
History Session 8 Vibrant Community Survives Slum Clearance Tragedy July 16, 2017

A group of UWS residents who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in the poor communities on West 98th and 99th Streets between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West met annually for maybe 50 years. At their reunions they recalled the experience of growing up in the kind of neighborhood that many Americans never know: a tightly knit community made up of families who rely on their next-door neighbors as much as they do each other. Or, as Jane Jacobs would say, there were “eyes on the street” - her famous metaphor for the natural surveillance that occurs in a lively urban environment. Each year many of these people came together to remember their common roots as members of a once-thriving UWS sub-neighborhood that by 1960 was totally dissipated. They affectionately called it the "Old Community."

The community began its history in 1905 as a small African-American settlement. From about 1905 until the 1950s, West 98th and 99th Streets constituted a vibrant, predominantly African-American community that was something of a miniature Harlem, with its own Renaissance. Many of the residents were from other black communities in the city, like San Juan Hill and Seneca Village, but others hailed even from the Caribbean, evading immigration laws by asserting their standing as "British subjects."

The community was a model for the tight-knit, interconnected neighborhoods later celebrated by Jane Jacobs and other critics of top-down redevelopment. In the early 20th century, it was briefly the center of New York's black music scene. Over the years, a startling roster of musicians, writers, and artists resided there: the composer Will Marion Cook, vaudeville star Bert Williams, opera singer Abbie Mitchell, James Weldon Johnson and his brother Rosemond, muralist Charles Alston, writer and historian Arturo Schomburg whose collection of art, manuscripts and photographs became the foundation for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Billie Holiday (whose mother also owned a restaurant on 99th Street), Butterfly McQueen of "Gone with the Wind" fame who later lived in Park West Village, and the actor Robert Earl Jones.

The community was founded when the black real estate entrepreneur Philip Payton Jr. broke the color line on 99th Street. Payton, also credited with first bringing African Americans to Harlem, wanted to make it possible for a black man to rent an apartment, in his words, "wherever his means will permit him to live." He started by buying up buildings on 99th St in 1905. By 1907, over 700 Black people were tenants in the fast growing community. As the community grew and flourished, the community members built churches, including St. Jude's and St. Luke's, to make more room for worship and to provide a community venue for activities ranging from sewing classes to a nursery school to scout troops. The residents were very close, looking out for and helping one another when times were tough. "It was extended family," said Jim Torain of the West 99th and 98th Street Old Community Association.

In 1952, however, the community was threatened by something more destructive to it than had been the Great Depression and two world wars. Title I of the US Federal Housing Act of 1949 set in motion the obliteration of the neighborhood. Robert Moses, in his position as chairman of

the New York City Slum Clearance Committee, condemned the area, **largely on the basis of median household income**. He designated the 98th-99th Streets site as the first Title One project of the Federal Housing Commission.

[The following is an edited excerpt by Jim Epstein, a writer and producer who grew up on 99th street and made the short video about the Old Community, *The Tragedy of Urban Renewal: The Destruction and Survival of a New York City Neighborhood*.]

Robert Moses wielded his power to condemn six square blocks of this remarkable neighborhood, containing 338 apartment buildings and 3,628 families. The total appraised value of this property was \$15 million, but the “reasonable bid” Moses accepted for its “renewal” was just \$1 million, from a company run by one Samuel Caspert, who promised to build a wonderful new housing complex, dubbed Manhattantown in five years but never constructed even one building.

Caspert was many things, but he was not a builder. Professionally, he was an auctioneer and appraiser. Politically he was a member of a Democratic Party club. It was the latter that got him the bargain price for six square blocks of prime UWS real estate. He and his partners would build nothing at Manhattantown beyond a parking lot, and they did not even demolish all that much.

Instead, they continued to collect rents from the dwindling tenants, while slashing their amenities and finding inventive new ways to bilk more money out of their holdings. One such scam included Caspert having the company sell all the buildings’ stoves and refrigerators to a son-in-law’s corporation, rent them back for over three times the cost of the sale, then buy them back at the end of the year.

In return for providing the rents to finance such lucrative scams, the residents of the Old Community received nothing but the slow destruction of their homes and their community. In keeping with the provisions of Title I, evicted tenants were promised comparable living arrangements and “preferential status” if they applied for new apartments. In reality, as in most of Moses’ projects, this was just a lie. Little or no effort was made to find the evicted residents a place to go, and none of them could afford the nice new buildings of Manhattantown – provided they ever got built.

In other words, the “slum-dwellers” who urban renewal was supposed to be all about, would get nothing and lose everything.

Caspert and company simply slapped notices in lobbies announcing that the buildings would be demolished at once, and that all tenants had to leave. To encourage them to do so, their new landlord stopped cleaning the buildings or making any repairs, leaving their front doors open to bums and winos. Eventually, heat and hot water went, too. All around them, the few buildings that were being slowly torn down were converted into huge piles of jagged, dusty wreckage, until one observer noted: “Manhattantown looked like a cross-section of burned out Berlin right after the second world war.”

A band of defiant liberal reformers including the Women's City Club decided to fight back. Going from apartment to apartment to interview the remaining tenants, they found people wary

and frightened by what would become of them, but discovered “that most of the apartments were well kept, clean”. They still would not become slum-dwellers, even as the slum was built around them. Scrupulously documenting all the wanton destruction and corruption they had found, the liberal reformers went public with their findings – and got nowhere.

...The black residents of Manhattantown and their liberal allies would not ... get a day in court. Such was the power of Moses ..., that almost none of New York’s many newspapers reported anything on the blatant corruption going on in Manhattantown. No elected officials were in a position to rein him in, even if they wanted to.

It was only when the liberals were able to force a hearing before a US Senate committee in 1954, three years after Moses’ “reasonable bidders” had obtained the right to build Manhattantown, that Caspert and company admitted that 280 of the 338 buildings they were supposed to have demolished already were still standing, and that their inhabitants were still being charged rent. It would also come out that the company was not even paying city taxes on the properties. But even then, there would be no punishment for any of this malfeasance. From 1953 to 1960, the Old Community and surrounding blocks were razed piecemeal with much of it sitting as rubble. By 1957, nothing of the old area remained except for the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, built in 1888. Only after a belated series of newspaper exposes, and three more years of negligible progress – after Caspert was exposed as a fake developer at other “slum clearance” sites by Moses – would the leading stockholders allow themselves to be bought out by a real developer and walk away from the rubble with a tidy fortune.

But by the early 1960s, things moved quickly enough. The remaining buildings were knocked down, their residents scattered. Soon, Manhattantown had become Park West Village, built for middle-income residents. A fairly charming, pricey set of red-brick buildings. To start, its residents would include many of the same sorts of extraordinary black and Hispanic achievers who had lived in the Old Community – Duke Ellington, Odetta, Coleman Hawkins, Wilt Chamberlain, Cicely Tyson, Tito Puente, Hugh Masakela, Miriam Makeba. Though, in perhaps the ultimate irony, the number of black tenants was initially limited to 20% of all residents.

Today, of course, there is no question of anyone being turned away from living in Park West Village, or anywhere else around what was the Old Community, due to the color of their skin. We live in the perfect democracy of money. All they have to have is the Brinks truck full of lucre that is required to buy into most of Manhattan these days.

The old dive bars and the greasy spoons are gone, but so are the wonderful little butcher shops, bakeries and corner cinemas that were there for decades, sustaining the community through all the crime and social decay of the drug years – crime and social decay that were, in part, drawn to the area in the first place by the long, government-imposed disintegration of the Old Community.

[Commenting in 2011, the author writes:] Businesses on Broadway are being driven out of existence in droves by the exorbitant rent demands of landlords – many of which are on the governing boards of the wealthy new co-ops. Even franchises of major national chains, such as Starbucks or Subway, are routinely shuttered, and shops sit empty for months at a time.

Today, pharmaceutical chains, bank branches and nail salons overwhelm our neighborhood like invasive species of weeds. It is difficult to believe that this is what even the owners of the shiny new condominiums in “Columbus Square” had in mind when they invested in urban living, but here we are.

Meanwhile, the elderly, dignified alumni of the Old Community held annual reunions and reminisced about past days. They seem remarkably devoid of bitterness, considering what was done to them. And somehow, something of the little 99th St block including some Mitchell-Lama co-ops still hangs on, an island of neighborly diversity in a sea of gentrification. The former neighbors, who experienced happiness and hardship together, gather to celebrate their common heritage and their old community.

=====

The Changing Face of a Neighborhood by Sara Vogel
Columbia University Spectator October 30, 2007

Otto Leuschel, the bespectacled and casually dressed representative for Whole Foods Market, was sweating under the harsh florescent lights of the cafeteria at P.S. 163 on Amsterdam Avenue and 97th Street one evening early this summer. Even as he energetically pitched the company’s “core values,” “animal compassion foundation,” and its “culture of empowerment and moving up,” it was clear that the couple hundred Upper West Siders assembled before him were not enthused. True, many in Leuschel’s audience of skeptics were eagerly nibbling the Whole Foods-catered asparagus rolled in pancetta and other free organic snacks, but convincing the crowd of neighborhood residents that 57,500 square feet of retail space in the middle of their housing complex was to their benefit was going to be a hard sell.

Dozens of local residents lined up at the microphone to confront Leuschel and the other Whole Foods reps with their complaints. The store is planned for a corner that would court East Side traffic coming across Central Park. The store’s loading dock would be too close to where children enter P.S. 163. The store’s prices would be too high for neighborhood people, especially those living at the nearby Douglass Houses, to afford.

Leuschel answered each speaker, explaining that the company was committed to working with the local Community Board 7 to minimize disruption to the neighborhood, prices wouldn’t be as high as people expected, and solutions to traffic and trash around children could be worked out without moving the store or the loading dock.

Area residents promised that they were willing to protest, boycott, and do everything else in their power to make development happen on their terms. Growing exasperated, Leuschel replied, “I’m sorry the neighborhood is changing.”

Overseeing a Neighborhood Transition

With that statement, Leuschel revealed an uncomfortable truth. The housing development known as Park West Village—which extends from 97th to 100th Street, from just east of Amsterdam

Avenue to Central Park West—is undergoing its biggest change since it was built as a middle-income housing complex with subsidies from the federal government in the late 1950s.

Long-time residents, most of them still living in rent-stabilized apartments, say they moved to Park West Village[, some buildings also known as West Park Apartments,] because of its location on the Upper West Side, its comparatively cheap rent, its diversity, and its leafy open spaces. “It’s a community unlike many places in New York where you don’t know your neighbors,” said Dean Heitner, who moved to the neighborhood in 1973. “We all know one another, and know a little about each others’ lives and meet frequently just outside on the benches.”

Today, walking down Columbus Avenue, passersby will see construction workers digging huge pits for the foundations of a glassy three-block-long retail corridor anchored by Whole Foods, and four residential towers with heights of 29 stories, 15 stories, 14 stories, and 13 stories, right in the middle of Park West Village.

The project is an “infill” development, meaning the new towers will be constructed between the buildings already on the site, replacing what was a strip of arguably shabby low-scale stores and a few tennis courts along Columbus Avenue.

Jeff Winick, CEO of the Winick Realty Group, confirmed that leases had been signed for 85 percent of the new strip’s storefronts. He would not give names, but did say there will be a bank, a sporting goods store, and a home furnishing store in addition to “a lot of smaller retailers from the community.”

Like Columbia’s proposed expansion into Manhattanville, plans for Columbus Village will radically change the population density and character of the neighborhood.

But unlike with Columbia’s expansion, there is no formal governmental process that gives local residents and neighbors a say in how development happens. Because the developers claim not to need a zoning change—building “as of right”—they do not have to go through the city’s extensive oversight procedure that gives communities a vote, albeit a non-binding one.

“When you don’t go through a ULURP [the city’s Uniform Land Use Review Procedure], that means you haven’t presented an environmental impact statement for scrutiny by the community and elected officials,” said Maria Watson, a long-time tenant at Park West Village. “They’re imposing on an aged infrastructure.”

But Peter Rosenberg, project manager for the developers Stellar Management and The Chetrit Group, said because of all of Park West Village’s open space, it is one of the least-densely developed areas in the city, and will remain so even after Columbus Village is completed.

“This is a responsible place for us to develop,” he said. “Almost every location in New York is infill at this point and, while we certainly regret the inconvenience that the residents have suffered, we’re going to try to do everything we can to make it as small an impact as we can for them.”

Among the area's stakeholders—the tenants and condo owners of Park West Village, local schools, churches, business owners, Community Board 7, and elected officials—there are many diverse opinions. Some say developers are dropping something akin to a shopping mall right in the middle of their neighborhood and hate the idea of change no matter what form it takes. Some want upgraded stores, and welcome the organic grocery franchise. Most have taken a complicated stance in the middle.

As groups against the new development deal with disagreement among their own ranks, they, the community board, and elected officials have also tried to carve out a set of guidelines to follow as they bring the developers to the negotiating table. The developers are just as unclear about the objectives of their interactions with area residents.

“Residents, elected officials, the community board... we're all trying to figure out ways that residents can get their voices heard in the absence of an official process,” said Jessica Silver, a community liaison in the office of borough president Scott Stringer.

Building “as of right”

Though the project is conspicuous to Park West Villagers today, it initially came as a surprise. The site's owners and developers waited at least six years after buying the property in 2000 to build on the site, as the city's contract with the slum-clearance project's first developer dictated the exact percentage of profits the complex's owner was allowed to make for four decades, locking the buildings' configuration in place.

The expiration of this 40-year clause snuck up on residents of Park West Village in late 2005, catching them off-guard and disorganized.

Initially, the developers would not meet with tenants to explain their plans, but they finally caved in to pressure applied by elected officials, according to Heitner, who is also the chair of the legal committee of the Park West Village Tenants Association.

“People were living in a complex, it didn't look like anything was going to happen to it, and all of a sudden our landlord started excavating,” Heitner said. “We actually had to force them to let us know what was happening.”

The Tenants Association took on the primary organizing role, though, as many involved in the organization are quick to point out, the group does not represent the interests of the condominium owners in the buildings east of Columbus Avenue and includes few of the growing population of the complex's market-rate renters.

The Tenants' Association, divided as it was, followed a few different courses of action. A hard-fought campaign to legally restrict building heights in Manhattan Valley from 97th to 110th Street was passed in late September, but Park West Village was left out of the new rezoning plans.

Park West Villagers and supporters vied for its inclusion but the City Planning

Commission was reluctant to grant height restrictions of any kind on the Upper West Side, according to Cynthia Doty of West Siders for Responsible Development and the Coalition to Save West Park North, who was involved in zoning negotiations.

“We were presented with the idea that if we didn’t come up with the compromise, that City Planning would pull the entire plan and we would wind up with nothing. Meanwhile, developers were lurking,” Doty said. “We didn’t wind up working on a plan for Park West Village and so tried to support other options.”

These other options included helping tenants apply to get the area land-marked for its historic rather than architectural value—Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, Max Roach, Tito Puente, and Elaine Stritch all called Park West Village home—or applying for city protections under a Special Preservation District program. The City Planning Commission was “not interested” in granting tenants status in the special district program, according to Doty. The Landmarks Preservation Commission also never brought the site up for a vote.

Meanwhile, tenants created a task-force of in-house architects and city-planners to brainstorm alternative designs to the one proposed by Gluck and Chetrit, and looked to convince Whole Foods to move to 100th Street, where traffic conditions would support the site better.

Heitner said he thought the developers never planned on taking their suggestions seriously, but Winnifred Armstrong, former president of the Tenants Association and a long-time resident of Park West Village, said: “We never really put it to the developer in any way that made it possible to consider it. There was no incentive for them to do that, it was late in the game.”

With these efforts taking up time and energy, the Tenants Association tried another tactic: a court case against the developers arguing that a technicality in the city’s contract with the initial developer allowed them to stall work for a few months. Park West Villagers lost the case, and in the summer of 2006, the commercial structures were razed and work began.

A Multitude of Meetings

The Tenants Association, their elected officials, and CB7, working with limited resources and time, tried as many strategies as they could think of to air their grievances with the developers about the “as of right” project.

There are still pending inquiries into whether or not the project is even “as of right.”

Borough president Scott Stringer expects the Department of Buildings to respond soon to a letter he wrote challenging aspects of the project which he claims may not be legal under zoning law—including types of stores that can rent at the site. The zoning law requires stores to be “neighborhood stores,” and Stringer said their size makes them “destination stores.”

Winick, the CEO of the development’s realtor, declined to comment on that issue.

But, in the meantime, tenants have aired their concerns at two monthly meetings—one to oversee construction, one for broader concerns—convened by CB7 since May, which bring them face to face with developers regularly.

Park West Villagers complain about the dust, noise, and disruption that comes with living next to a major construction site, and many consider the construction committee meetings helpful, especially in the wake of the collapse of a retaining wall at the site of the future Whole Foods this summer that brought every outraged West Side politician to the rescue of Park West Villagers for a few weeks. Representatives from city agencies attend these meetings to ensure developers are within the law as they build.

The objectives of the monthly coordinating committee are less defined, but Silver of the Borough President's office said they are useful because they aim to ensure the efforts of various community groups aren't duplicated.

At these meetings, tenants and developers said some issues are advanced but divisive issues like the general scale of the project and the location of Whole Foods' future loading dock are discussed without progress.

Rosenberg, the project manager, points to major concessions—giving residents nearly full control of landscaping, retooling the heating and cooling systems so as to not blow on current tenants' windows, and revising how trash will be handled at the site—but many tenants don't consider these key accomplishments.

"They sit and listen, and yes us to death, and do exactly what they choose to do," Lois Hoffmann, president of the Tenants Association, said.

"We are listening," Rosenberg countered. "We accommodate the residents and the tenants when and where we can."

There is a sense on both sides that talks between the two parties go around in circles, and many say because it is considered an "as of right" project, they expected it. As Armstrong said, "nobody—politicians, residents, developer—was ready for this dialogue." But twice a month the dialogue happens anyway.

The construction site in 2007



The rest is history. But there may soon be a Trader Joe's not too far south on Columbus. Some will say good, "Whole Foods is too expensive for those with a family." Others will say, "There goes the neighborhood!"