Highway (fig. 4.26). The area had thinned out considerably since the early twentieth century, when it rivaled the Lower East Side in population density and concentration of poverty, but it was grayer than gayer for the change. The site itself was mostly old-law tenements, boarding houses, and aging lofts, which the *New York Times* characterized as "twenty acres of squalid West Side rookeries." Few outsiders, with the exception of a handful of preservation-oriented architects, thought it worth saving—although residents rallied to defend their tenements, knowing that they lacked the income to qualify for the new apartments.<sup>57</sup>





4.26: Penn Station South, ca. 1962

Penn South was designed by the architect Herman J. Jessor, a Russian émigré who studied at Cooper Union and had specialized in worker housing since designing the Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments in the late 1920s. The idiom was, in accord with best practices in the 1950s, tower-in-the-park Modernism. Normally this would have demanded closing interior streets to create a cloistered superblock, but concerns about access to the shipping piers required all but West 27th Street remain open. To enlarge two of the blocks and calm traffic the city allowed Jessor to bend West 24th and West 28th Streets. A twelve-story elevator hotel and two churches were kept (two other congregations were given new buildings). Penn South also included one- and two-story retail buildings, a heating (and later electricity) plant, a three-story office building, surface and underground parking garage, and a theater and an indoor tennis center that were leased to commercial operators (fig. 4.27).

Jessor arranged the apartments in ten, twenty-two-story towers, rendered in a simple red brick. The project drew heavily from earlier Jessor and Kazan collaborations, although it included some new embellishments, such as central air conditioning. The basic design element was the cruciform plan, with two or three units occupying each quadrant, arranged around a central elevator landing. This plan allowed all but one





4.27: Penn Station South, 2014

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or two lines of apartments to have two exposures, improving the flow of natural light and air. Five buildings comprised a single cross and five "double" buildings fused two modules together. Most of the apartments were one- and two-bedrooms, with two three-bedrooms per floor in the double buildings. In a break from the usual emphasis in postwar below-market housing on families with children, and in recognition of the limited appeal of the West Side of Manhattan to younger families at that time, buildings also included studios. (There was so little demand from younger families initially that even some three-bedrooms were given to one-person households at first.) All the apartments were generous in size: studios, which included foyers, kitchens, dining areas, and dressing rooms, had at least 520 square feet, while three bedrooms had nearly 1,250. Half the apartments had balconies.

Penn South targeted a middle-income group too affluent for public housing but unable to afford high-quality housing at market rates in central sections of town. Original sales prices averaged \$650 per room down (\$5,800 in 2013 dollars), which covered 20 percent of construction costs; many tenants financed these down payments with loans from lenders like the Amalgamated Bank and a new Penn South credit union, thus effectively putting down nothing. Initially monthly maintenance charges were about \$24 per room (\$220). Without city tax abatements these would have been 25 percent higher, and without the Title I subsidy for the site, yet more. Among the original owners were 300 families displaced by the project and 715 who were members of the ILGWU, although no apartments were specifically reserved for them. Other tenants were mainly civil servants, teachers, professors, artists, and other blue-, pink-, and white-collar types (fig. 4.28). Credited by some for saving Chelsea, Penn South quickly earned a reputation as a desirable, even luxurious





**SOL S.:** Retired I.L.G. W.U. member. My two children got married the same year that we moved in. My wife Mary passed away two years ago. Here you're in the center of everything. The co-op runs pretty well, but we should stress more security. I suggest having a booth half-way between Building 1 and the Roundabout, with a green light and a guard... maybe more like that around. Security should be more visible to everyone.



**PAMELA:** Social worker. The Co-op is spacious, a supportive community and safe for my children. The problem was my guide dog. When he emptied, people complained. It ended when the office issued a notice that my dog was not just a pet. Kids today need to learn how to serve. We've kept carrying charges down through good management. My guess is that our co-op will become an open market situation, which will not be helpful to the people who need it.



**ALICE:** Retired garment worker. We made lots of friends here. We've belonged to the Penn South Cultural Club since 1964. The Emma Lazarus Club, it's not what it used to be — all goldider. We joined when we moved in. I keep house, do cooking and a little reading. Good management of our co-op keeps rent down. The difference here is that wherever I want to go I can get there. My husband sits in the Patrol. We always vote.



**SARAH:** Age 8. I was born in Penn South. I have an older brother and sister. First thing I remember is the sandbox and slides. I made friends, Lelia and Monique. We're still good friends. I don't have to go far to get to somebody's house. I met Elliot at nursery school. We take turns sleeping at each other's house. We go to Vermont, but I wouldn't live there. I'd miss Penn South. My Grandpa from Building 8 plays with me; he gives me lots of attention.



**SAL:** Artist. My first child was a year old, my second was born here. After W.W. II, I was 3½ years in a hospital. We then lived in an illegal loft. We got an apartment here. A beautiful lady next door, if my baby was sick and I had to take the other to school, would babysit and make cookies too. I hope the Board will not let people sell for profit. If a person pays half the rent he'd pay elsewhere, he owes the cooperative some involvement.



**MARY S.:** Here since 1977. I have two children, 4 and 6. The playground was a place to go when you have small children. We go to museums and movies. We don't spend all our income on rent. Some of our friends do. We've the only playground in Chelsea that is quiet and clean. Most older people enjoy watching the children play. There's a terrific baby-sitting co-op. There are fathers in it, too. We need younger people involved for the future.



**MAREA AND BILL:** Retired Health Ed Coach/Teacher. I'm active in the Hudson Guild and still feel close to it. We feel lucky here — you can't duplicate it in any part of the city. The services are wonderful, concerned with people. If Marea had not become handicapped, we would have been more active in our co-op. When we see the discipline of children in the playground, we feel this co-op will continue its future on a high level.



**FANNY:** Retired social worker. Moving here changed my life. I never dreamt I could live in an apartment where I could enjoy the cultural advantages of the City. I always pictured Manhattan as a cold place, but people are friendly and seem to care. Our co-op is well-run, we're fortunate in its Board of Directors, and I hope it is appreciated. I love living here — and wouldn't want to live any other place.



**ANN:** Retired Nurse. My family didn't want me to move from Harlem. The neighbors here are very nice. I'm one to know, because of ethnic difference. That new Black woman on the top floor, I'll bring her down to Bingo. The 8th Floor lady invites me to go walking, the one with numbers on her arm. You know what's going on here. They put the new under your door almost the same day. Or the Lobby Patrol, people stop and talk to you.



**ESTELLE:** School Administrator. moved in 4 years ago, long enough to know what's good about Penn South short enough to know what's terrible out there. The nice thing in our recent mortgage negotiations was the concern that lowest income people would be unable to continue living here. Many deposited money in the Credit Union for loans. This should insure the future of Penn South. I don't think any profiteering suggestion would ever go through.



**MARY & BRESCHI:** Retired teacher and art director. B. I grew up in Chelsea. had a cold-water flat with a toilet in the yard. When cooperators complain, laugh inside. Mary holds Xmas Parties for the entire building. We met at the Hudson Guild. M. I thought we could never live with low ceilings because we came from a brownstone. Our daughter lives in Building 2, we look across an see our grandchildren.



**DIANA:** Retired teacher. When a landlord raises rent, you know he doesn't have to. In a co-op, however, you know it's necessary. If you feel you're paying too much, anyone here will say, "You have the best buy in the city." Only in our co-op can you find tulips, cherry trees and dogwood together. On our Board of Directors, there should be strong minority, no matter who the majority is. We don't attract children because of our school situation.



**FRANCES:** Retired psychologist. It's much nicer here than at London Terrace from where I came. I have some lovely neighbors who, when I was ill, shopped and helped to care for me. There's more friendliness here; you don't feel like transients. When I moved in, it was glorious. You just open your door, and walk into this wonderful city. Co-op literature and minutes make you feel that you know what's going on here.

4.28: Penn Station South, tenants, from Penn South, "Twenty-first Anniversary Journal" (1983)

project for the well-to-do.<sup>58</sup> Tenants were always, however, of modest means. For new tenants there were income ceilings of eight times the annual maintenance (since lowered to seven); existing owners crossing this threshold paid a surcharge. In recent decades many tenants, especially the elderly, have received federally financed Section 8 "rental" vouchers to help pay their maintenance; many also benefit from the city's Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption program, introduced in 1970 to aid tenants and owners in many kinds of privately developed subsidized housing.

If young professionals, following the lead of Jane Jacobs, were becoming more vocal about their taste for "diverse" older neighborhoods around the time Penn South was built, the ILGWU crowd—both producers and tenants—did not share their nostalgia. They welcomed the complex's quiet spaciousness, low site coverage, and functional separation of land-uses. As writer Leonard Kriegel, who moved to Penn South in 1962 from a small studio in the neighborhood, notes, "Penn South never lacked the amenities Jane Jacobs thinks of as the glue of a healthy urban community." Moreover, he continued, "what is sterile or totalitarian to some is liberating" to others, especially those who "couldn't afford to view the elevator as incarnate evil."<sup>59</sup> At the dedication ceremony in 1962 attended by President Kennedy, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and





4.29: President Kennedy, David Dubinsky (president of ILGWU), Robert F. Wagner, Jr., dedication, Penn Station South, by I. D. Ettinger, 1962

Eleanor Roosevelt, Mayor Robert F. Wagner declared Penn South "another milestone on the road to our goal of making New York a slumless city" (fig. 4.29).<sup>60</sup>

Many tenants moved to Penn South from declining sections of the outer boroughs. Manhattan—what some thought of as "the real city"—not only saved them from long commutes, a special concern for older workers, but also permitted them to enjoy urban life in ways they had not done in decades.<sup>61</sup> In this respect Penn

South effected a sort of white flight in reverse (for years Penn South was almost entirely white and overwhelmingly Jewish), allowing middle-class families to escape to what one tenant referred to as "a suburban community within New York City."<sup>62</sup> Penn South, even with its greenbelt, security patrols, and fences and cameras, could not counter all the destabilizing forces sweeping through New York City; some early tenants with children ended up moving to the suburbs. But for others, "Moving to Manhattan was a dream come true. For the first time in years I can go out at night."<sup>63</sup> As another owner explained, "We came from the Bronx . . . our life style changed from hell to heaven."<sup>64</sup>

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One of the most remarkable things about Penn South was and remains the tenants' politics. As at all owner-occupied complexes subsidized by the city or state from the late 1950s onward, tenant-owners were given mandatory preoccupancy training to generate support for the progressive political economy, encourage feelings of camaraderie, and stimulate participation in project governance. An important message conveyed both here and in attention the complex received from leaders like President Kennedy was that one should think not just about what to get out living in a co-op but what to contribute. Perhaps as a result of this programming Penn South inspired a degree of fealty rare to any community. Owners took particular pride in the role organized labor played in its construction, financing, and public subsidies. "Each day," remarked one owner, "I am thankful to my union, the ILGWU, for thinking of a beautiful place in midst of Manhattan for workers' homes."<sup>65</sup>

Awareness of Penn South's unique status has also manifested in a high degree of volunteerism. Tenants launched Penn South chapters of dozens of social, welfare, and political clubs. During the city's fiscal crisis in 1970s, when the city asked property owners to pay taxes early in return for a discount, Penn South tenants complied but declined the reduction. "We sit in the midst of New York City," explained one owner, "and we wanted to help."<sup>66</sup> As David Smith, a lifelong progressive who was president of the board for decades, put it, "Until now, it's the co-ops that have been receiving various benefits from the city. . . . Now we're giving rather than receiving."<sup>67</sup> Penn South tenants have also voted several times to remain limited-equity: in 1986, extending price and income limits to 2012; in 2001, extending controls to 2022; and in 2010, extending them to 2030. According to Smith the question faced was whether



"this development, built by union and public funds and dedicated to working people, [should] be destroyed as a middle-income cooperative" and become a place "where only the well-to-do can live?"<sup>68</sup> Penn South today has a long waiting list—so long it has been closed since 1987, with lotteries for a place held in 1996, 2003, and 2014. But those with sufficient patience pay approximately \$40,000 to \$110,000 for apartments of two to five and a half rooms, with monthly maintenance of \$350 to \$1,000.<sup>69</sup>

A decisive factor uniting tenants across the complex's several internal political parties was old age. Many of the first families were older and as early as 1976 half the complex was retired; by the mid-1980s, three-quarters were. In return for remaining limited equity, the city offered to extend tax abatements. Without them, maintenance would have risen by 50 percent, an impossible expense for seniors living on pensions. An additional fear was that market-rate tenants would drive up maintenance even further with expensive demands. "The people coming in," Smith warned dramatically, "will want amenities—carpeting in the hallways, microwave ovens, maybe even gold-plated urinals."<sup>70</sup>

The elderly have dominated life at Penn South in other ways. Concerns about the tremendous numbers of seniors living in a naturally occurring retirement community demanded that the co-op's board introduce services tailored to the elderly. With a grant from the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York in 1986, Penn South created the Penn South Program for Seniors (PSPS), offering dedicated community rooms for the elderly; opportunities for medical care, home visits, and food delivery; and classes in everything from exercise to the dangers of hoarding. Staffed since the mid-1990s by UJA-Federation agencies Selfhelp Community Services and Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged, PSPS is now financed by a mixture of private foundations, the co-op, and, thanks to UJA lobbying, the city and state. PSPS has served as a model for NORC programs nationally.<sup>71</sup>

The young, meanwhile, have not been forgotten. For decades Penn South maintained the best playgrounds in Chelsea, and in 1985 a parking area was converted to one of the complex's most popular features, the Penn South Intergeneration Garden, which brings children and seniors together. More recently, the parents group built an indoor play space in one of the complex's many community rooms. And although lawns are off limits to play, families enjoy the campus-like design. As one mother put it, "The gardening, the playgrounds, were a blessing for my children. I never had to worry about hearing [car and truck] brakes."<sup>72</sup> This appeal has brought many second- and third-generation Penn South families to the complex. Unfortunately, there is not room for everyone. Indeed, if there is a problem with Penn South, it is that there is too little of it: tenants of every age wish it were younger, with more children and more "new blood" on the board. Yet perhaps more than any other subsidized housing complex in the country, turnover is minimal thanks to its superior services, management, and location.<sup>73</sup>

Penn South today is surrounded by some of the most expensive real estate in the United States. It would be impossible to create under current housing policies, and the tenants know it. Yet careful stewardship on the part of city leaders and the project's homeowners has ensured long-term affordability. While many complexes like it have abandoned these limits, Penn South has been resolute in its commitment to the commonweal. MATTHEW GORDON LASNER