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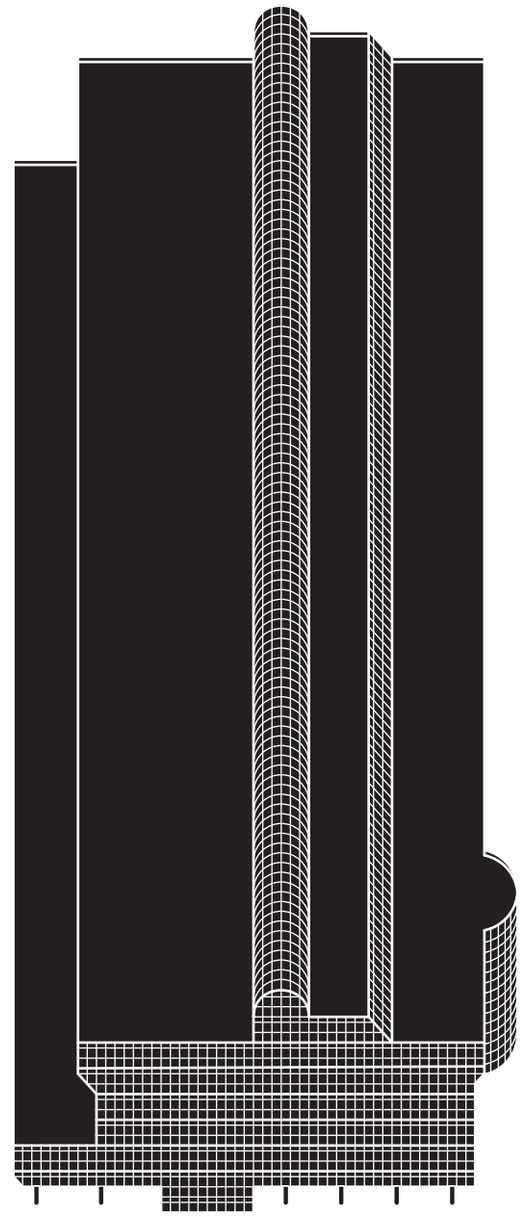

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“1966 CAN BE THE YEAR OF REBIRTH FOR AMERICAN CITIES”

Susanne Schindler

“1966 can be the year of rebirth for American cities.” With this declaration of optimism, and overlooking ample evidence to the contrary, President Lyndon B. Johnson opened his special message to Congress on 27 January 1966, proposing a new “Demonstration Cities” programme to “set in motion forces of change in great urban areas that will make them the masterpieces of our civilization”. Johnson sketched out an initiative “larger in scope, more comprehensive, more concentrated, than any that has gone before” to tackle the poverty, racial segregation and physical decay of the nation’s cities.[1] Part of his vision of the Great Society, the programme was conceived as a five-year experiment to demonstrate alternatives to the human displacement and physical destruction caused by the existing strategy of urban renewal, in place since 1949. But it was also a more immediate response to the civil unrest that had taken hold of US cities since 1964. African-Americans, excluded from postwar prosperity and largely confined to the decaying inner cities, made their plight known through violent protests referred to as either “riots” or “rebellions”, depending on your political standpoint. To target the roots of this inequality, Demonstration Cities was to coordinate all available federal funding for social, economic and physical renewal in close cooperation with residents of selected target areas.

In this article I provide a snapshot of what was considered possible in terms of urban planning in the United States in 1966. I focus on New York City since the programme – renamed Model Cities on its signing into law in November 1966, to avoid the riotous connotations of “demonstration” – was paired and enhanced here with a housing initiative focused on small-scale infill and rehabilitation. A look at the five plans produced between late 1966 and early 1967 as part of this effort reveals an acute awareness, among planners and residents, of both the opportunities and the limits of using housing to further the triple goals of better design, more equitable development and stronger democracy.

In June 1966, under newly elected Mayor John Lindsay, New York City launched the Vest Pocket Housing and Rehabilitation programme in anticipation of the new federal funding – “vest pocket” referring to new housing built in smaller than full-block sites that were either vacant or underused, “rehabilitation” to the renovation of existing tenements. Unlike the “stereotyped” towers that had been “designed in a vacuum of participation”, the new housing was intended “to fit into” the neighbourhood in “size and character”. The programme targeted “the city’s worst slums”, proposing to jump-start their “turn around” through the addition of 800 units of public, low-income housing and an equal amount of non-profit, middle-income housing.[2] Private investment was then to follow the public sector’s lead.

In November 1966 the city, consciously or not, engaged five strikingly different teams of planning consultants to work with the residents of the designated study areas on vest pocket housing plans. The task was clear: the committees were to site the allocated new housing. Four of these study areas were located within the envisioned, much larger future Model Cities neighbourhoods: Bedford–Stuyvesant and East New York covered substantial parts of Central Brooklyn; Mott Haven was just a small part of the South Bronx; and Milbank–Frawley a mere corner of Harlem/East Harlem. The fifth study area, Twin Parks, a more affluent neighbourhood in the central Bronx, was never considered for Model Cities.

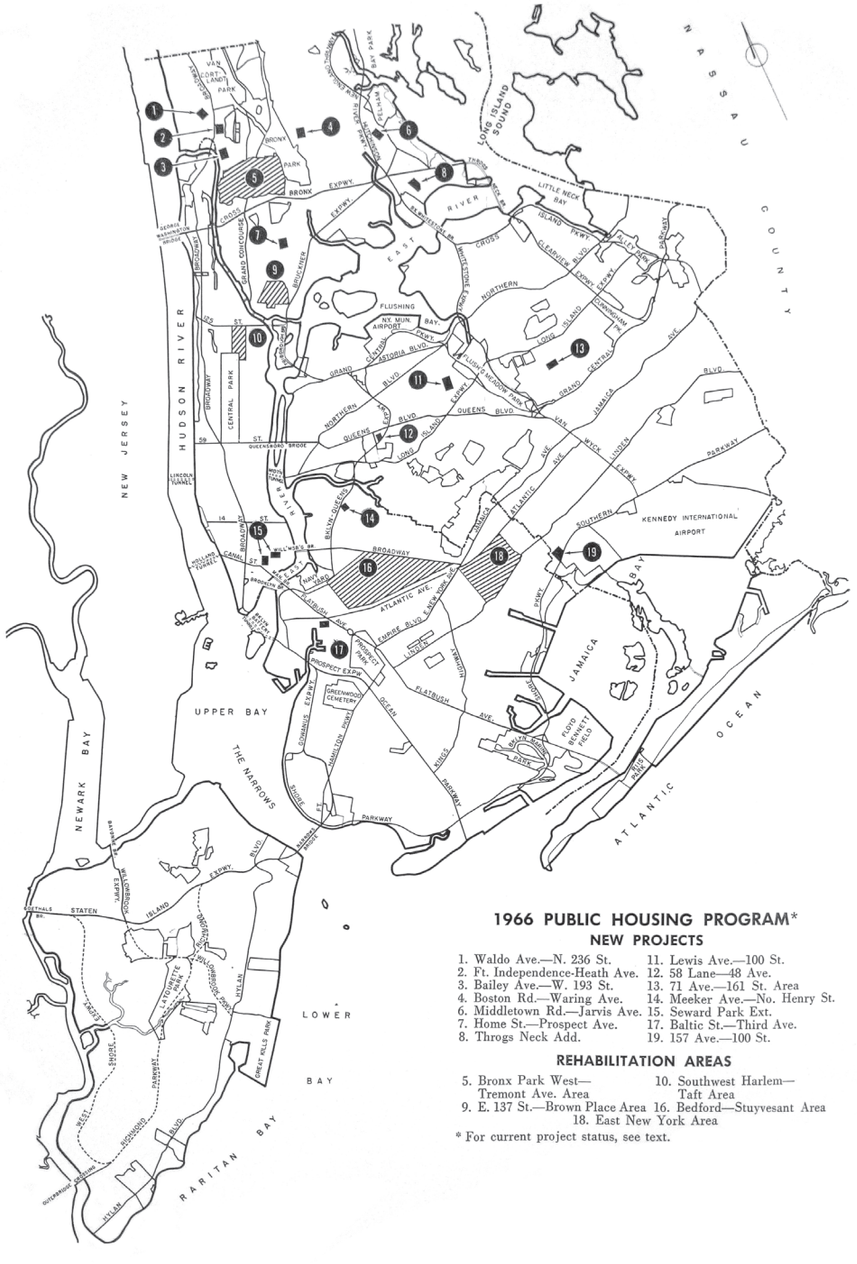
The resulting studies were presented in April 1967. In June the city authorities approved the selection of sites and applications for planning grants were submitted to Washington shortly thereafter. In mid-July, just as the nation was gripped by fresh round of civil unrest, the city released *People & Plans,* a ten-page pamphlet documenting the process to date and the ultimate goal of 14,500 new or rehabilitated units of housing.

The five plans provide a rare and remarkably clear view of the moment when planning – by definition a state-enabled endeavour, due to the question of land use and control – was both called into

1
Quotes are from the transcript of Johnson’s full speech as printed in the *New York Times*: “Text of President’s Special Message to Congress on Improving Nation’s Cities”, 27 January 1966, 20.

2
Quotes are from NYC Housing and Development Administration, *People and Plans: Vest Pocket Housing, The First Step in New York’s Model Cities Program*, July 1967, as well as coverage in the *New York Times*. This was a small number of housing units compared to the size of the areas to be studied; Bedford–Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, for instance, encompassed 400,000 residents living in 120,000 dwelling units – equal to the entire population of many mid-sized cities at this time.

Next page:
Map locating the four vest pocket housing study areas, as well as the Twin Parks, designated as “Rehabilitation Areas” and by slightly different names. Source: NYC Department of City Planning, Newsletter, August–September 1966



question as anti-social *and* considered essential to creating a more equitable society. As a programme, vest pocket housing is a little-known colleague of better-known efforts across the Atlantic, including those undertaken simultaneously in Bologna by the communist-led municipal council, or those initiated over a decade later with West Berlin's IBA 84/87. Fifty years on, confronted with frighteningly similar conditions of inequality, the five plans make us question our own ability to engage in "demonstrations", or experiments with open outcomes, as opposed to following "models", or normative, ideologically foreclosed solutions.

Inspired by the many existing owner-occupied brownstones in the Bedford–Stuyvesant area, what Raymond & May are suggesting in this rendering is that "community" does not necessarily mean "communal", and that the aspirational, status-enforcing role of housing should not be disregarded, especially in low-income neighbourhoods. The rendering co-opts the representational techniques generally reserved for the marketing of new residential development in the suburbs: the aerial view in saturated colours and strong shadows provides maximum insight into the amenities on offer, including private patios, lush vegetation and car parking. That this style was employed to promote, not new towns, but low-rise street-edge buildings in "the nation's largest ghetto", discussed in a vocabulary of "fabric", "scale" and "frontage", is reflective of Raymond & May's broader philosophy.[3] The planning firm believed in holding on to

Raymond & May's rendering of Bedford-Stuyvesant shows the hoped-for "dramatic overall effect" of the vest pocket programme in Bedford-Stuyvesant: "New housing blends with existing and rehabilitated structures ... The overall neighbourhood density remains low and livable." Source: Raymond & May Associates, *Vest-Pocket Housing in Bedford-Stuyvesant. A Summary Report to the Community and City on Some of the First Steps in New York's Model Cities Program*, June 1968

3
George Raymond was born in 1909 in Odessa, grew up in New York, and graduated with an undergraduate degree from Columbia in 1946. He gained experience both as an urban renewal consultant and as an outspoken critic of the programme. In 1963 he founded the country's first university-based community design centre, the Pratt Center for Community Improvement, at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he was director of planning. He remained active as a commentator on housing issues until his death in 2005. For more on the 50-year history of the (renamed) Pratt Center for Community Development, see http://www.prattcenter.net/50-years/50-things.

planning expertise while responding to the desires of the community it was working with. Here, this meant a separation of different income groups. An earlier rendering, published in 1967 in *People & Plans*, had shown that low-income housing was to be built as large apartment blocks, while middle-income households were to have access to individual houses to be configured with one or two rental units below, and a larger unit for the owners above. By 1968, as this image shows, this idea had been adjusted: the rental apartments were less different and mixed in among the individual homes.[4]

Black lines indicate a street front and sidewalks. Mounted into these outlines is a photograph of a single four-storey house. This vacant, haunted, Superstudio-like image encapsulates Walter Thabit's main message for East New York: a cautioning as to the futility of trying to save a deeply troubled neighbourhood through a smattering of new housing. But while Thabit resorts to visual communication on the report's cover, architectural design or images were not what the trained planner was interested in.[5] Rather, his 122-page report is made up exclusively of maps surveying socio-economic conditions, spreadsheets of development costs, and densely typed text reporting on what residents want and need – not the new housing proposed by the city, but jobs, education and health services. Accordingly, Thabit's proposition is not a physical plan but a "development framework". Of the seven steps, only the first is about the siting of new housing. All others focus on job training, job creation and the operation of housing as a cooperative, non-profit endeavour. "Poorly operated properties are to be made liveable through group management", Thabit writes. "These [locally established] companies should be organized to train and use local labour."[6]

Architect Barry Jackson's proposition for Harlem was to harness the power of computation to empower the community in order to address the ever-changing conditions of development.[7] While Jackson delivered to the city the required map of development sites (largely selected on the basis of vacant land) and a rendering of what the architecture might look like (a highly detailed and volumetrically articulated building of concrete and brick), Jackson's larger aim was to develop a computer program to analyse *all* data affecting housing development and management, from real-estate values to zoning laws, from construction costs to maintenance needs. In a 1967 arti-

4
Raymond & May, *Vest Pocket Housing in Bedford Stuyvesant. A Summary Report to the Community and the City on Some of the First Steps in the New York Model Cities Program,* June 1968. Quote from Introduction, 9.

5
Thabit was born in 1921 to Christian-Syrian parents in Brooklyn, where he grew up. After deployment to Europe in World War II, he studied design at Brooklyn College, sociology at the New School, and obtained a graduate degree in urban planning at MIT in 1953. He worked for four years in Baltimore's planning department, then established his own planning office in New York in 1958. In 1964 he cofounded Planners for Equal Opportunity, a breakaway group of the nation's largest professional organization of planners, to take a clear stand on issues of social equity. This movement became known as "advocacy planning". Thabit died in 2005. For an account of Thabit's impact on New York City planning culture see Marci Reaven, *Citizen Participation in City Planning: New York City, 1945–1975*, PhD Dissertation, NYU, 2009.

6
Walter Thabit, *Planning for the East New York Target Area*, October 1967, 97.

7
Jackson was born in 1932 in Harlem, studied architecture at Rensselaer and Berkeley, and founded the firm Fisher/Jackson in 1964. Upon returning to New York in 1965, he taught

a seminar on mathematics, computation and design at Columbia's School of Architecture. Jackson was the only African-American to be retained as a planning consultant in these studies. The belief that computational systems developed in the defence and aerospace industries could be adapted to address urban problems was being actively pursued at Berkeley and MIT at this time. See Felicity D. Scott, *Outlaw Territories: Environments of Insecurity/Architectures of Counterinsurgency,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); and Jennifer S Light, *From Warfare to Welfare: Defense Intellectuals and Urban Problems in Cold War America* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Walter Thabit's cover image conveys his fundamental message: it is futile to solve East New York's problems with a mere smattering of new housing. Source: Walter Thabit, *Planning for A Target Area in East New York*, October 1967

cle for the Italian design journal *Zodiac*, Jackson points to the "failure of the designer" who, faced with "the complex array of forces which have impinged upon our environment", still "fear(s) turning to new tools when the opportunity arises". Rather, he explains, "The key to any design process is feedback, which may be defined as the continually operating modification of the input of a design system by its output." An accompanying diagram consists of circles, connected by lines, each identifying a different step in the "procedure network", which he credits to Christopher Alexander.[8]

Jonas Vizbaras' Mott Haven Plan advances the idea that designing human community was possible not only in the new town, but in the ghetto.[9] The eye-level drawing of a block interior summarizes the approach for Mott Haven, the smallest and physically most clearly defined of the five study areas. The drawing imagines a landscaped area at the interior of a block which would bring together the diverse residents of the surrounding buildings, including households of low and moderate incomes, living in both old or new rental housing, or even new "garden-style walk-up" and "two-family row houses", to "provide a variety of housing types and ... offer a wider range of choices."[10] These "renewed blocks", a version of reform-era urban courtyard housing, would then be connected to other such blocks through landscaped, pedestrian-only paths. Accordingly, site selection was concentrated on five adjacent blocks (rather than being scattered widely). Vizbaras's approach was clearly influenced by his earlier experience in the office of Whittlesey & Conklin, working on the country's first new town, Reston, Virginia, where "villages" were similarly linked.

The main evidence for the Twin Parks study, produced by architects Jonathan Barnett, Giovanni Pasanella, Jaquelin Robertson, Richard Weinstein and Myles Weintraub, is a small eight-page pamphlet that unapologetically sets out the case for better architectural design: "Vest pocket houses are attractive structures which are designed to fit into the neighbourhood while making more efficient use of land, and to promote a sense of dignity and freedom through modern and imaginative designs ... Obviously, stock plans pulled from an architect's dusty file are out of the question for Twin Parks."[11] And yet the pamphlet contains only two images. The first is a photograph of a cardboard model showing the insertion of two large, parallel slabs among smaller houses. The second is an axonometric line drawing of the two sites of intervention. The old and the new are barely distinguishable in the slight differentiation of line weight and shadows; and the sites were clearly selected to create a legible, urban whole along two major thoroughfares. The Twin Parks study thus advances an understanding of urban design based on a volu-

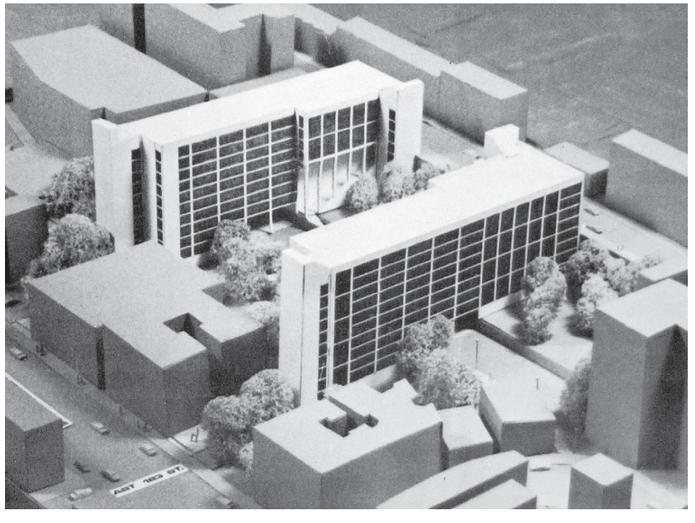
8
The article, titled "The Relationships Between Needs are the Elements of Form", was published in an issue dedicated to "Architecture USA" with a special section on "Problems of Renewal Planning and Design", *Zodiac*, no. 17 (1967), 210–12.

9
Vizbaras was born in 1921 in Lithuania, left the country at the outset of the World War II, earned a degree in architecture at Karlsruhe University in 1947, and emigrated to the United States as a displaced person. He died of cancer in 1977.

10
Jonas Vizbaras, Mott Haven Plan/67, 1967.

11
NYC Housing and Development Administration, *Twin Parks Vest Pocket Housing,* December 1967, 3–4.

Jonas Vizbaras' drawing for Mott Haven demonstrates the widely held belief that landscape can drive the renewal of a community: "New buildings and rehabilitated tenements enclose open space in the interior of a renewed block." Source: NYC Housing and Development Administration, *People & Plans,* July 1967



The future Urban Design Group's model photograph of twin slabs inserted between existing low- and midrise buildings at Twin Parks West reveals that legibility of urban form is the ultimate goal. Source: NYC Housing and Development Administration, *Twin Parks Vest Pocket Housing*, December 1967

metric view of the city as a whole, grounded in site-specific, atypical interventions and not afraid – despite all talk of small scale – of size.

What became of the five vest pocket housing plans? The sites designated by the residents for development or rehabilitation were acquired by the city starting in 1967 – a demonstration of the unusual agency given to the resident committees. As to the planning consultants: once Model Cities implementation grants were approved in 1968, most were retained to take on the physical planning of the larger areas. The members of the Twin Parks study team had become the core of the newly formed Urban Design Group in the Department of City Planning in April 1967.[12] The site acquisition and continuity in terms of personnel are significant achievements of the early vest pocket planning. Unfortunately, the subsequent difficulties of the Model Cities programme have led vest pocket housing to be framed largely in terms of failure. Once the need to set up local resident committees took hold and the federal money rolled in, so did the logistical and political complications, and the ability to experiment was largely foreclosed. In some cases, infighting within the much-invoked "community" over the relatively large sums of allocated federal money resulted in the complete freezing of approved programmes. After his re-election in late 1969, Mayor Lindsay centralized control over Model Cities and directed his deputies to focus on producing tangible deliverables. In practice this meant that recreational, health or job training programmes were often sacrificed to build housing.

Model Cities never really had a chance to prove itself. President Richard Nixon, elected in late 1968, had initially supported the programme; in late 1974, however, he terminated it, together with urban renewal. Vest pocket housing died more quietly, mainly as a consequence of New York City's declining fiscal options which culminated in near-bankruptcy in 1975. The relative inefficiency of building on small and scattered sites as compared to larger, contiguous developments had always been an issue, and despite the best of intentions the programme had not produced enough housing to stem the tide of abandonment in these neighbourhoods.[13] As a consequence, the story of Model Cities and vest pocket housing is little known or studied. With the exception of the housing built in the Twin Parks areas, much published at the time, in part due to the involvement of architects including Richard Meier, scant attention has been paid to the buildings that resulted from the 1966 planning efforts: if published at all, they are never discussed in relation to their origins.

In their extraordinary diversity in terms of analysis, representation and process, the five vest pocket housing plans offer an antidote to this historical disconnect. They show that, when given the opportunity, architects and planners can work in conjunction with residents to generate a range of possibilities for employing housing as a tool – but just one of many tools – for addressing urban inequality. The five plans complicate a dominant narrative that still largely shapes urban and architectural discourse in the United States today – one framed by a "bad before", leading up to *c.*1960 (and identified with Robert Moses, top-down planning, modernism), and a "good after" (Jane Jacobs, bottom-up initiative, contextual design), which is thought to have taken hold sometime around the mid-1970s and to still endure to the present day. It is an assumption of "goodness" that is being fundamentally challenged in our times by the dominance of private development over democratic participation or design exploration.

12
This was slightly in advance of the founding of Peter Eisenman's better-known Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in October 1967. Eisenman and members of the Twin Parks study group had been part of the group Conference for the Study of the Environment (CASE) since 1964, which led to their participation as teams representing Princeton and Columbia in the January 1967 MoMA exhibition, *The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal.*
For a detailed story of the members, goals and debates within CASE, as well as its ending and merging into the IAUS (but not the UDG), see Stanford O. Anderson, "CASE and MIT: Engagement", in *A Second Modernism: MIT, Architecture and the "Techno-Social" Moment, a book celebrating the School of Architecture at 150 years,* Arindam Dutta, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 578–651.

13
An accounting of how much housing was built under Model Cities has not been done. The endeavour is partially complicated by the fact that Model Cities provided only gap funding in the range of 10 per cent of development costs, but projects were generally accounted for according to the main funding stream. In addition, some sites acquired by the city under Model Cities in the late 1960s were not developed until the 1980s or later, and are thus even more difficult to link to the original planning.

The longer-term effects of the social and economic parts of Model Cities – including health care, child care, professional education and many other programmes – is even harder to evaluate. For a closer discussion of the legacy of Model Cities and vest pocket housing in the case of Mott Haven, see Susanne Schindler, "Model Cities Redux", *Urban Omnibus,* October 2016, http://urbanomnibus.net/2016/10/model-cities-redux/