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History Session 9 History of the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) Aug 6, 2017
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[The following history of the West Side Urban Renewal Area project is taken from writings by Jennifer Hock, including from her 2012 Harvard University PhD dissertation and her 2014 chapter in *Affordable Housing in New York*.]

Introduction

The residential district of tenements and brownstones between 59th and 110 Streets, Central Park, and the Hudson River, the once-fashionable West Side was in decline in the 1950s. While the East Side increasingly attracted upper-middle-class and wealthy households and new high-rise development, the West Side tenements and brownstones were subdivided into smaller apartments and turned into rooming houses as working-class and poor households moved into the area. The West Side had always been demographically diverse, home to middle-class and working-class Jewish and Irish residents who had moved to the neighborhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as wealthy professionals who lived in the elevator apartment buildings along Central Park West and elderly men who lived in single-room occupancy hotels along Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues. It was also one of the more racially integrated areas in Manhattan, with a significant number of African Americans and Puerto Rican families, many of whom had moved to the neighborhood since the Second World War. Although the area was experiencing racial tension and high crime rates and had increasingly poor housing conditions—especially at the northern edge and on the side streets—few thought of the West Side as a "slum." Rather, marginal areas like the West Side were increasingly the kind that interested planners and city officials in the 1950s, as city agencies abandoned the slum clearance and redevelopment paradigm for a model that assumed that targeted intervention would encourage further private investment…

There were demographic trends driving change in the neighborhood, such as the departure of white families to the suburbs and the arrival of low income families from Puerto Rico. Another cause of change, perhaps the most destabilizing of all: the displacement of thousands of residents from nearby Title I and public housing projects…. Beginning in the early 1950s, Manhattantown, the scandal-ridden Title I project, and the adjacent Frederick Douglass Houses, a public housing project, displaced several thousand families who had lived immediately to the north. Although in theory the housing authority and the private relocation firms working with Title I sponsors offered relocation housing for these families throughout the city, in practice the vast majority of tenants relocated themselves to new apartments close to home, and adjacent areas often bore the brunt of the effects of displacement. The phenomenon of overcrowding and deteriorating housing conditions associated with public housing and redevelopment projects was not, perhaps, as widely discussed as white flight or Puerto Rican migration, but it had already gained a name by the mid 1950s: "slum shifting." Displacement from the sites of nearby housing and redevelopment projects played a significant role in the transformation of the area in the early and mid-1950s and helped shape subsequent community response.

The West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) marked a significant shift in New York City's approach to housing and redevelopment. Proposed by City Planning Commissioner James Felt in 1955 as an alternative to the dominant model of slum clearance practiced by Robert Moses' Committee on Slum Clearance, the WSURA prescribed instead a combination of targeted

redevelopment, residential rehabilitation, and the conservation of the neighborhood's existing housing stock. In the terminology of the period, it was a plan for "urban renewal" rather than "urban redevelopment," drawing on the new tools and techniques available through the National Housing Act of 1954.

New York was one of a number of cities reconsidering housing and urban renewal policies in the mid- to late 1950s. Large-scale clearance projects were coming under fire and both planners and politicians had begun to look for alternative approaches that would help them reverse the decline of city neighborhoods without bulldozing them entirely. On the Upper West Side, the city aimed to maintain racial and economic balance in one of New York's diverse neighborhoods though a range of affordable and market-rate housing options.

The WSURA encompassed twenty city blocks stretching from West 87th Street to West 97th Street and from Central Park West to Amsterdam Avenue. This part of the Upper West Side was going through a transition in the 1950s, attracting Black and Puerto Rican families displaced from nearby redevelopment projects while losing middle- and working-class Jewish and Irish residents to the outer boroughs and the suburbs. Upper middle-class professionals continued to move into the well-maintained apartment buildings along Central Park, but much of the rest of the housing stock in the area was deteriorating due to neglect and overcrowding, including the old-law tenements lining Columbus, Amsterdam Avenues [and the south side of 96th St] and the brown-stones on the side streets.

A team of planners, social workers, and economists descended on the urban renewal area in 1956 to assess the feasibility of Felt's idea. The resulting 1958 report, entitled simply *Urban Renewal*, offered a vision of what the neighborhood could become—indeed, what another model of urban renewal in New York might look like. *Urban Renewal* recommended retaining the existing street grid and limiting clearance to sites along Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues and along parts of 96th and 97th Sts, where some of the oldest tenements were located. High-rise housing and public plazas would be constructed here, and most of the brownstones along the side streets were slated for extensive rehabilitation. Code enforcement and federally insured loans for rehabilitation would spark reinvestment in the area. In fact, Felt, confident of the catalytic potential of urban renewal, had spoken of the plan as one that required a "minimum of government subsidy.

A range of housing options lay at the heart of the plan. With different financing, the report explained, the plan could accommodate everything from low-income public housing to middle-income rentals and limited-equity cooperatives to market-rate, privately financed apartments. This range would help the neighborhood achieve a "racial and economic balance," something that seemed increasingly elusive in a racially and economically segregated city. In keeping with its promise to the neighborhood for those who already lived there, *Urban Renewal* recommended meaningful citizen participation in the planning process, the construction of public low-income housing within --rather than adjacent as was done typically--the Title I renewal area to house relocated families, and phasing redevelopment and rehabilitation to minimize the hardships of displacement and construction.

Shortly after the report's release, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr, established the Urban Renewal Board (URB) to develop a plan and execute the project, with leadership drawn from the City Planning Commission and NYCHA. The URB, which operated concurrently with Robert Moses' Committee on Slum Clearance, worked with a citizens' committee organized for this purpose, the Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council (SBNC). This group shared the URB's commitment to a racially and economically balanced neighborhood but objected vociferously to the specifics of the Preliminary Plan when it was released in 1959. Despite the city's pledge to the neighborhood for existing residents, the breakdown of allocated housing was heavily skewed toward market-rate housing unaffordable to most current residents. Of 7,800 projected new units of housing, only 400 would be low-rent public while 2,400 would be moderate-income units built with public subsidy and a full 5,000 would be market rate. Fifty-eight hundred households faced relocation--a figure almost double initial estimates. Fearing disruption on the scale of one of Moses' traditional slum-clearance projects, the SBNC rethought its mission. Rather than acting as an impartial representative of the area's residents or a pro forma consultation, it became an outspoken advocate for the poor and an active force determining the direction of the project. Father Henry Browne, a priest at St. Gregory the Great Church on 90th St in the WSURA, emerged as its leader, spearheading a campaign to mitigate the effects of relocation and increase the number of housing units available to both low- and moderate-income residents

The Liberal Social Promise

In early 1961, Father Harry Browne, wrote to a prominent planning consultant asking how he could explain the city's West Side urban renewal plan to his working-class Puerto Rican parishioners, many of whom were facing displacement. The city was planning for new schools, safer streets, and modern, low- and moderate-income housing for this aging neighborhood of overcrowded brownstones. Would the renewal plan help residents, as promised? Browne supported the city's goals—indeed, he had actively supported the West Side Urban Renewal Plan throughout the early planning process in the late 1950s—but he was worried that the plan did not provide for the return of every family that would be displaced. Judging from the extent of redevelopment that was planned, thousands of residents would need to move. Even those who were lucky enough to secure new housing in the neighborhood faced a long waiting period before they could return. Many worried they would be forced to relocate to the outer boroughs, far from family. Was it true, as rumor had it, that Puerto Ricans were being pushed from the neighborhood to make room for new development?

The consultant, Roger Shafer, demurred. Puerto Ricans were not so much being pushed away, he replied, as they were being given a chance to better their lives by moving out of an increasingly crowded and dangerous neighborhood. “In answer to your question of what to say to the Puerto Rican family who accuses you of trying to push them out of the neighborhood over to Staten Island,” Shafer wrote, “I would consider the following approach: Throughout the centuries people have come a long distance to America to improve the status of their living conditions. To get your wife a decent kitchen and a clean home and a good neighborhood, surely it is worth moving to Staten Island.”

From the aging brownstones of the Upper West Side to the new, middle-class housing on Staten Island: Shafer's narrative of social and geographical mobility represents the height of postwar liberal optimism about the social promises of urban renewal—and the profound insensitivity that

planners exhibited on issues of displacement as late as the late 1950s. The sheer scale of human displacement required by the West Side Urban Renewal Plan is shocking to us today; some 3200 families and individuals—or about 10,000 people—in this neighborhood of twenty blocks containing 40,000 people lived in housing scheduled for demolition or extensive rehabilitation in the 1958 urban renewal plan. Some displaced families would be offered public housing in other parts of the city; others were offered moving expenses and assistance finding a new apartment elsewhere in the city, but relocation provisions were, on the whole, minimal. Conceived at the height of the postwar suburban boom, when a surprising 25% of the American population was estimated to be on the move, the urban renewal plan assumed that residents would be geographically mobile and have few attachments to their neighborhood. It did not acknowledge the difficulty that people of color, large families, or individuals with limited English would have leaving a familiar neighborhood and finding new housing; if anything, the plan saw renewal as an opportunity for the city to disperse poverty and arrest decline on the Upper West Side and in the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) in particular.

If the logic of slum clearance in Robert Moses' New York in the 1950s dictated that the city's poor and working class would need to make room for new, middle-class residents, however, Father Browne and other community activists took their cues from the social movements of the 1960s, exploited the plan's provisions for citizen participation, and argued that renewal could be used to create and preserve space for a community that was made up of members of different races and ethnicities and different incomes and visions for urban life. The participatory provisions themselves were modest; this was New York's first foray into neighborhood renewal, after all, and its first attempt to involve residents in the planning process. By the standards of the late 1960s, under the heightened scrutiny of activists who had become wary of the city and its methods of dealing with renewal area residents, these provisions might have seemed unacceptable. But they helped create a citizen organization that played a crucial role in promoting and preserving affording housing in the mixed-income neighborhood, and they established an expectation of resident participation in the planning process that had effects far beyond what was initially envisioned.

Citizen Participation

In the late 1950s, the Puerto Rican community in New York seemed politically powerless unable to launch a protest against the changes being planned. But by the early 1960s, the climate of public opinion in the project area was changing. The moderate community group organized to help the city plan the renewal project, the Provisional Council, reorganized itself as the Strycker's Bay Neighbor-hood Council (SBNC). Headed by Father Browne, the SBNC became engaged in issues related to the local Puerto Rican community and increasingly outspoken about the problems faced by displaced residents. The local Democratic club, the FDR-Woodrow Wilson Democrats, published an analysis of the West Side plan that found the plan's provisions for low-income residents insufficient. Most importantly, the area was finally developing a vocal Puerto Rican constituency led by Aramis Gomez, a resident who had recently been relocated from the nearby Lincoln Square project area and who, along with several other community members, had formed the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee (PRCHC). In a report drawn up in January 1962, the group contended that Puerto Ricans were "being 'pushed' out of so-called prime real estate in Manhattan" and that "the overall housing program seems to envision a New York without Puerto Ricans." Like the Reform Democrats, they pushed for a

significant increase in the number of low-income housing units as well as more meaningful Puerto Rican participation in the renewal project.

Public hearings on the final plan, held in May and June 1962, were contentious. At the first hearings on May 17, proponents of the plan emphasized the city's commitment to open housing, its attempt to provide housing for all income levels in a single neighborhood, and its innovative rehabilitation program. … Critics attacked the extent of Puerto Rican displacement, the city's poor track record with relocation, and the disparity between the number of households displaced and the number of low- and middle-income housing units, arguing that the social costs of the plan were too high. The PRCHC's Aramis Gomez attacked the plan as a "masterpiece of deception" intended to "get rid of the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and low-income families from the area" and declared that "if you (the City Planning Commission) approve this plan, you are declaring war on the Puerto Rican community."

After three years of delays, the city wanted nothing more than to begin the West Side project. On May 29, 1962, the planning commission announced its approval of the final plan, urging it forward through the next round of hearings "quickly and expeditiously" and warning that changes in the plan at this late date would cause delays.

Both critics and proponents geared up for a second round of debate in June. In a series of meetings leading up to the next hearings on June 22, Father Browne pushed the SBNC to support an increase in the number of low-income units to 2500 without success. He and other opponents of the plan organized a rally at Holy Name Church in support of more low-income housing on the night of June 21. In the face of this opposition, city officials conceded defeat and phoned Browne, promising an increase in the number of low-income units in the plan from 1,000 to 2,500 and the number of middle-income units from 4,200 to 4,900. The number of luxury units was reduced, from 2,800 to 2,000. In addition, the city's Bureau of Relocation would be authorized to step in and terminate private relocation contracts if at any time the Bureau believed that relocation was not being handled adequately. The rally was held anyway, and the crowd sang anti-renewal songs written by an SBNC activist.

At the Board of Estimate hearing the next day, Puerto Rican leader Joseph Monserrat denounced the destruction of 5,000 existing low-income units in the WSURA and the impact that it would have on the Puerto Rican community. A representative of the local branch of the NAACP, Percy Sutton, spoke against the plan, challenging the national association's position and requesting more low-income units and minority representation on the City Planning Commission on the grounds that "members of the minority groups should participate in these decisions that affect us." Father Browne spoke about the plan's insufficient attention to low-income residents who would be displaced by the project. Defending the plan, officials cited the "very high degree of voluntary turnover" among Puerto Ricans, arguing that the effects of displacement were not as dire as the opposition made them out to be. Moreover, if the city built housing for all the low-income residents in the area, there was the danger of "permanently embedding a low-income and minority ghetto in the area." As one official said, the plan's "vision is of an entire neighborhood truly integrated on a stable basis, not simply caught at the point where there is apparent integration while one group is moving in and another out." Several days later, on June 26, the Board of Estimate approved final plan.

By the end of the second round of hearings, two opposing views of the West Side plan had emerged. One was optimistic about the effects of renewal and favored the use of renewal tools—particularly new middle-income housing and loans for rehabilitation—to draw new residents to the neighborhood and precipitate change. One was skeptical about the effects of

renewal and wanted to use its tools—low-income housing, and to a lesser extent limited-profit middle-income housing—to secure a place for current residents who would be displaced during the process. One was consensual and used the liberal language of participation and opportunity; the other was increasingly militant and wanted the city to concentrate its resources on helping the poor. The issue of low- and middle-income housing was where they found common ground to negotiate, and the ideal of the stable, integrated neighborhood informed both approaches.

Implementation of the WURA Plan

NYCHA was the first to develop new housing in the area. Following the basic idea of the plan, it broke with its superblock design tradition. The area's first redevelopment project, Wise Towers, a 399-unit, nineteen-story set of two towers located mid-block on one of the side streets (117 West 90th Street), opened in January 1965. Father Browne and the SBNC also worked with NYCHA to construct what they called "human-scale" housing. The resulting vest-pocket project, one of the city's first, also opened in 1965. Known only by its street address, the nine-story, 70-unit brick building faced directly onto one of the side streets, virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding housing. In keeping with the plan's emphasis on brownstone rehabilitation, NYCHA also bought four contiguous row houses and rehabilitated them as a single structure with forty low-income apartments. Building on the success of this first project, NYCHA ultimately took over an additional thirty-six tenement rooming houses, converting them to 236 units of public housing.

Much of the WSURA's moderate-income housing was constructed in high-rise buildings along Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues using Mitchell-Lama funds. The limited-dividend sponsorship requirement attracted organizations with strong social agendas that helped develop a culture of cooperative living on the avenues and one on 96th St. These sponsors actively sought displaced residents, applicants who favored renewal and racial integration, and families. Indeed, several of the developers opted to build units with three and four bedrooms, intended to appeal to families who might otherwise move to the suburbs. The first of the high-rise housing developments— the Goddard Tower, Strycker's Bay Apartments, RNA House, and Columbus Park Towers limited-equity co-ops—opened in the spring of 1967. Because of their high density and their tight budgets, carefully calculated to yield the lowest possible cost per room, they were architecturally modest. On the avenues, at over twenty-seven stories, they were also massive, towering over nearby brownstones and prewar elevator buildings. On 96th St, RNA House was a more moderate height to blend better with the prewar elevator buildings on the street.

These first projects set the tone for further development along the avenues. When demand for market-rate housing proved weak, the Housing and Redevelopment Board—the successor to both the mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance and URB— began to amend the plan to redesignate sites for moderate-income housing. By the end of the 1960s almost all of the new development was limited-profit housing, some funded through Mitchell-Lama and some funded through federal programs. Each of these middle-income developments also contained a designated number of "skewed rental" units available to qualified families at public housing rates, further diversifying the housing in the area. Under this program, monthly rentals or maintenance charges for 80 percent of units were "skewed" up so that the remaining apartments could be offered at costs comparable to public housing. This formula was used throughout WSURA until 1970, when it was revised so that 70 percent of units were skewed up and 30 percent down.

Brownstone rehabilitation progressed more slowly. The city, which had initially conceived of the brownstones as a moderate-income housing resource, encouraged tenant-

financed renovation achieved by simultaneous conversion of buildings to small cooperative apartment houses. To facilitate the process, the city bought contiguous brownstones and offered groups of three and four for sale as packages. Despite an ambitious demonstration project along West 94th and West 95th Streets and a few experiments by investors, however, the idea failed to gain traction. Ultimately, individual families who negotiated purchase of houses privately carried out the majority of row house rehabilitation in the WSURA.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s the West Side's support for a racially and economically integrated neighborhood had frayed. A decade of city-led redevelopment along Columbus Avenue and private brownstone rehabilitation along the side streets had displaced thousands of low-income residents, and rising construction costs and interest rates made newer subsidized projects significantly more expensive, even at below-market prices. Frustration over displacement and the scarcity of low-income housing sparked a city-wide squatting movement in the spring of 1970. Although squatters in this era occupied buildings from Morningside Heights to the Lower East Side, the movement was centered on the condemned brownstones and tenements of the Upper West Side Title I project. The organizers of a new group called Operation Move-in, including West Side residents, Puerto Rican activists, and anti-poverty workers, selected as their headquarters a condemned old-law tenement on Columbus Avenue slated for public housing known as Site 30. There, they protested the demolition of structurally sound buildings, called for immediate shelter for homeless families rather than further planning or redevelopment, and demanded their inclusion in the city's relocation caseload.

The squatters' movement galvanized a group of brownstone owners, tenants, and small business owners calling themselves the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), which was concerned that too much low-income housing would take the neighborhood past a "tipping point" and discourage private investment in a district that was just beginning to turn around. Instead, CONTINUE argued, the city should be building market-rate housing and accommodating a limited number of low-income residents in skewed units within those projects—a new idea at the time. Their suit to halt the construction of public housing on Site 30, the center of the squatters' movement, held up construction on that site until the 1980s.

The Nixon administration's moratorium on the construction of subsidized housing ended the deadlock between CONTINUE and advocates of-low income housing. Yet, as a result, more than a dozen redevelopment parcels were left to languish empty for years. Vendors sold Christmas trees on Site 30, and neighbors established a community garden on a nearby undeveloped site. By the mid-1970s many of the moderate-income buildings in the area dramatically increased monthly payments— some more than doubling—and residents began to stage rent strikes. Meanwhile, market-driven gentrification continued to cause displacement at the southern end of the project.

In 1980 the Reagan administration decided that market-rate construction could begin on all remaining redevelopment sites without any reference to the original public housing commitment, and the project was closed out in 1981. New design guidelines accompanying a fifth amendment to the plan in 1977 introduced more buildings with ground-floor retail and lower densities, aligning with the urban values that Jane Jacobs had advocated in the 1960s. As the West Side gentrified in the late 1980s and 1990s, the final sites were developed, some entirely as market-rate housing, some with a mixture of market-rate and subsidized units.

The WSURA's legacy is complex. Between redevelopment on the avenues and the gentrification of the side streets, the scale of intervention was vast; one observer of the project

estimated that thirteen thousand people, one-third of the area's total population of 40,000, had been displaced between 1960 and 1970. Only a fraction returned. But if the relocation process failed the neighborhood, the project succeeded in other ways. It demonstrated the potential for community groups to guide the development process, the ability of the city to implement a variety of housing programs in a single neighborhood, and the power of activists to gain racial and economic inclusivity With its high-rise housing on Columbus Avenue, scattered public housing projects, Mitchell-Lama limited equity cooperatives and rehabilitated brownstones, the WSURA retains a remarkably wide array of housing options that blend seamlessly into the rest of neighborhood and that remain popular today.
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West 90th Street, between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues, is now Henry J. Browne Boulevard. In 1980, when Councilwoman Ruth W. Messinger of Manhattan, sponsored the bill in memory of Henry J. Browne, she said she thought it was "a nice thing to do... to honor "a man who was a fine scholar and activist priest," who was pastor of St. Gregory's Roman Catholic Church, which now stands on the street named for him.

Father Henry J. Browne at SBNC meeting ca. 1959