

At Home in the City
Refugee Lives in New York
A Case Study of the Park Hill Liberians

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Abstract

As the world's displaced continue to step through the doors of its cities in numbers not seen in recorded history, planners have an obligation to consider refugees as we reimagine the neighborhoods and paradigms in which we work. While the few refugees who resettle in the United States may be considered on a global level to be fortunate, resettlement systems which have been put in place in the twentieth century have left much of the work of integration to chance. This study aims to identify neighborhood factors which may contribute to a welcoming community for refugees and therefore create greater community integration. An evaluation of physical and social factors on the ground in the Liberian community in Staten Island, combined with personal experiences of resettlement informs the recommendations at the conclusion of this study.



Figure 1. The brick blocks of Park Hill Avenue.

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Contents

Introduction	1
A Refugee Story.....	1
Research Aims.....	3
Background	5
The Great War and the Creation of Refugees.....	5
Codification of Political Refugees	7
Post World War II Expansion	9
Send These, the Homeless, Tempest-Tossed to Me.	10
Assistance and Making Do: Current Provisions for Refugees.....	14
The Park Hill Liberians.....	19
Exploring the Numbers: Park Hill as Presented by the Census	21
Literature Review	24
What is “Refugee”?.....	24
Policy, and the Definition Thereof.....	26
Welcoming and Hospitality, or Not	27
Resettlement and Integration.....	28
Conceptualizing Space, Opportunity, and Decision-Making	30
Research Design	34
Designing for the Just City.....	35
Image of the City	36
Interviews.....	37
Speaking with Resettlers.....	37
Speaking with the Resettled.....	38
Limitations.....	39
Findings and Analysis	42
Resettlement Organizations	42
Finding Fundamental Needs	44
Welcoming Communities	46
Permanence: Approaches to Housing	48
Permanence: Approaches to Employment.....	49
Refugees: The Liberians of Park Hill Avenue, Staten Island	52
Fundamentals First.....	55
Needs Met and Unmet	59
At Home in a House	63
Safety and the Boys of Park Hill	65
Jobs and Support.....	69
Informality at Work and Play: the Community Market.....	72
Public Spaces for Play, Relaxation, and Community	76
Beauty and Beholders and Notions of Home.....	79
Reflections on Research: Positionality and Subalternity	83
Synthesis and Recommendations	90

From “I have a friend who...” to “Our framework is...”	90
Understanding Histories and Presents: Contextualizing Resettlement Criteria.....	93
Creating a Market, Creating Ourselves: Licensure and Zoning	96
Services and Institutions: A Call for More	101
Bibliography	106
Appendix.....	112
 Neighborhood Elements	112
 Questions for Refugees	112
 Questions for Refugee Resettlement Agencies.....	113

Introduction

A Refugee Story

The professor's father did not have much money. He had a few favorite neighborhood stores, even if most of what they stocked was unfamiliar. His Saturday bench, covered in brown and yellow leaves, sat in the middle of the little square between two streets. He knew a good amount of English from a productive and studious life, but had few people to use it with. In his small Brooklyn apartment, he had all the things that make a house – plates and cups, a table for eating and working, curtains, two beds: one large for his wife and he, one small for their young son – and none of the things that make a home. It is difficult to carry your things, your heirlooms and your comfort items, your souvenirs of a life peaceably lived, when you are fleeing.

The professor's father had already fled one time in his life, from China in the middle of the century, escaping the ascendant Communist regime by heading South into Vietnam. When that country came, itself, to be dominated by guerilla-victory Communist party, the professor's father and his family, along with a great swath of Sino-Vietnamese, looked to the next place. New York City became a new home, a place of negotiation and acculturation and disappointment and success. The young son was a success at school, and at the city's public university, too. With the support of his family, of a small collection of twice-over refugees, he earned a doctorate and became a renowned scholar of immigration at one of our country's top universities.

This story is not typical. For most of the sixty million displaced since the by war and instability or deemed unworthy of their own government’s protection, the future is one of wandering, of camps, of an impoverished incarceration with no avenue for exit.¹

Refugees – those who are forced out of their home countries, in contrast to internally displaced persons, who exist in a state of flux within their own borders – comprise more than fifteen million of these.² Despite contemporary cries in the media and popular political discourse, this number translates not into an influx of refugees into our cities: in total, only about one percent of global refugees resettle in third countries, with half of these heading towards the United States.³ After trudging from hardship and danger, negotiating systems of assistance and livelihood in refugee camps and – more often – in cities teeming those following the same path, passing through the sometimes twenty steps to qualify for entry into the United States, some have the opportunity to resettle in this country.⁴ Since 1975 and the fall of Saigon, nearly three million refugees have come to call the United States their home, some integrating into their new communities, some finding great success, others struggling to escape the carceral existence that too often defines the refugee experience.⁵ New York has always loomed large in the resettlement system, with more than 90,000 refugees entering the city between 1975 and 1987.⁶

Largely Soviet and Vietnamese at first, the refugee population today encircles a much

¹ Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. *Resettling Refugees*. <http://www.hias.org/work/resettling-refugees>

² Brown, Anastasia and Todd Scribner. “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States.” *Journal on Migration and Human Society* Vol. 2 (No. 2). 2014. pp. 101-120. p. 101.

³ US. Department of State. *Refugee Admissions*. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/>

⁴ UNHCR. *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas*. Sep. 2009. and Park, Haeyoun and Larry Buchanan. “Why it Takes Two Years for Syrian Refugees to Enter the U.S.” *The New York Times*. Nov. 20, 2015.

⁵ Ott, Eleanor. *Get Up and Go: Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Migration in the U.S.A.* (Geneva: 2011). p. 1.

⁶ Bogen, Elizabeth. *Immigration in New York*. (New York: 1987). p. 119.

wider diversity of national origins, with Iraqis and Burmese and Bhutanese and Somalis comprising more than half of New York's refugees.⁷

Research Aims

This thesis aims to examine the integration process for these contemporary groups. In particular, it seeks to illustrate the experiences of refugees in New York City alongside an evaluation of neighborhood characteristics and the relationship between spatial factors and social justice, focusing primarily on environmental well-being, belonging, and social ownership. In short, this thesis attempts to answer the question: How should we plan neighborhoods for refugees who are resettled in the American city? At the same time, this thesis seeks to call into question the notion of “are resettled.” Which elements of refugee resettlement arise from the formal system composed of the UN, the federal government, and volunteer resettlement agencies and which grow out of more informal networks of kin, language, or national origin? With an unprecedented number of refugees around the world, and the very real prospect of an influx of refugees to the US and New York stemming from Syria, these questions demand answers if planners are to lift the lamp for Emily Lazarus' tempest-tossed homeless.⁸ While only 1,682 Syrians have resettled in the United States and only 78 in New York since Oct. 1, 2014, planners will, somehow, have to determine how to accommodate the 10,000 displaced Syrians and numerous others that President Obama has pledged to welcome over the next year.⁹ Through an examination of

⁷ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center. *Refugee Arrivals by Placement, State, and Nationality: All Arrivals*. Oct. 1, 2014-Sep. 30, 2015.

⁸ Lazarus, Emily. “The New Colossus.” 1883.

⁹ Robbins, Liz. “Syrian Refugees in Jersey City are among Few to Start New Life in U.S.” *The New York Times*. Oct. 13, 2015.

the Liberian community, established during the First Liberian Civil War in the early 1990s, in Clifton and Park Hill in Staten Island, as well as other refugees in New York, this thesis will present ideas about what it means to find a home in the city and the ways in which planning can assist in the creation of welcoming communities.

Background

The Great War and the Creation of Refugees

One starving person, one human being lying like forgotten wreckage on a street corner, wasting away bit by bit - this we understand; here our feeling is so strong it becomes compassion. One refugee, even a crowd of refugees, if you like, pushing their children and their possessions in wheelbarrows in front of them - this we understand. But millions of these, hunted like game from country to country, behind them the fires of their burning homes, before them the emptiness of a future over which they have no control - here our minds stop dead; instead of producing images, they merely play back the statistics presented to them.¹⁰

Fredrik Stang, Nobel Peace Prize Presentation Speech for Fridtjof Nansen, Dec. 10, 1922

Refugees as we know them were created in 1921. With the European continent and the Near East strewn with destruction and as many wandering souls as lost ones, the newly-created League of Nations formally created the High Commission for Refugees on a Monday in Geneva, answering calls from the International Committee of the Red Cross and other charitable organizations overwhelmed by the needs of the drifting. Dr. Fridtjof Nansen – zoologist, athlete, statesman, Arctic explorer – led the efforts, as the first High Commissioner, to persuade the various European nations to accept and settle hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes in the East. Herein lies the introduction of the “refugee” and the genesis of “resettlement.”

¹⁰ “Award Ceremony Speech. Presentation by Fredrik Stang, Chairman of the Nobel Committee. December 10, 1922.” *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. (Nov. 9, 2015.)

Concerned primarily with opening up “work and opportunity” to the largely Russian refugee population, Nansen and the High Commission set up a system of identity documents – “Nansen passports” – to provide the now stateless the ability to move and resettle.¹¹ Such papers helped to facilitate Nansen’s mode of cradling and then supporting and then setting free the displaced multitudes, and in doing so forged an approach that was to become a “classic: custodial care, repatriation, rehabilitation, resettlement, emigration, integration.”¹² Early efforts defined “refugee” in terms of particular national origins, and the initial focus on Russians slowly expanded to include other nationalities, firstly Armenians and then the formerly Ottoman Turks, Kurds, Syrians, and others. As Nansen traversed Europe, ideas circulated about implanting High Commission representatives in “the greatest possible number of countries” as well as protections against expulsion, travel visas, and the legal security imburement known as *cautio judicatum solvi*.¹³

The efforts of Nansen and the early High Commission for Refugees represent the first time in the human record that the refugee had been conceptualized as an international problem, the first time that governments made explicit promises to welcome the expelled. Such actions were, however, perhaps largely due to the ingenuity and affability and determination of Nansen himself. A string of *ad hoc* agreements addressing very specific groups was, of course, hugely beneficial to those groups: Russians and Armenians, Ottomans and Balkans displaced by the Great War and the upheavals in their home

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Fridtjof Nansen - Biographical". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. (Nov. 9, 2015.)

¹³ Jaeger, Gilbert. “On the History of the International Protection of Refugees.” *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 83 (No. 843). Sep., 2001. p. 729.

countries found home and health and a new start. Yet what of other groups, of other wars and upheavals, of countries and situations with non Nansen-brokered agreement? What of other people?

Codification of Political Refugees

The *Convention of 28 October, 1933 relating to the International Status of Refugees* was written under the auspices of the Kings of Belgium, Bulgaria, Egypt, and Norway and the President of France and aimed to create a framework for the treatment of generalized refugees, even if it still confined its efficacy to a few choice groups. Going beyond a simple bilateral covenant, this paper manifestation of ideals expressed its sponsors as

desirous that refugees shall be ensured the enjoyment of civil rights, free and ready access to the courts, security and stability as regards establishment and work, facilities in the exercise of the professions, of industry and of commerce, and in regard to the movement of persons, [and] admission to schools and universities.¹⁴

To be desirous, of course, does not make it so. Yet the many articles following the preamble outline the specific responsibilities that the plenipotentiaries thought appropriate to an early form of refugee justice. Most of these ask the welcoming nations to render unto refugees the “most favorable treatment that it accords to the nationals of a foreign country.”¹⁵ An idea with much greater gravity is planted in the middle of Article 3:

¹⁴ *Convention of 28 October, 1933 relating to the International Status of Refugees*. League of Nations. Treaty Series Vol. CLIX (No. 3663). Preamble.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Each of the Contracting Parties undertakes not to remove or keep from its territory by application of police measures, such as expulsions or non-admittance at the frontier (*refoulement*), refugees... It undertakes in any case not to refuse entry to refugees at the frontiers of their countries of origin.¹⁶

That is, no nation should remit a refugee into the hands of their persecutor, either by an active deliverance or by a non-admission. In these several sentences lies the foundation of the modern refugee resettlement system: the idea that those unable to continue in their homeland, those dispossessed of their legitimacy of place, should be able to find succor elsewhere, and that such succor should be legally sanctioned, was a new idea, the relevance of which stands tall today. At the same time, no vision for the effective resettlement of refugees emerged from the document.

The 1933 Convention was not, of course, an all-healing salve, in terms both of the efficacy of its institutional context and of the Convention's content. In the first instance, the League of Nations lacked large-scale, long-lasting financial support as well as significant political support from several countries, namely the United States. In the second, the Convention lacks any definition of the term "refugee" other than as a designation pertaining only to Russians and Armenians. The *Arrangements of May 12th, 1926*, to which the Convention refers, contains an equal and timely fixation on Russian and Armenian refugees while perhaps offering more guidance, designating as refugees

¹⁶ Ibid. Article 3.

those who “no longer enjoys the protection of the Government.”¹⁷ This understanding, altered and refined, still guides refugee thinking.

Post World War II Expansion

The carnage wracked by World War II, especially in Europe, led to a reconceptualization of the global peace mechanism in general and of refugees in particular. In a series of meetings in Geneva through July, 1951, representatives of 26 governments, observers from two governments, a proxy representative for one government, and numerous non-governmental organizations debated the terms that, they hoped, would govern global perspectives on refugees in a new, post-war world. The first point of order, in contrast to the 1933 Convention, was to define the term “refugee” in a non-nation-specific context. The delegates, in Article 1, paint the “refugee” as someone who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events [as warfare], is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.¹⁸

The Convention here places the idea of protection at the center of the concept of “refugee.” The refugee ceases to be solely a Russian churned out of the seismic upheaval

¹⁷ *Arrangement of 12 May 1926 relating to the Issue of Identity Certificates to Russian and Armenian Refugees*. League of Nations. Treaty Series Vol. LXXXIX (No. 2004). Arrangement 2.

¹⁸ UN High Commission for Refugees. *Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*. Article 1.

of her society or a Kurd suddenly bereft of any centralized and centralizing authority. Instead, the refugee becomes a victim, any victim, damaged by the persecutor-in-authority because of who or where they are. The refugee becomes someone for whom life in their homeland is not living.

The 1951 Convention specifies a desire for employment opportunities, equal housing, access to education, and even public assistance and social security to be afforded to the refugee. While the document does not propose designs for such programs, instead merely calling for fair treatment, the very inclusion of separate articles for each speaks to the relevance and necessity of a particular planning for refugees. They are principles intended to guide concrete, localized action. Perhaps most significant is an echo of the 1933 Convention in the form of the non-*refoulement* clause, Article 33. In essence, non-*refoulement* aims to enforce the idea of welcoming, or at least of not rendering the persecuted unto the persecutor: by enabling refugees to escape and to enter, governments are implicitly stating their intention to help refugees establish something better in a new context. Non-*refoulement*, in a certain reading, also promises some measure of protection from persecution through a presumed integration.

Send These, the Homeless, Tempest-Tossed to Me.

The United States has its own long tale of refugee history, dating back to the first immigration regulation in 1875 barring convicts and prostitutes from entry.¹⁹ While this act perhaps played at humanitarianism by halting the entry of forced labor from China,

¹⁹ Haines, David W. *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook*. (Westport, CT: 1996). p. 3.

the nation enacted most early immigration acts in an attempt to keep those it considered undesirables out. First it was the unfortunate whose public morality was less strict than the buttoned gentlement in Washington; next it was people who did not quite look like the majority of self-imagined polite American society, in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; other acts excluded people on the basis of their mental capacity, religious persuasion, fitness for employment, Asian heritage, and other rather subjective and often uncontrollable factors.

While the Red Cross and the League of Nations responded to the Great War crisis in Europe by establishing a system of assisted migration and settlement, the United States, in 1921, embarked on a quest to control the ethnic and national composition of its population, setting restrictive quotas on the number of migrants allowed to enter from each country: the word “refugee” appears not once, and anyone meeting Nansen’s criteria simply counted as one more towards filling the quota.²⁰ Only in the aftermath of World War II, with more than eleven million soldiers and new exiles traversing Europe, did the United States formally imagine itself a refuge, reserving ninety percent of the established Central and Eastern European quotas for the displaced. Further responses to the war included the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which enabled the entry of 400,000 European refugees, and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, which opened the doors to 200,000 more.²¹ This latter act helped to shape later understandings of US policy by defining “refugee” as

²⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

²¹ Ibid. p. 5.

any person in a country or area which is neither Communist nor Communist-dominated, who because of persecution, fear of persecution, natural calamity or military operations is out of his usual place of abode and unable to return thereto, who has not been firmly resettled, and who is in urgent need of assistance for the essentials of life or for transportation.²²

While later language proves more limited, the focus on persecution and the lack of a home is notable. In addition, the act firmly set the tone for a lengthy refugee policy aimed at those fleeing Communist countries, defining “Escapee” as anyone fearing persecution from Communist governments; several acts followed enabling Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, and, later, Cubans to establish new lives in the US.

One such act, passed in 1957, further limited entry by defining “refugee” as those from Communist countries or the Middle East.²³ Significantly, however, it also separated the entry pathway for refugees from the quota system, thereby creating a parallel migration system capable of incorporating more targeted assistance into its provisions. The landmark Refugee Act of 1980 built on this shift to conceive the refugee policy governing United States acceptance of refugees today. Placing its wording in the context of the US’ commitment to a humanitarian response to the needs of the persecuted and displaced, the act defines “refugee” as any person who is

unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, [their] country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of

²² *Refugee Relief Act of 1953*. Section 2. (a).

²³ Warner, Judith Ann. *Battleground: Immigration*. (Santa Barbara, CA: 2008). p 719.

persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.²⁴

The act also reserved the right of the President to specify particular nations for which the designation “refugee” could apply without broader international recognition. (Bhutan and Myanmar exemplify this second designation.) Today’s resettlement efforts are, across the country, driven by the language contained in this act.

Entry into a nation does not, of course, equate with resettlement. Refugees, even if legally able to cross over the border of one nation state and into another, face the wicked problem of rebuilding their lives, livelihoods, and identities. Scarred by trauma and harrowed by lengths of internment and journeying, refugees often find themselves in what others call their new “home” with little, if anything, to their name and often without the place-specific knowledge to acquire the barest of necessities.

The federal government, after accepting World War II-era refugees into an absence of government assistance, has long maintained, as it did in early immigration restriction acts, that refugees should not evolve into prolonged charges of the state. Even so, after accepting several hundred thousand refugees from Hungary in 1956, President Eisenhower and his government offered \$40 per person to resettlement agencies for “transportation of refugees to their final destination,” noting that such did “not constitute a precedent... for other refugee movements.”²⁵ The Cuban Refugee Program, established

²⁴ *Refugee Act of 1980*. Section 201 (a).

²⁵ Haines. *Refugees*. p. 6.

after the Cuban Revolution and the dissolution of ties between Cuba and the US, proved otherwise: seeking to offset costs that would have others unduly burdened Miami, the federal government provided funding for health services and education. Further funding helped to meet transitional needs and provide activities aimed at producing economic independence among recent refugees, including job training, English lessons, the care of parentless children, and the provision of food.²⁶ Similar schemes later provided similar programs for Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees in the 1970s.

Assistance and Making Do: Current Provisions for Refugees

Despite the development of a national consciousness decidedly opposed to any conception of “welfare” during the 1980s, the federal government continues to provide per capita assistance to volunteer resettlement agencies and public institutions such as schools or health centers. The public distaste for social spending has meant that what should be viewed as instances of necessary aid – temporary transitional programs such as Refugee Cash Assistance and Refugee Medical Assistance – have been equated with undeserving welfare, and refugees are now often initiated into the national public assistance program, receiving the same Medicaid and food stamps as others in dire poverty in America.²⁷ The welfare reforms of 1996, particularly New York’s move from traditional welfare to a new “workfare” system requiring physical labor in return for

²⁶ Ibid. p. 8-9.

²⁷ Brown, Anastasia and Todd Scribner. “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States.” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* Vol. 2(No. 2). 20014. pp. 101-120.

welfare payments, have only made state assistance more precarious and burdensome for refugees resettled in New York.²⁸

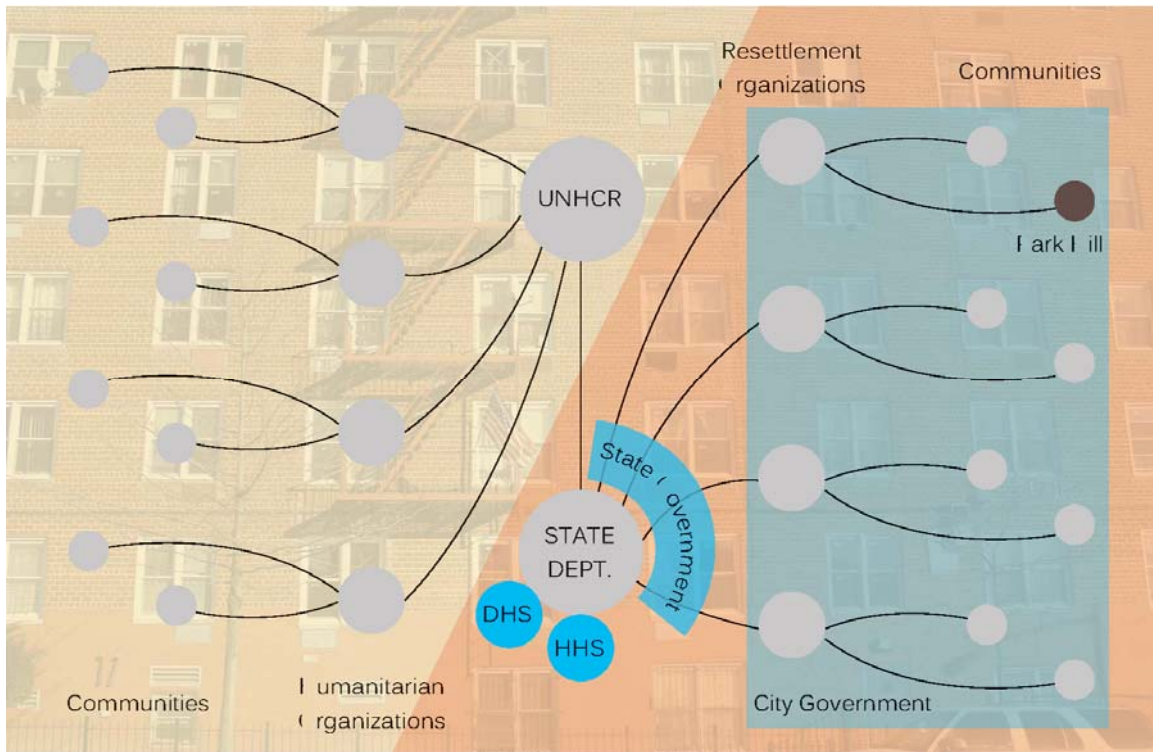


Figure 2. A Conceptual diagram of the refugee resettlement process.

In light of this changing landscape, public programs addressing the resettlement of refugees and the subsequent needs of refugee communities have become increasingly fragmented. The federal government, through the State Department, works with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to bring, after background research and a series of interviews and, a number of refugees from a particular location – be it a camp or, as is the case for a majority of the world’s refugees, a coordination center in an urban environment – to the United States. In the meantime, one of nine volunteer resettlement organizations under contract with the State Department works to find housing for the

²⁸ Tang, Eric. *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. (Philadelphia: 2015). pp. 96-99.

impending arrivals, taking over responsibility of the resettlement process once a refugee steps off of the airplane.²⁹ These organizations, contractually obligated to work with each resettled refugee for one year, work to connect refugees with employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and public benefits such as food stamps and welfare payments. Assistance with applications for permanent status, for which refugees are eligible after one year in the United States, also falls under the remit of the resettlement organizations.

Refugee assistance, however, goes far beyond cash assistance or healthcare, important though these are. After arriving with nothing, refugees need everything if they are to begin lives anew in a meaningful way. And yet, this is precisely the point at which the current paradigm of provision for refugees breaks down most, with much of the work of planning for successful integration – or, indeed, for successful existence – left to sympathetic community groups, mission-driven faith-based organizations, or personal relationships. At the state level, almost all service provision in New York is provided by organizations utilizing state (and federal) financial support and related mostly to education, healthcare, and cash assistance; the state’s support mechanism consists largely of contact information for each program provider, tellingly offered by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.³⁰

New York City boasts only slightly better apparatuses of assistance, if only because they are directly implemented by the city. Falling under the broad goal, as stated by the

²⁹ Refugees are, themselves, responsible for reimbursing the government for the cost of their plane ticket to this country.

³⁰ New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance: Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance. “BRIA Programs.” <http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/programs.asp>

current mayoral administration's Office of Immigrant Affairs, of enhancing the "economic, civic, and social integration of immigrant New Yorkers," such apparatuses include language support mechanisms, including the production of an Emmy-winning television series designed to improve comfort with the English language and the facilitation of public English classes, as well as health initiatives aimed at broadening access to healthcare.³¹ Programs such as these are often coordinated through schools and community offices of city agencies. Most inspiringly, the mayor's initiative has recently launched the Immigrant Women Leaders Fellowship, a program designed to integrate the most marginalized of groups – poor, immigrant, and female – into the immigrant planning paradigm, giving them the opportunity to form a Cabinet in order to inform and advise the mayor on city policy initiatives.³²

Absent in New York City's provisions for immigrant needs is a specific consideration of the needs of refugees, who exhibit so little choice in moving to New York and therefore carry a very different set of resettlement requirements than other immigrants. Refugees can, of course, take advantage of the array of services targeting immigrants if they are able to discern what the applicability of such services and figure out how to procure them; such often requires, however, interfacing with state entities, an action many refugees may not be comfortable with, particularly before they have secured permanent status.

³¹ Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. "Summary of Programs."
<http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/MOIA%20Summary%20of%20Programs.pdf>

³² Ibid.

Furthermore and importantly, given the aim of the present study, New York City lacks any conception of urban planning with the refugee in mind. Planning officials, who may be uniquely suited to helping resettlement organizations plan and find appropriate accommodation in promising neighborhoods for refugees, do not participate in the refugee resettlement process. Planning regulations are designed to be applicable to the whole city and thus do not, on their surface, target specific populations. In practice, planning for a particular populace is most often achieved through the creation of a special zoning district, which amends existing planning regulations to achieve certain goals; these are motivated, more often, by the preservation or prescription of a certain urban fabric. While Little Italy and Bay Ridge have been conceived as such districts, their status as respective past and present centers of immigrant settlement – and, in the latter’s case, refugee resettlement – forms a part neither of the designation nor the rules. No designation nor any concern of New York City’s Department of City Planning engages the reality of refugee resettlement.

Resettlement – that is, beginning life anew – is complex and convoluted. Big programs meet some needs; in the current conception of resettlement, individuals meet the rest. In illustration, Elizabeth Bogen shares the story of the Thanh family, refugees who arrived in New York from Vietnam in 1976. On the day after their arrival, the family met Mrs. Nguyen, a refugee caseworker at a volunteer resettlement agency and herself a Vietnamese refugee. In her office on Park Avenue, Mrs. Nguyen helped Mr. and Mrs. Thanh fill out applications for social security cards, Medicaid, and food stamps. She arranged for health checkups for the couple and their five children at Montefiore Medical

Center in the Bronx. For food, new clothes, and transportation, she gave them a check for \$80. The next day, she brought them to their new apartment with two bedrooms, only a door away from Mr. Thanh's brother's house on University Avenue. Inside, they found five beds, a small kitchen set, linens, blankets for the unfamiliar cold New York weather, cookware and dishes and other household goods. Their rent, their security deposit, and their utility costs – which constituted \$975 – had been paid.³³ One could monetize all of these items and processes and applications and then hand Mr. and Mrs. Thanh a bill, or provide them with the equivalent in cash instead. True refugee assistance, however, demands that the needs at hand are met. Sometimes, a bedsheet goes further than a dollar.

The dishes and the hospital visits and the roof over the Thanh's head is the space from which this thesis begins.

The Park Hill Liberians

This thesis focuses on the Liberian refugee community centered on Park Hill Avenue in the Clifton-Park Hill section of Staten Island. Located on Staten Island's North Shore but rather isolated from the bustle of places such as St. George, Stapleton, and Bay Street, Park Hill Avenue runs in an almost-straight line in between nine large brick housing projects and behind three others. The examination of Park Hill Avenue began with a suggestion from Professor Van Tran, of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. He, after expounding upon a wide variety of refugee communities in New York City and discussing the experiences of each, recommended consideration of

³³ Bogen. *Immigration*. pp. 131-2.

Bernadette Ludwig's chapter on Liberian refugees in Nancy Foner's book, *One out of Three: Immigrant New York in the 21st Century*.³⁴

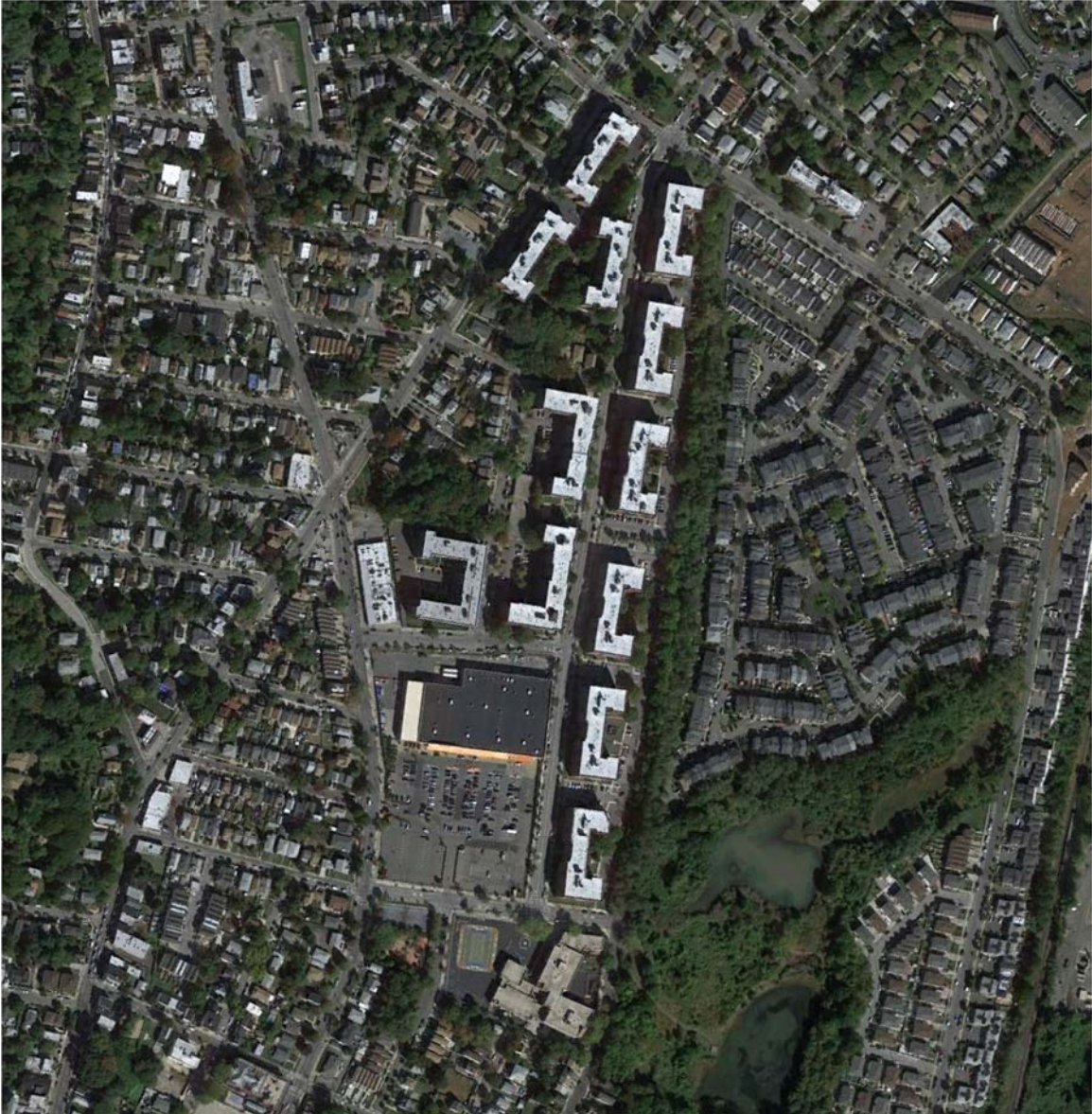


Figure 3. The buildings of Park Hill Avenue are uniquely monolithic in the neighborhood. (Google Earth.)

Echoing (or prophesying) the response most people give upon learning of the focus of this thesis, Ludwig begins the chapter with “Liberians in Staten Island?”³⁵ She goes on,

³⁴ Ludwig, Bernadette. “Liberians: Struggles for Refugee Families.” in Foner, Nancy, ed. *One out of Three: Immigrant New York in the 21st Century*. (New York: 2013).

however, to note that more Liberians were settled in New York than in any other state and that Park Hill has been the second most common resettlement area in the country, taking in 1,889 Liberian refugees between 1990 and 2010.³⁶ A multitude of news articles cite a wide range of numbers – *The New York Times* mentions 3,000 to 4,000; *Al Jazeera* puts the number as high as 11,000; *Politico*, acknowledging the uncertainty inherent in counting an ever-moving and insecure population, estimates between 8,000 and 10,000 – yet mostly agree on the neighborhood’s designation as “Little Liberia.”³⁷ Some even speak of Park Hill as “the most densely populated Liberian community outside Liberia” or “home to the largest Liberian population in America.”³⁸

Exploring the Numbers: Park Hill as Presented by the Census

Census data confirms such notions. Park Hill Avenue sits directly in the center of Census Tract 40, which also encompasses some of the single-family districts to its north and south. Information from the 2009-2014 American Community Survey shows that individuals born in Liberia make up 25.3% of the tract’s total population, far exceeding any other national origin group; 73.5% of these have arrived since 1990, reflecting the influx that came with the outbreak and perpetuation of that country’s violence.³⁹ Given that 30.6% of the area’s inhabitants are foreign-born, the Liberian-born population makes

³⁵ Ibid. p. 200.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 205. The most common resettlement area is Philadelphia, with 2,550 official resettlements during the same period.

³⁷ Barry, Ellen. “From Staten Island Haven, Liberians Reveal War’s Scars.” *The New York Times*. Sep. 18, 2007. and Ahmed, Amel. “In Little Liberia, expats nervously eye those returning from Africa to NYC.” *Al Jazeera America*. Oct. 3, 2014. and Clerici, Caterina. “Life in Little Liberia, Staten Island.” *Politico beta*. Jun. 25, 2012.

³⁸ Ahmed. “In Little Liberia.” and “The Staten Island Parkhill Community Market.” *Island Voice*. <http://www.islandvoice.org/phcm/>

³⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T139. Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population.” and U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T134. Year of Entry for the Foreign-Born Population.”

up quite a sizable portion of the area's people.⁴⁰ If Park Hill Avenue and its housing projects could be isolated from the rest of the Census Tract, the high number of Liberians living in the area would likely show through even more clearly. Even given the geographical limitations of data collection, Park Hill and its environs host the highest number and percentage of Liberians in all of New York City: several other disparate areas of Staten Island – namely a section of Oakwood by Great Kills Park two neighborhoods of Port Richmond on the island's northwestern shore – as well as isolated tracts in Queens and the Bronx report percentages reaching toward 10%, yet nothing approaches the numbers seen in Park Hill.⁴¹

Census data goes on to paint a fairly grim portrait of Park Hill and its people. Nearly 80% of people lack a college degree, and the high school drop-out rate is 11.6%, greater than both the New York City and the Staten Island averages.⁴² Unemployment remains higher in Park Hill than Staten Island, New York City, and national averages at 7.9%.⁴³ Of those with full-time employment, more than one third work in “educational services and health care and social assistance” with other large proportions in fields containing “management and administrative” services and “accommodation and food services,” reflecting, perhaps, the propensity of West Africans to work in the management and service sectors, with

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T133. Nativity by Citizenship Status.”

⁴¹ U.S. Census Bureau. “T139. Place of Birth.”

⁴² U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T150. Highest Educational Attainment for Population 25 Years and Over.” and U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T30. School Dropout Rate for Population 16 to 19 Years.”

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau. “2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T33. Employment Status for Total Population 16 Years and Over.”

particular emphasis on employment as home health aides.⁴⁴ Even so, more than 60% of the inhabitants of Park Hill and its surrounding areas subsist on less than New York City's median income of around \$50,000 per year, with 17.5% living on less than \$10,000.⁴⁵ As such, it is unsurprising that nearly one quarter of the area's population lives in poverty, with that percentage growing to 37.4% when looking at youth under eighteen and to 45.3% when looking at the elderly over 65 years.⁴⁶

While numbers cannot explain the experience of a neighborhood or the lived realities of its inhabitants, they can describe trends necessitating consideration. Staten Island's Census Tract 40, with Park Hill at its center, demonstrates a clear need for further such consideration. Though trends specific to Park Hill Avenue cannot be legitimately isolated from the above data, it is clear that the area suffers from significant social and economic ills. The combination of low incomes, low educational attainment, and poverty afflicts many communities across New York City and the country at large and stands at the center of many urban planning efforts: that this combination afflicts a neighborhood with a distinct concentration of refugees from a single country requires a more targeted approach, demanding an examination of the lived experiences of the Park Hill Liberians. This same concentration, unusual in New York, also makes the present study feasible.

⁴⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. "2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T49. Industry by Occupation for Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over." For an example of literature on West African employment trends, see: Ofori, Esther. *Site Selection of Small Ethnic Minority Business: A Case Study of the Bronx Terminal Market, Bronx, New York*. (Master's Thesis: Binghamton University: 2004).

⁴⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. "2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T56. Household Income (in 2014 Inflation Adjusted Dollars)."

⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. "2009-2014 American Community Survey (5-Year Estimate): T114. Poverty Status for Children under 18." and Ibid. "T1145. Poverty Status for Population Age 18 to 64." and Ibid. T116. Poverty Status for Population Age 65 and Over."

Literature Review

What is “Refugee”?

The story of the refugee resettled in New York is a story wrapped up in that of forced migration, of transience, and of those constantly on the margins. The existing literature provides devastatingly little insight into the lived experiences of the New York refugee nor the broader process of urban resettlement and integration, as Bascom notes.⁴⁷ In contrast, the literature holds innumerable fruitful discussions of the spaces occupied by the disregarded classes, in general, and of the way they interact with the urban world.

Saskia Sassen writes helpfully that the idea of the refugee stems from the vision of the “foreigner” as an “outsider” and as not being entitled to the normal rights of the citizen.⁴⁸ She goes on to speak, however, of the creation and dangers of a refugee identity and existence separate from that which prevails in the city: “What has generally come to be seen as destructive in the immigrant question is their creation of a separate class, one represented as not belonging to the country of residence.”⁴⁹ While the emphasis on “not belonging” carries through much of refugee discourse, the agency that Sassen ascribes to migrants seems problematic, seeming to suggest that refugees, through their act of seapartation, create their status.

Eric Tang, in contrast, places refugees within the violence wrought by neoliberal warfare: in seeking to globalize its own liberal values, the United States and other “freedom”-

⁴⁷ Bascom, Johnathan. “The New Nomads: An Overview of Involuntary Migration in Africa” in Baker, Jonathan and Tada Akin Aina, eds. *The Migration Experience in Africa*. (Uppsala: 1995). p. 207.

⁴⁸ Sassen, Saskia. *Guests and Aliens*. (New York: 1999). p. 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 149.

loving nations need to create someone they can then save, and the downtrodden of chaotic foreign lands suits this purpose beautifully.⁵⁰ This creation story, while having relevance to his Southeast Asian context, also places too much onus on a single phenomenon. Voutira and Harrell-Bond quietly endorse this idea, however, when they write of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, albeit with apparent disdain, as the “guardian” or “protector” for those displaced by anti-colonial warfare, in the process generating in relation the existence of the refugee.⁵¹ In both cases, the refugee is a being to be sheltered, a powerless actor entirely contradictory to Sassen’s reading.

Political theorists Seyla Benhabib and Giorgio Agamben present an idea somewhere in the middle: of the refugee as a “limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link.”⁵² Here, the refugee is a political concept deriving from the creation of state borders and geographically-situated sovereign powers. Nationality and citizenship, and particularly their theft from some, emerge as the crucial defining factors of the refugee. Arendt concurs, equating human rights with national rights and writing that the loss of one’s functional nationality conferred “the abstract nakedness of being nothing.”⁵³ In this reading, a refugee is created when official belonging is lost, something Aristide Zolberg suggests in saying that refugees are largely the “by-product of two major historical

⁵⁰ Tang, Eric. *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. (Philadelphia: 2015).

⁵¹ Voutira, Eftihia and Barbara Harrell-Bond. “Successful Refugee Settlement: Are Past Experiences Relevant?” in Cernea, Michael M. and Chris McDowell. *Risks and Reconstruction: Experiences of Resettlers and Refugees*. (Washington, DC: 2000). p. 68.

⁵² Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. trans. Daniel Heller-Roazan. (Stanford, CA: 1998). p. 134. and Benhabib, Seyla. *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. (New York: 2004). p. 2.

⁵³ Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (Orlando: 1979, orig. 1948). p. 300.

processes – the formation of new states and confrontations over the social order in both old and new states.”⁵⁴

Policy, and the Definition Thereof

It is within this conceptualization of nationality and citizenship – or the lack thereof – that the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the policies put forth by the United States Congress and State Department should be seen. In the realm of international law, the High Commission for Refugees established by the League of Nations at first allowed the conception of the nation-state to completely dictate its definition of the refugee.

Reacting to the specific difficulties of the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, the High Commission applied the term “refugee,” and the protections such term conferred, to Russian prisoners of war stranded in Europe without a country; Sassen dismisses the definition as “basically describ[ing] those fleeing from communism.”⁵⁵ The term’s efficacy was soon expanded to Armenians and others from the demised Ottoman Empire. This first formal idea informed the United Nations’ iteration, the landmark 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which set out definitions, protections, and obligations from a universalist perspective.⁵⁶ The convention, in specifying a refugee’s inability to avail of the protection of the “country of his nationality,” gives credence to the nation-state concept of refugees.⁵⁷ Furthermore, if the nation-state, as Peter Nyers writes, “simultaneously secures the possibility of being human,” then perhaps such

⁵⁴ Zolberg, Aristide R. “The Next Waves: Migration Theory for a Changing World.” *The International Migration Review* Vol. 23 (No. 3). (1989). pp. 403-430. p. 416.

⁵⁵ *Convention of 28 October 1933 relating to the International Status of Refugees*. League of Nations. Treaty Series Vol. CLIX (No. 3663). Preamble. and Sassen. (1999). p. 95.

⁵⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees. *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Article 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

language could ameliorate the “hierarchy of humans between those who are inside and those who are outside.”⁵⁸

United States policy on refugees draws centrally on the United Nations’ convention language, but also reaches further back to early immigration laws. David Haines locates the first state regulation of migration in 1875, with the Page Act barring convicts and prostitutes.⁵⁹ Haines suggests that, after a period of decidedly un-European openness, the United States finally began edging its door shut, little by little and to different groups at a time, only to start reopening it slightly after the Second World War.

Welcoming and Hospitality, or Not

Derrida, of course, would disagree, rejecting such qualifications on a national welcome as counter to the law of hospitality: “Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.”⁶⁰ Indeed, Derrida comments that the true ideal of hospitality would welcome especially the convict and the prostitute because they carry a certain risk: they may not fit perfectly into the present construction of society.⁶¹ From a standpoint of social justice, this view of hospitality and acceptance proves attractive, particularly in the

⁵⁸ Nyers, Peter. *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*. (New York: 2006). p. 72.

⁵⁹ Haines, David W. *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook*. (Westport, CT: 1996).

⁶⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality: Anne Defourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. (Stanford, CA: 2000). p. 77.

⁶¹ Rosello, Mireille. *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. (Stanford, CA: 2001). pp, 11-12.

context of refugees who, while they may carry the greatest risk of anyone who could appear on the urban doorstep, have been summarily excluded from their own home.

Historian Fernand Braudel equates this coming to cities and states as reaching “civilized spaces” where they naturally should encounter humanity, in opposition to the “wild” and non-human space of wandering.⁶² In this context, consider the refugee, forcibly sent on her journey. Edward Saïd puts this in perspective, reminding us that the lived experiences of exile, of *refugeeness*, are much darker than literature and studies depict, that the poet in exile suffers more than we can learn from the poetry of exile.⁶³ He also reminds us that it is human beings who visit this experience upon other human beings: it is only right, then, that yet other human beings should be the ones to welcome the refugee back from the wilds of expulsion.

Resettlement and Integration

The literature conceptualizes the process of refugee resettlement in a number of different ways. In their overview of resettlements of Greeks after World War II, of Greek Cypriots in 1974, of Saharawi in 1975, and of Tibetans in 1975, Voutira and Harrell-Bond identify resettlement “success” as variously economically beneficial to governments (in Greece and Cyprus), social development (in Algeria), and the self-sufficient maintenance of identity or expanding employment opportunities (in India and Nepal, respectively). They present the invisible absorption of Guinean Fula into Sierra Leonean society as a separate

⁶² Braudel, Fernand. *The Structures of Everyday Life*. (London: 1981).

⁶³ Saïd, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. (Cambridge, MA: 2000), p. 174.

form of non-aided success.⁶⁴ None of these cases are definitive, but they do offer the possibility of differing forms of refugee resettlement and glimpses of the benefits that hospitality can bring. The authors emphasize the importance of “integration,” though, by not defining the parameters of such an integration, their suggestion loses relevance; by further discussing the desirability of refugee livelihoods premised on their “self-sufficiency,” economic factors creep in as determinants of success.⁶⁵

Karen Jacobsen, in contrast, identifies the resettlement of refugees in almost purely economic terms: the pursuit of livelihoods is here the most important indicator of integration and of permanence.⁶⁶ In her reading, Jacobsen suggests that, by pursuing livelihoods, refugees assist their host communities by offsetting costs of their own resettlement borne by their new neighbors. In this sense, Jacobsen echoes Voutira and Harrell-Bond but introduces an element of risk aversion, suggesting that host communities should not be burdened by refugees resettling in their midst. This runs counter to Derrida’s argument of unconditional hospitality: while practical, the suggestion perhaps expects too much of a vulnerable population and not enough of a relatively privileged one.

Voutira, Harrell-Bond, and Jacobsen are not alone, however, in seeing economics as a prime determinant of refugee resettlement, though others locate the economic driver

⁶⁴ Voutira and Harrell-Bond. pp. 67-69.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 72.

⁶⁶ Jacobsen, Karen. “Livelihoods in Conflict: The Pursuit of Livelihoods by Refugees and the Impact on the Human Security of Host Communities.” *International Migration* Vol. 40 (No. 5). (2002). pp. 95-123.

within the host communities rather than among refugees. Indeed, Sassen presents the liberal welcoming cities of yesteryear as motivated primarily by an increased labor force:

Religious wars had devastating economic consequences, engendering further economically induced flight. A tolerant city such as Amsterdam receiving these religious refugees reaped a corresponding economic gain... Mercantilist policy, for one thing, considered in-migration of people a positive matter, an addition of resources. In-migration compensated, again, for the high mortality rates, short life expectancy, famines, and multiple wars which decimated the European population.⁶⁷

In this way, Sassen argues that, where people see an influx of refugees as a source of economic gain, they may be more welcoming. She also cites progressive-era France: liberal work policies such as eight-hour workdays and ban on child labor led to a shortage which the French were very happy to let refugees fill.⁶⁸

Conceptualizing Space, Opportunity, and Decision-Making

Of course, refugees rarely resettle on their own: a voluntary resettlement agency often assists them logistically and existentially, at least for a period. As such, the modern day refugee journey to New York differs remarkably from that of pre-“refugee” migrants at the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. As the housing typology of New York’s Lower East Side shows, latter-day refugees concentrated where networks already existed and where they could easily find shelter: in the tenements carved out of brick apartment

⁶⁷ Sassen. p. 11.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 92-3.

buildings for the purpose of renting out to the recently arrived.⁶⁹ Richard Harris, in explaining this new pattern of dispersion, argues that the “changing distribution of different types of paid employment” has resulted in new arrivals destined, by choice, for the outer boroughs, thereby filling a vacuum created by white flight and an influx of poverty in the 1970s and 1980s. As he writes: “The social contrasts between Manhattan, the outer core, and the suburban rings are the result of millions of decisions to move, settle, or stay put. These decisions have been shaped by many considerations.”⁷⁰

Harris’ assessment certainly seems to have relevance to better-off refugee groups such as early arrivals from Eastern Europe and Iran as well as. For most others, however, it seems inadequate as an explanation of today’s pattern of refugee resettlement. Those who secure low-wage menial jobs – including Cambodians, Laotians, Afghans, Ethiopians, and Cubans dating from the 1980 Mariel Boatlift – largely lack the opportunity to make such movement decisions, as do those who do not work and rely on welfare – often East and Southeast Asian refugees with little education and few work skills. Even those who have started businesses have often done so from a lack of choice: reality has extinguished the promise of an eventual return to their home country, leaving them to harness their entrepreneurial capacity as a survival tactic.⁷¹ Furthermore, Portes and Rumbaut present the information that “official” refugee populations are, in fact, more spatially dispersed than other groups, largely through their lack of agency in the decision-making process; choice only enters into the equation in the case of the “secondary migration,” wherein

⁶⁹ Plunz, Richard. *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis*. (New York: 1990).

⁷⁰ Harris, Richard. “The Geography of Employment and Resident in New York since 1950” in Mollenkopf, John H. and Manuel Castells, eds. *Dual City: Restructuring New York*. (New York: 1991). p. 143.

⁷¹ Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. (Berkeley: 1996). pp. 24.

resettled refugees take it upon themselves to move to areas more in line with their own culture, and particularly those areas with existing ethnic communities of their own nationality.⁷²

Tamer Mott Forrest and Lawrence A. Brown look at the role of volunteer resettlement agencies in the spatial organization of new refugee arrivals. In noting that refugees often resettlement in locations differing from what one would expect according to standard migration thinking, the authors argue that the characteristics and capabilities of volunteer resettlement agencies largely determine the location of the resettlement, while also allowing that a small minority of cases can be traced to employment opportunities.⁷³

Relationships, be they personal or institutional, play a large role: often, where individual caseworkers or the agency knows a landlord, an ethnic association, or a job placement coach, there settle the refugees under their charge.⁷⁴

The preceding notions, however, assume responsibility and, indeed, hospitality on the part of volunteer agencies. Eric Tang, in his story of the Cambodian refugee population in the northwest Bronx, paints a picture wherein refugees resettle in locations representing absolutely no choice, on the part of neither the agency nor the refugee: he calls this process the “unsettling” of the Cambodian refugees.⁷⁵ While Tang’s study refers to a relatively small population revolving around one woman and her family, it nevertheless

⁷² Ibid. pp. 34, 43.

⁷³ Mott Forrest, Tamer and Lawrence A. Brown. “Organization-Led Migration, Individual Choice, and Refugee Resettlement in the US: Seeking Regularities.” *Geographical Review* Vol. 104 (No. 1). (Jan. 2014). pp. 10-32. p. 16.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 19.

⁷⁵ Tang.

demonstrates that, for some, discussions of hospitality and economics, of citizenship and integration and resettlement, have no direct application: they are “anchored” in what Edward Soja describes as the deindustrialized and socially isolated “hyperghetto.”⁷⁶ Soja juxtaposes the idea of an enduring mid-century “spatial mismatch” between urban opportunities and those in need with a an increasingly globalized city: the refugee, in this conception, begins to occupy, or at least be vulnerable to occupying, a socially trapped and economically isolated “urban underclass.”⁷⁷

In comparison, if not contrast, and of relevance to the specificity of this thesis, Elizabeth Bogen identifies particular elements that have served as critical drivers in New York’s extensive welcoming of refugees, going so far as to title a section of her book “New York is ‘Refugee-Friendly’ (Mostly).” She singles out the large size and incredible diversity of ethnicities as a welcoming characteristic which enables refugees to feel as if they are “just another thread in the complex social fabric.”⁷⁸ This stems from its long and storied history of receiving immigrants of all strips, a trend which has formed something of a positive feedback loop not only with single-nation ethnic associations but also with the more formal networks and resources of voluntary resettlement agencies, public schools with extra English instruction, a wide availability of (often-free) interpreting services, and the variety of easily visited health and social clinics.⁷⁹ Even the reach and convenience of New York’s public transportation, Bogen writes, serve as a draw.

⁷⁶ Soja, Edward W. *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. (Malden, MA: 2000). p. 271.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Bogen, Elizabeth. *Immigration in New York*. (New York: 1987). p. 125.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Research Design

The premise of this thesis is: What is “planning for refugees?” That is, what physical and social elements contribute to a welcoming environment in which forcibly displaced people can remake their experiences and become true stakeholders in a given neighborhood? This questions eschews economic arguments and reasoning: financial well-being has been studied before and by people much more well-versed in economics than I and, in any case, does not automatically equate to a sense of ownership or permanence or true resettlement.

In the context of refugee narratives so fraught and contested and a literature at once richly various and surprisingly short on New York accounts, this thesis seeks an understanding of refugee integration into the city’s neighborhoods and the factors, both physical and social, that have played a significant role in that process. My approach is based on the idea of the right to the city, particularly David Harvey’s reimagining that states that the idea refers to “the right to change ourselves by changing the city.”⁸⁰ Refugees are, by many means, forced to change themselves, and it is my belief that they should thus be able to change the city.

The methodology I employed towards this end attempted to harmonize three main inputs: Toni Griffin’s conception of designing practically for the just city; Kevin Lynch’s idea of the “Image of the City” and people’s perceptions of their environments; accounts of the use of semi- and un-structured interviews to understand the experience of street retailers

⁸⁰ Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.” *New Left Review* Vol. 53. (Sep.-Oct. 2008). p. 23.

(in Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk*) and a Cambodian refugee family in the Bronx (Eric Tang's *Unsettled*).⁸¹ I used a combination of the three in an effort to identify neighborhood characteristics that contribute to, or detract from, a refugee's sense of belonging.

Designing for the Just City⁸²

Through inventory, observation, and intercept interviews, the methodology attempts to measure ten factors of justice in public spaces:

- equity: distribution
- choice: ability for all to make selections among a variety of options
- access: proximity to or presence of amenities, choices, opportunities
- connectivity: social or spatial network
- ownership: ability to have a stake
- diversity: acceptance of different programs, people, cultural norms
- participation: active engagement and acceptance of different voices
- inclusion and belonging: integration, fellowship, safety
- beauty: well-made, well-designed environments
- creative innovation: ingenuity and inclusivity in problem-solving

⁸¹ Griffin, Toni L. "Is Equality Enough? Design for the Just City." *Lectures in Planning Series* (Sep. 22, 2015). Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University. and Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. (Cambridge, MA: 1960). Duneier, Mitchell. *Sidewalk*. (New York: 2000). and Tang, Eric. *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. (Philadelphia: 2015).

⁸² Griffin, Toni L. "Defining the Just City beyond Black and White." in Griffin, Toni L., Ariella Cohen, and David Maddox. *The Just City Essays: 26 Visions for Urban Equity, Inclusion and Opportunity. Volume 1*. (New York: 2015). p. 9.

My research replaces the above framework's focus on public plazas with my own focus on streets and sidewalks as a way to understand a particular neighborhood. From the list of ten factors, I isolated choice (particularly choice to take advantage, or not, of origin-specific amenities, such as shops or services offered in a particular language), access, and participation. Based on the literature, and conversations with experts and representatives of resettlement agencies, and walks through and around Park Hill, I developed a focus on housing type, sites for employment opportunities, public amenities and open space, existing services and retailers, and opportunities or evidences of informality. This focus informed both my own observations of the site as well as questions I asked of my interviewees.

Image of the City

This methodology was originally pioneered by Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes in an attempt to understand and present how people visually perceive the city in which they live. Informal maps, descriptions of important places or landmarks, and emotions towards particular routes through the city conspire to construct a very subjective city as experienced by one individual and to inform the reader about a place's "legibility." Here, I adopted Lynch's question, "How does a stranger build an image a new city?" and his idea of a city's "potential structure," its permission for us to continually construct a more complex version of itself.⁸³ Through semi-structured interviews with refugees, I asked questions adapted from an interpretation of Lynch's methodology applied to refugees in Stockholm by Jennifer Mack, focusing on the importance of different neighborhood

⁸³ Lynch. *Image*. pp. 157-8.

elements and the lived experiences, by way of emotion and feeling, in a particular neighborhood.⁸⁴

Following Lynch in a rather circuitous fashion, I also employed the methodology of behavior mapping. On various visits at different times of day, I noted and mapped people's movements and, particularly, patterns of congregation and use of space. The goal here was to identify both physical sites of importance or, at least, of convenience as well as to equate the principles suggested by common behaviors with the needs and preferences expressed by inhabitants in interviews as well as in my own perception of the needs of the space. In addition, the use of behavior mapping served as a small education into the milieu of the site, a brief contextualization of the interaction between the physical and the social.

Interviews

Speaking with Resettlers

The current study relies heavily on interviews. The first, largely unstructured, took place with actors involved with the formal resettlement system and with refugees themselves. My aim for interviews with representatives of resettlement agencies was to understand the process of resettlement and the logic behind the programs and activities offered. In particular, I hoped to locate aspects of formal planning as a way of later identifying the relationship between formal and informal means of resettlement and isolating critical

⁸⁴ Mack, Jennifer. "Ice Skating and Island Hopping: Refugees, Integration, and Access in a Segregated City." (Cambridge, MA: 2003).

factors. I sought a more personal and nuanced account than what is often printed for publicity purposes, and accordingly asked questions largely about personal experiences working with refugees rather than about institutional missions or organizational norms. In total, I conducted interviews with ten refugees.

Speaking with the Resettled

I spoke with residents of Park Hill Avenue and surrounding streets in the Park Hill section of Staten Island on a succession of days at a variety of different times. I began with representatives of the local service organization, African Refuge. I then solicited interviews from refugees living in the area. The selection of interviewees was wholeheartedly organic: if I met someone on the street, I asked if they had come from Liberia and, given an affirmative response, if they would be willing to answer some questions. Most interviews then took place immediately, on the sidewalk or in the little yard between two apartment blocks. If I asked if was preferable to arrange a different time, everyone said that right then was best. Several people were intrigued when they saw me interviewing one of their neighbors and inquired as to what I was doing, which then led me into another interview. Sometimes, particularly in the queue for the Food Pantry, individuals I asked to speak with would point me towards another person in line, their “auntie” or “sister” or some other familial relation. When interviewing the owner of the local sporting goods store, several people stopped in to arrange money transfers: their transactions allowed for informal questioning.

The conversations I had with interviewees did not follow a strict formula. I used questionnaires as a basis for the conversations, yet strayed often in order to follow up on responses and gain insights not foreseen on my few pages of questions. Many interviewees spoke at length without questioning, describing their life in the neighborhood and the ways it had either failed or supported them. Some interviews were upsetting; some were uplifting; some were clipped short, as interviewees carried on their daily life; at least was rather frightening.

Limitations

On a Friday afternoon.

“Can I ask you some questions about the neighborhood?”

“It’s okay. Next time.”

“Next time? Okay, that’s fine.”

“Okay, next time we meet.”

“Great. When is next time?”

“Next time we meet.”

“Okay, Should we set up a time?”

“No, no. Next time. We will meet.”

“We’ll meet?”

“I am sorry. We are talking about some family concerns.”

“Oh. Okay, I’m sorry.”

“Yes. An old man. Just passed away two days ago. He was in the hospital.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Yes. So next time.”

“Okay. Next time. I’m sorry.”

“That is okay. We will meet. Don’t feel bad.

We never met.

This study was curtailed largely by issues of access. My intention was to utilize conversations with representatives of refugee resettlement organizations to gain the contact information of several refugees who might have been willing to have a conversation or, at least, of a local partner organization that could facilitate meetings. This did not happen. Representatives were unwilling to share such information or, even, suggest how best to meet and talk to refugees in New York. This is likely due to concerns about privacy and security, particularly important to those with as tumultuous histories as refugees, particularly those who had escaped the Liberian conflict. There may also be some element of gatekeeping at play: because federal funding is connected to the quantity of service provided, it may be that independent access to a particular refugee population, even when presented as academic scholarship, seemed too much of a liability. While frustrating, this is understandable.

My approach then became direct contact by chance. This approach, as is probably expected, presents its own challenges. First is the very real possibility that someone approached for an interview about the experience of Liberian refugees is not, in fact, a Liberian refugee. While I asked all of my interviewees which country they had come

from and when, I also attempted to minimize misidentifications by subtly listening to the accents of people as they spoke before I approached or focusing on individuals with apparent signifiers, often clothing or accessories, of Liberian heritage. Thus the second challenge: the population reached through such means is surely not “representative,” in a research sense, of the population of Park Hill Avenue. They may be skewed towards mothers, as I often sought interviews on weekday mornings or afternoons; they could be more at ease than others with displays of their culture, demonstrated by their willingness to wear easily identifiable garments; they could be largely older or particularly disadvantaged, as most of my research times, with the exception of a few weekend days, coincided with work times.

Findings and Analysis

Resettlement Organizations

Once in the United States, refugees rely almost exclusively upon refugee resettlement agencies, sometimes known as volunteer agencies or VOLAGS. These agencies, through an agreement with the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, carry out the crucial first steps of resettlement, primarily helping to connect newly arrived refugees with housing and employment; in addition, many provide other services, including education, healthcare, English classes, and registration for social benefits. The federal government regularly makes funding available for these programs, which is then, under state-administered programs, directed to a number of voluntary agencies under contract with the State Department and the Department of Health and Human Services. Some states have turned to Wilson-Fish programs, an alternative scheme developed in 1984 named for its two Congressional supporters. The stated purpose of the Wilson-Fish program is to

establish an alternative to the traditional state administered refugee assistance program through the provision of integrated assistance (cash and medical) and services (employment, case-management, English as a Second Language (ESL) and other social services) to refugees in order to increase early employment and self-sufficiency prospects.⁸⁵

In a certain way, Wilson-Fish stands as a reaction to the high levels of welfare dependency observed in refugee populations; in another, it privileges the idea of

⁸⁵ Office of Refugee Resettlement Wilson/Fish Alternative Program. *FY 2015-2016 Program Guidelines*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/wilson_fish_guidelines_fy2015_16.pdf

employment and economic self-sufficiency over that of quality of life, or at least views employment and economic self-sufficiency as inalienable precursors to considerations of quality of life. A third program, public-private partnerships, seeks “more effective and better quality resettlement” undertaken by a local voluntary resettlement agency while privileging the state’s role in policy and administration. In practice, and from a refugee perspective, the distinction between these three types of administration remains obscure. Beyond these initial programs, lasting three months to one year, the federal government provides additional funding to local voluntary organizations through occasional grant competitions. One such competition is an ongoing funding opportunity for organizations providing “citizenship preparation services,” calling for applications for a share of \$10 million made available through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security: these opportunities allow community-based organizations to support English language programs, “citizenship instruction,” and legal services.⁸⁶

On the day-to-day neighborhood level, such high-level administrative differences make little difference: in all cases, volunteer agencies use state funding to enact programs. New York, as a consistent receiver of a large refugee population, hosts a number of voluntary agencies, chief among them the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and the Church World Service. Each targets a slightly different population, but their approaches to resettlement are largely comparable: the fundamentals of “resettlement” in the United States are seemingly set in stone.

⁸⁶ White House Task Force on New Americans. “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: Grant Program Stakeholders Teleconference.” (Mar. 16, 2016).

Peter Sullivan, of Catholic Charities, equates “resettlement” with access to food, clothing, housing, and jobs, as well as to the connections one can make to ethnic communities and associations.⁸⁷ In its overview of its Reception and Placement Program, the State Department expands upon Sullivan’s summary, writing that

all refugees are met at the airport upon arrival in the United States by someone from the sponsoring resettlement affiliate and/or a family member or friend. They are taken to their apartment, which has basic furnishings, appliances, climate-appropriate clothing, and some of the food typical of the refugee’s culture.⁸⁸

With the exception of arriving at the airport, both Sullivan and the State Department speak of the fundamental needs of all urban dwellers, not simply of refugees. As such, they point to the similarities between refugee newcomers, marking the humanity of refugees as the same as that of everyone else. At the same time, that a refugee resettlement agency holds the provision of four fundamental needs as paramount demonstrates the challenges of resettling after conflict and pain and flight: what constitutes the banal for most rises to primacy of concern for refugees.

Finding Fundamental Needs

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society’s Harvey Paretzky explained further the actions contained in the resettlement program. Echoing Sullivan’s focus on the fundamentals of living, Paretzky points out several of the programs required under contract with the State Department, including health screenings and medical follow-ups as well as signing new arrivals up for social security and other public benefits and ensuring that men are enlisted

⁸⁷ Sullivan, Peter. Personal Interview. Jan. 15, 2016.

⁸⁸ U.S. Department of State. *The Reception and Placement Program*. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/>

in the federal selective service system.⁸⁹ In the realm of housing, Paretzkey elaborates on the fundamentals brought up by Sullivan, saying that resettlement organizations bear responsibility for ensuring certain “standards” of housing.⁹⁰ Such standards include requirements that a home be “sanitary,” that it provide a “minimum habitable area” according to “locally accepted standards” in addition to “an appropriate number of bedrooms or sleeping areas,” that it has “working locks,” “adequate ventilation,” “electrical fixtures in good repair,” “no evidence of current rodent or insect infestation” nor “visible mold.”⁹¹ The guidelines also include standards for the provision of furnishings and household goods.⁹²

The publication of such standards – and their inclusion in a legal contract – speaks to the difficulty that refugees face in creating liveable spaces upon their arrival. At the same time, it creates confidence that our nation welcomes refugees, helps them to settle in ways that ensure comfort and security which, hopefully, can lead to integration. Eric Tang, however, in his study of Cambodian refugees in the northwest Bronx, paints a very different picture of refugee housing, writing of infestation, precarious construction, lack of heat and water, and electrical dangers resulting in fire, all befalling a single family in a single home.⁹³ Much of the difference in experience may be due to personal connections: Paretzky mentions that newcomers who join family members in the US often rely on their help to meet housing standards, sometimes even living with them temporarily as a way of

⁸⁹ Paretzky, Harvey. Personal Interview. Dec. 18, 2015.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions. *Operational Guidance to Resettlement Agencies*. (Apr. 12, 2001; revised Nov. 6, 2006; Oct. 18, 2007). pp. 1-2.

⁹² Ibid. pp. 2-3.

⁹³ Tang. *Unsettled*.

demonstrating that they meet the standards; others, particularly those placed on their own, lack such an opportunity.⁹⁴

Beyond providing for the fundamentals of urban life, Paretzky speaks of the necessity of providing a program of “cultural orientation.”⁹⁵ While the State Department speaks of brief cultural orientation programs offered prior to travelling to America, Paretzky refers to localized and context-specific programs offered once refugees have arrived. Once again, the focus remains on the very fundamentals of getting by, on activities and understandings not usually seen as requiring training. Such training involves teaching refugees what to do in emergency situations (and how to recognize emergency situations in the first place), how to navigate common systems (such as the post office or public transit), how and where to go shopping for food or clothes, and how to access and use money.⁹⁶ While it is likely that refugees joining family members in this country – a population that makes up much of Paretzky’s client base – can learn these norms easily and quickly, those arriving on their own or after severe trauma likely need greater assistance.

Welcoming Communities

Aside from attempting to meet the fundamental needs of new refugee arrivals, volunteer agencies also appear to take into account certain welcoming elements of communities in which they might resettle refugees. Susan Downs Karkos, of Welcoming America, lifts

⁹⁴ Paretzky. Interview.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

institutional and network-based components to the highest levels of importance. In describing an ideal model of a receiving community, she says that of paramount concern is strong local leadership, such as a city mayor or particularly vocal church group, willing to engage meaningfully with refugee issues.⁹⁷ Realistic opportunities for contact – that is, to find out who refugees are – and the effective communication of a “positive message of unity” complement strong leadership and help project an atmosphere of welcoming to refugees while also enabling existing non-refugee residents to meet and understand refugee resettlement quite apart from the political rhetoric most are used to hearing. Downs Karkos also points to the necessity of strong collaboration between organizations and groups, calling on groups to avoid “turf battles” which would undermine the ability of a community to effectively welcome and integrate its refugee newcomers.

Paretzky, in defining community elements most welcoming to refugees, cites more specific yet no less high-level conditions. Employment opportunities coupled with high levels of available public benefits or welfare assistance, in his view, contribute to a successful welcoming community: he references the example of Charlotte, NC, which provides welfare insufficient to completely get by but where there is little competition for jobs and which offers generally high-quality yet affordable healthcare and housing.⁹⁸ Completing Paretzky’s conception of a welcoming community is a citizenry that has no problems allowing those who are not like them to settle among them. This last component is crucial and greatly affects all other elements mentioned by both Downs Karkos and Paretzky: it is also the most difficult to measure or assess, and may seem true

⁹⁷ Downs Karkos, Susan. “Understanding and Addressing Today’s Organized Backlash Against Muslim Immigrants and Refugees.” National Immigrant Integration Conference. Brooklyn, NY. (Dec. 13, 2015).

⁹⁸ Paretzky. Interview.

of a larger geography – as in the entirety of New York City – while not holding up more specifically – as in some neighborhoods of Lowell, MA, for example.

Permanence: Approaches to Housing

Approaches to the provision of the fundamentals of urban living vary among the different voluntary agencies. Catholic Charities, for instance, often shies away from housing activities: “I don’t touch housing,” says Sullivan, qualifying that there is “no housing in New York.”⁹⁹ Rather, the organization encourages refugees to find housing on their home, asking them to rely on the existing network of countrymen to find rooms. This tactic is particularly fruitful where there already exists strong ethnic enclave with which Catholic Charities can put refugees in contact, as with the Tibetan community in Queens or the West African community in the Bronx. Another option is shelter housing. Catholic Charities does, indeed, directly offer shelter housing, albeit only for battered women or single women. As such, they sometimes refer refugees arrivals to specific shelters operated by other organizations in New York: Sheltering Arms, an offshoot of the Episcopal Social Services, is one example cited by Sullivan, though refugees may only live there for a specified period.¹⁰⁰

Paretzky, too, speaks of his organization’s preference to rely on countrymen or family members already established here to house refugee newcomers. On the one hand, Paretzky notes that his organization settles only around 100 refugees per year in New York, echoing Sullivan’s lamentations that New York has less available space and is

⁹⁹ Sullivan. Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Sullivan. Interview.

generally too expensive.¹⁰¹ On the other, refugees joining family members enjoy significant benefits. Established families, having passed through the refugee resettlement system themselves, may be better equipped than even the voluntary agencies to assist with the selection of housing and resettlement assistance programs.¹⁰² In this way, resettlement agencies encourage the further development of ethnic enclaves, viewing them as a significant contributor to successful first steps toward integration. The Liberian community on Park Hill Ave. in Staten Island studied throughout this project provides living evidence of this: many individuals with whom I spoke had moved to that particular street because of family members or knowledge of the community. Connections invariably make the initial stages of meeting fundamental needs easier; it may, however, be the case that such connections make subsequent integration or success more difficult. On the other hand, refugees arriving in the US with no family members or personal connections can effectively settle anywhere, though the absence of familial assistance renders the meeting of fundamental needs more challenging in the short term.¹⁰³

Permanence: Approaches to Employment

Employment, privileged by the resettlement system in general and by the Wilson-Fish alternative in particular, presents hardships and opportunities not dissimilar from those in the field of housing. Common problems, according to Sullivan, center on issues of language as well as the fact that it is easier and thus more preferable to many businesses

¹⁰¹ Paretzky. Interview.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

to hire American workers.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, many refugee newcomers, up to 80%, find themselves in entry-level positions, even if they are qualified in their home countries for more: such could make the prospect of long-term employment in such positions less desirable.¹⁰⁵ Within this particular category of jobs, many opportunities arise, as with housing, from personal connections, this time between individual agents of resettlement agencies and their contacts. As an example, Sullivan cites an acquaintance who constructs television and Broadway sets from a site in Queens: because he knows this man, and this man has had good experiences with Sullivan's refugee clients, he is able to successfully gain employment for a good number of refugee arrivals at a time; the work, of course, is largely manual, requiring little English language skills.¹⁰⁶

Sullivan speaks of other such examples, too: restaurants offer significant opportunities, because many restaurant owners and managers feel that refugees will be hardworking and reliable even if they require some amount of initial training; healthcare and home aid providers, too, appreciate working with refugees for their tendency to be caring and compassionate, perhaps bred of the hardships and pains they themselves have gone through.¹⁰⁷ Some employers, Sullivan explains, prefer to hire refugees out of sympathy. Macy's, for instance, may soon partner with Catholic Charities in a program to provide employment and further job training in the customer service sector. Another store,

¹⁰⁴ Sullivan. Interview. Language issues certainly plague a huge number of refugees – particularly large groups like Nepali Bhutanese or Cubans who may not experience English education in their home countries – vying for jobs in which fluent English is essential, such as those in the service industry. Liberians, however, should theoretically remain exempt from such hardships, as English is the official language of Liberia and is widely used, though the prevalence of Pidgin and Kreyol (creole) versions, as well as indigenous languages, may complicate this understanding.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Sullivan. Interview.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Wankel's Hardware on the Upper East Side, has historically offered opportunities to refugees from all countries and experiences, going so far as to display the flags of its workers' countries of origin.¹⁰⁸ It is crucial to note, though, that, even with such opportunities for reliable and transitional employment, prospects still often rely on relationships already existing between resettlement workers and business owners and managers: dedicated program connections appear to be few.

Prospects for employment follow the trend of the provision of housing and other fundamental needs: more important than finding the right or most suitable employment is the simple fact of employment, regardless of the job. Sullivan concedes that, in matching refugee arrivals to job opportunities, he seeks not jobs with realistic growth opportunities but rather those that will accept his clients, with the exception of cases in which refugees specifically express a desire for a certain type of work.¹⁰⁹ In addition, one's neighborhood of residence is not necessarily a factor when seeking a job: it is simply too difficult to match place of home to place of employment. Even given the difficulty, however, Sullivan states that he tries to find jobs that are not "too far," following the guidelines of New York's Workforce One program.¹¹⁰ As such, employment efforts exist in isolation of housing efforts: no coordinated efforts exist to stimulate job opportunities in neighborhoods likely to welcome a large number of refugees. Given this, while many refugee resettlement and integration programs highlight the important of employment,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. It is interesting to note that Professor Van Tran – of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University and who, as the son of refugees, provided invaluable references to this project – once worked at Wankel's Hardware while a student at Hunter College.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Despite Sullivan's caveat, it remains unlikely that many refugees will specifically request a certain type of employment, for reasons both of being grateful to return to the normality of an everyday job and not knowing, perhaps, the full extent of available jobs in their new home context.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Sullivan cites Workforce One commuting guidelines that limit one's reasonable travel time to work to less than 90 minutes.

such seems more an effort to condition the refugee to the United States' political-economic climate and system of labor-capital relations rather than an attempt to improve the refugee's neighborhood-level lived experience.



Figure 4. A basketball court and a sunny mural decorate the Park Hill housing blocks.

Refugees: The Liberians of Park Hill Avenue, Staten Island

Park Hill Avenue is a short road, hedged in on either side by six-story brick apartment buildings reminiscent, but not a part, of New York's ubiquitous NYCHA blocks. A few steps down from the street brings you to the door. Inside, some – such as 180, which has an entrance in the middle of the structure – present their long hallways directly upon ingress, with several multi-use rooms behind gray doors. Others – as in 185, directly across the street, with entrances on either end of the building – welcome you with massive empty lobbies, an elderly man set up in the corner with a log book, saying

“Hello” but not questioning your presence. Around the corner, suggested by the hand-painted but worn patterns of red, gold, green, and black, sits the office of African Refuge, a community organization working to meet some of the needs of Staten Island’s Liberian refugee community and the only such group to lend such support in the area.



Figure 5. African Refuge maintains a Drop-in-Center on Park Hill Avenue and carries out programming in a number of different locations on the street.

African Refuge locates its genesis in 2002, as rival gangs took to the streets of Park Hill in a proxy for the fratricidal carnage still underway in Liberia: though the refugees had escaped their country in an attempt to cast off the warfare that had engulfed their society, the complexities of the conflict meant that many individuals with oppositional sympathies received refugee status and resettled in close proximity to one another.¹¹¹ As

¹¹¹ Harris, Rev. Dr. Janice. Personal Interview. Feb. 4, 2016.

Jacob Massaquoi says, “Everyone was against each other.”¹¹² Such conflict within the Liberian refugee community only compounded the issues already extant on Park Hill Avenue, from high rates of gun violence and crack use – this, books and articles constantly remind us, is the milieu of the declarative rhymes of the early Wu-Tang Clan that “I’ll be damned if I let any man / Come to my center” – to the battle among the Latino and African-American communities already in the area to somehow protect what was “theirs.”¹¹³ The name of the organization is thus literal: they were attempting to provide safe haven from the very present dangers of the street. Practical immigration assistance was provided, too: African Refuge helped, as required by the State Department’s refugee resettlement provisions, refugees (from all sides of the conflict) obtain green cards and permanent visas and provided free legal services, the latter focusing mainly on the small group of new arrivals granted Temporary Protected Status.¹¹⁴

When the war ended in Liberia, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which sought to bring peace to that country passed through Staten Island, too, and the violence calmed. Absent the outright conflict, African Refuge turned its focus to servicing other needs, these focused on improving the community rather than merely keeping it alive. After-school programs sprung up, of which 95% of today’s participants are African children.¹¹⁵ They established regular nurse visits to offer referrals and to carry out disease screenings and blood tests, psychological counseling, and health and hygiene workshops. Most

¹¹² Saul, Jack. *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing*. (New York: 2014). p. 145.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 146. and Wu-Tang Clan. “Protect Ya Neck.” *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. 1993.

¹¹⁴ Harris. Interview.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

notably, in the basement of 185, behind the gray door, they founded a drop-in center with computers for the use of the refugees and space for small meetings. Daily logs from the drop-in center's first year show the variety and distribution of services: 26% of visits were for computer education or assistance, including communicating with family members not in the U.S.; 20% were for the umbrella of social services, comprising counseling, group discussions, family support, or advocacy; 15% were for employment or vocation assistance; 12% were for homework and project help or college applications; 8% were for youth arts or recreation; 5% were for immigration services, such as citizenship tutorials or help with green cards or travel documents; 5% again were for health services; and 2% were for financial, cadastral, or insurance assistance, with the remainder of visits for more informational or documenting purposes.¹¹⁶ The ability to seek assistance with such fundamental and legally crucial elements of resettlement helped to firmly ground African Refuge in the Park Hill Liberian community.

Fundamentals First

From its previous incarnation as a war-torn “hyperghetto,” Park Hill has certainly turned a significant corner. Yet, now that the refugee community no longer needs, for the most part, to fear for their daily safety, has the neighborhood developed the resources required to meet the fundamental needs of its inhabitants? First, that most basic of rudiments: food. Lacking any significant grocery store or market within an appropriate distance, the neighborhood is a veritable food desert. Indeed, Park Hill lies within one of New York City's FRESH Program zones, demonstrating the city's recognition of the lack of fresh,

¹¹⁶ Saul. *Collective Trauma*. p. 155.

affordable food in the area.¹¹⁷ Of the food generally available in the immediate vicinity, many of the refugees complain of the small selection and the high prices at the small shops on Targee Street. Sophie, who has lived in Park Hill for 21 years and did not wish to share her real name, relates that she sometimes uses these stores to pick up necessities, but generally tries to avoid the expense.¹¹⁸ (Sophie is a pseudonym.) Tobias, a self-proclaimed “elder” of the neighborhood who has lived in New York for several decades, shares her sentiment, lamenting that there are only one or two stores and “they say what the price is and that’s that,” leaving no room for negotiation.¹¹⁹

Alex, a man not wanting to offer his name who has been in Park Hill for fifteen years, admits that he uses the neighborhood food stores only occasionally, and then only because there is “not everything that I need here at the food pantry.”¹²⁰ His statement, not unique among the refugees I interviewed, reveals the extent to which many in the Park Hill Liberian community struggle with food and rely on assistance. In this case, it is once again African Refuge who organizes, in concert with Project Hospitality, the Food Pantry: each Wednesday, they arrange 40 bags of food to distribute to whomever arrives, serving first those who come first with no need to demonstrate one’s income or refugee status. The bags contain common staple foods, including eggs, bread, milk, juice, rice, and oil, and the Pantry could easily, in the words of Rev. Janice, give away 80 bags each

¹¹⁷ “NYC: Food Retail Expansion to Support Health.”

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/misc/html/2009/fresh.shtml>. While the Western Beef on Bay Street is large and carries a great variety of foods, including those familiar to Liberians, it takes approximately 30 minutes to walk there, as many in the Liberian community do, from Park Hill Avenue. The FRESH (Food Retail Expansion to Support Healthy) Program is a New York City endeavor to provide tax and other incentives to entice food markets to establish stores in nutritionally underserved areas.

¹¹⁸ Sophie. Personal Interview. Feb. 15, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Tobias. Personal Interview. Mar. 18, 2016.

¹²⁰ Alex. Personal Interview. Feb. 24, 2016.

week to fulfill the food needs of the community.¹²¹ Even this seemingly reliable food source, however, is not entirely secure, and not only because it is donation based. While the Food Pantry has largely welcomed Africans and some Latino and American residents over the past decade, the last several years have seen an influx of Asians, particularly Chinese, to the area: since they have begun frequenting the various pantries in the vicinity, often travelling by car, the number of food bags available to the Liberian refugees has gone down.¹²²

Clothing, too, stands as a fundamental element of life in an American city, and the provision of appropriate clothing is particularly crucial for those fleeing, often quickly and by foot, conflict zones. Park Hill Avenue offers, through African Refuge's partnership with New York Cares, various items of clothing to refugee newcomers at different times of the year. For Liberians, procuring a good winter coat was of utmost importance, leading to an annual coat drive that permits each family to select one adult coat and one children's coat as well as two other items of clothing. While the provision of essential attire must be commended, the persistence of the clothing program, as well as the food program, speaks to an inadequacy of planning in refugee communities. People taking refuge in New York should be able to, eventually, develop away from continual assistance: to rely on weekly food donations and yearly clothing drives reveals a flaw in the way New York resettles its refugees.

¹²¹ Harris. Interview. The Food Pantry has been known to distribute more than 100 turkeys to families for the Thanksgiving holiday.

¹²² Ibid.

Beyond the provision of clothing by African Refuge and New York Cares, however, here sits at least one successful clothing shop on Targee Street, right in the center of the unimpressive block of shops. “Supreme Sportswear,” its two signs (different in style and in finish) proclaim from above the windows. It is the only clothing store in the area. Yet advertisements for sportswear may be the least convincing prospect of the establishment: the displays of running shoes and winter gloves and rain jackets are obscured by a cacophony of signs set up on sandwich boards on the sidewalk and pasted onto the windows. “International Pinless Calling,” one board proclaims, allowing those in this country to purchase phone credit for family members’ numbers back home; “Liberia Next Day Food Delivery” says another, enabling refugees to pay for their loved ones’ food in Liberia; a third shouts “Utility Bills Paid Here” underneath an advertisement for Moneygram, the ubiquitous transfer service used widely for sending remittances.



Figure 6. Supreme Sportswear offers many services aside from clothing provision, such a food delivery in Liberia.

Rather than finding its success solely in sporting goods, Supreme Sportswear serves as a community connection back to Liberia, enabling the refugees on Park Hill Avenue to send some of what little they have back to those who have not crossed the ocean. “How many people use these services in a typical day?” I asked the owner, himself an immigrant. “Sometimes five, sometimes two, sometimes just one.”¹²³ As we chatted, the shop owner helped process four money transfers (\$100, two at \$150, \$250, all paid in cash) and one phone credit transfer (\$20) and fielded an inquiry. (“*Oma*, you need ID to send money,” he told one familiar face. “Why?” she asked in surprise. “I’ve been here 11 years. I’ve sent all my money back. I never needed an ID before.” She looked at me: “So if you don’t have ID, then you can’t send money.”) Supreme Sportswear may do fine business as a clothing store, or it may not, but it certainly fills a quite specific role in the community. That the establishment is used not to meet the fundamental need of clothing one’s back but rather to facilitate regular small-scale remittances demonstrates the priorities to which the Park Hill Liberians dedicate their minimal funds, suggesting both a need for dedicated financial services and further examination of the applicability of certain types of retail establishments in particular neighborhoods.

Needs Met and Unmet

Given the reliance of the Park Hill Liberians upon charitably-offered food and clothing and the repurposing of the clothing store into a multi-purpose financial center, can the Park Hill neighborhood be seen to fulfill the daily needs of its refugee inhabitants?

Roughly half of the interviewees spoke emphatically in the negative. Tobias, the elder,

¹²³ Shop Owner. Personal Interview. Mar. 17, 2016.

explained that he or someone in his family regularly has to travel to another neighborhood – or, often, another borough – to access goods or services inherent in daily life. In particular, he says that many in the community travel to the Chinatowns of Manhattan and Brooklyn to procure rice, the staple food of most Liberians, which has been selling for around \$3.50 per pound in Park Hill of late.¹²⁴ Even with the bus-ferry-train journey required, a trip out of Park Hill seems infinitely preferable than paying the premium added on in local shops. Alex laughed at me when I asked if he ever made use of the clothing store on Targee Street for simple items: he and his family have to head to one of the malls in another part of Staten Island if they require any new item.¹²⁵ Rev. Janice herself lamented that most of the refugees have to walk more than 30 minutes to the Western Beef supermarket – packed as it is with roots vegetables and cuts of meat unfamiliar to me but common to the Liberian dinner table – on Bay Road beyond Clifton and Stapleton if they want to fill their pantries and refrigerators.¹²⁶

While it is, of course, unrealistic to expect one's immediate neighborhood to meet all of one's daily fundamental needs, it is equally unrealistic to expect an urban dweller to venture beyond their neighborhood to fulfill any of one's daily needs. Initiatives such as the FRESH Program are a step in the right direction, though stronger incentives across a wider array of retailers should be explored. Establishments akin to state-supported or state-run retail dispensaries, targeting refugee needs but open and applicable to all in the area, could also serve to fill a void in retail services.

¹²⁴ Tobias. Interview.

¹²⁵ Alex. interview.

¹²⁶ Harris. Interview.

Reflection on a First Visit to Park Hill

I suppose that I was expecting some sort of Little Monrovia, some enclave screaming its connection to its inhabitants' past experiences, some small patch of Liberia carved out of Staten Island. Scores of articles and other works – from portraits on PBS and in the New York Times to coverage of the underground rap scene on Sean Jacobs' blog Africa is a Country to Jonny Steinberg's non-fiction novel, Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City – have characterized Park Hill that way. I guess I thought that Liberia would be apparent, that I would see more, be inundated with reminders of the influx that happened over the past several decades. The present study began as a search for physical evidences of refugee immigration, and I had imagined that a neighborhood so strongly connected to its refugee identity would readily show me something.

I walked around for a while. I walked down most of Targee Street, which the New York Times describes as a “commercial strip bustling with West African street vendors and music.” It was empty. I turned onto Van Duzen, sauntered down Vanderbilt, looked around Bay Street and Tappen Park, poking my head into these streets' dark tributaries and looking up at the brightly-lit projects. The roads were like any in the slightly-but-not-really suburban spaces that define the just-outside of our country's older cities. Single-family homes in weathered vinyl siding, some with a few mailboxes announcing their conversion into apartments. Once or twice: a storefront offering cold beer, deli meats, and cigarettes; every so often a set of semi-detached houses, notable in their rarity. Up the hill from the train station, the hospital sits grandly in its lawn next to Victorians with porches and colonials with bay windows. Wood and stone walls stood behind ten-foot

gardens, with one car in the little driveway and another on the curb in front of the gate. Further into Park Hill, I got lost in puzzlingly repetitive circles of single-story brick houses, their yards home to minivans and sport utility vehicles. Curtains drawn, light peeking through, the occasional blue flicker of a television screen, a single American flag leaning on the window. Around Park Hill Circle, up Park Hill Lane, onto Park Hill Avenue. Here, something different: the tell-tale brick blocks of public housing (though it is not exactly, I would later learn), six stories tall, extending down either side of the street, half-empty parking lots leaving some room for a basketball court.

“Why is it all housing?” I asked myself. “Where are all the food shops, the hair braiders, the aid office and signs touting quick approval loans?” Where were all the reminders I thought I needed to tell me that I was in a refugee neighborhood? And then: Was I wrong for having these expectations? Was it absurd to think that a place referred to as “Little Monrovia” or “Little Liberia” would hint at the aesthetic of the real thing across the water?



Figure 7. Park Hill's commercial center on Targee Street.

At Home in a House

African Refuge's current stated focus, according to Reverend Janice, is on issues of "housing and jobs," two of the fundamental elements of refugee resettlement addressed by the larger voluntary organizations.¹²⁷ Interviewees, however, seem less strongly concerned with such issues. Of the refugees I spoke with, all seem fairly secure in their housing within the subsidized block lining Park Hill Avenue after experiencing a wild diversity of housing types and statuses in the preceding decades. Many, after fleeing the unrest in their hometowns and spending lengthy stretches in refugee camps across West African and particularly in Ghana, resettled directly in Park Hill with the assistance of Lutheran Social Services. Others display a more varied housing history. Tobias, for

¹²⁷ Ibid.

example, fled Liberia before the large-scale exodus. He settled first in Brooklyn and then found a home in Harlem before moving to Park Hill Avenue. His reasoning for the last move: “the rent was cheap.”¹²⁸ The owner of Supreme Sportswear started out in Queens. After working various jobs for other people and driving a taxi, he eventually made an amount of money that enabled him to seek out his own housing elsewhere: after getting married, he moved to Park Hill, where his wife lived and where they could afford a comfortable house together. For him, the housing story is not static and he maintains an eye for the next opportunity: “I started at the very bottom [...but...] I’m gonna be like Donald Trump.”¹²⁹

Angelina presents a slightly different story. (Angelina is a pseudonym.) Having just arrived in the United States on her own last year, she first stayed with her sister’s friend, who helped her acclimate to New York and learn how to navigate the city’s many complex networks. Given that introduction, she soon found an apartment of her own without institutional assistance.¹³⁰ Furthermore, not a single interviewee dissatisfaction with their current housing situation or even with the quality or reliability of the housing stock, utilities, or appliances. The common areas, which were the only parts of the buildings I was able to observe, suffer from inadequate maintenance and a significant lack of active programming, resulting in large areas of wasted space at the base of each building. During certain times of the year, however, such space is decorated with

¹²⁸ Tobias. Interview.

¹²⁹ Shop Owner. Interview.

¹³⁰ Angelina. Personal Interview. Feb. 24, 2016. “Institutional assistance’ is taken here to mean assistance from a voluntary refugee resettlement agency or a community-based organization. The apartments on Park Hill Avenue are federally subsidized, so Angelina does, of course, receive a form of institutional assistance in the housing realm.

seasonally appropriate materials and used for various activities, the last being a Christmas decorating competition, according to Rev. Janice.¹³¹ While housing poses a very significant challenge to recently arrived refugees and, as seen in the literature, may present persistent problems for some groups in some places, the Park Hill Liberians seem somewhat removed from this concern, satisfied and stable in their apartments. Observations in this field are, of course, particularly hard to generalize, particularly without having been able, myself, to enter and assess any of the refugees' apartments on Park Hill Avenue. In any case, it is worth repeating Rev. Janice's call, shared by HIAS' Paretzky and Catholic Charities' Sullivan, for even better housing for refugees.

Safety and the Boys of Park Hill

While issues of housing may not warrant primary attention in terms of provision or condition, peering through the lens of security brings them into sharper relief. Park Hill Avenue is, to many, still an extremely dangerous place to live, its long brick apartment buildings enabling transgressions, even if the more extreme elements of Liberian warfare or of Wu Tang rivalries have mostly dissipated. Sophie decries that, even with good neighbors, "there are still bad people around," that the residents will not be able to feel safe without increased security inside the buildings.¹³² Annie Gibson explains further: "I have come back from outside and found people inside my apartment."¹³³ Safety seems hard to come by; indeed, I was never once questioned by those sitting by the door in the

¹³¹ Harris. Interview.

¹³² Sophie. Interview. The Wu Tang Clan, started in 1992, is a hard-core hip-hop and rap group growing out of a collective of nine rappers, DJs, and MCs in Park Hill. Many of their raps reference the difficult life they faced in their youth in the neighborhood, with raps about violence, drugs, and the sense of community that gang life offered.

¹³³ Annie Gibson. Personal Interview. Feb. 24, 2016.

many times that I, a quite obvious outsider, entered Park Hill Avenue’s various housing blocks. Rev. Janice, for her part, acknowledges the dangers facing the Liberian refugees in their homes, discussing plans for a “tenant patrol” entrusted with monitoring (and, perhaps, sanctioning) behavior in the apartments, though many interviewees desire official security with operational sanctioning power, viewing a neighborly coalition as less effective and, perhaps, somewhat quaint.¹³⁴



Figure 8. The boys of Park Hill and their stretch.

The residents’ security concerns extend beyond the walls and out of the door onto Park Hill Avenue and its various asphalt tributaries. Undoubtedly, Park Hill stands today much improved as compared to its state several decades ago: no longer nicknamed “Crack Hill” or “Killa Hill,” the neighborhood suffers less from outright gang or sectarian violence than it did in the past. Yet the unique history of the Liberian influx brought with it its own set of destabilizing ingredients which have raised different security issues. Tobias, the long-resident “elder,” says that the neighborhood has “changed a lot due to new immigration”: trauma from war experiences in Liberia have sent a lot of young people in

¹³⁴ Ibid.

the neighborhood to rehabilitation or psychiatric therapy, yet newly sprung gang groups also provide a type of coping mechanism.¹³⁵



Figure 9. Housing and “open space” on Park Hill Avenue.

To roll with a gang provides some type of security and some type of community, not to mention a healthy income from drug dealing: the “boys,” as Tobias calls them, spend a lot of their time selling drugs up and down the street, particularly Sobel Court between Targee Street and Park Hill Avenue. Marijuana, used by many Liberians, is not a problem, Tobias concedes: it is the crack cocaine, LSD, the “everything else” that causes concern. While an increased police presence and more security cameras have, to Tobias, cleaned the neighborhood up “small small,” he still feels that it is generally unsafe:

¹³⁵ Tobias. Interview.

“When it’s dark, it starts getting dangerous. I don’t go out when it’s dark.”¹³⁶ Thomas – who introduced himself to me by his alias, Paul – is one of the “boys” of whom Tobias speaks. (Thomas Paul is a pseudonym.) Looking through his yellowed eyes, breaking into uncontrollable laughter, Thomas Paul spends entire days sitting on the side of the street, shouting across the street to his other boys and chatting to anyone who will listen about the attacks of September 11.¹³⁷ He is known in the community: Frederick, chuckling at the conversation between Thomas Paul and I, later told me, “His father worked hard. He just decided to be stupid.”¹³⁸

While there is likely more than stupidity at play in the behavior of the Park Hill boys, Frederick suggests a structural dilemma that most immigrant communities hope to avoid: rather than pushing them towards rising beyond the hardship of their parents’ generation, something takes away these boys’ ability to care about or for their neighborhood, makes them willing to destabilize the well-being of their families and friends. The boys lack, it is apparent, a meaningful and constructive connection to Park Hill. Tobias’ solution promises to push this relationship to its logical conclusion: “I’d wipe those boys off the street and put them in [jail].”¹³⁹ That is one solution, an immediate one: it is not the structural solution to which planning should strive.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Thomas Paul. Personal Interview. Mar. 18, 2016.

¹³⁸ Frederick. Personal Interview. Mar. 18, 2016.

¹³⁹ Tobias. Interview.

Jobs and Support

Echoing the general level of concern for the provision and quality of housing, the refugees I interviewed expressed no worries about employment or dissatisfaction with their jobs. Often, in discussions of employment, interviewees focused not on their own experiences finding or keeping employment nor on their own job's suitability, but rather on the way that employment could be leveraged to solve some of the social ills of their neighborhood, particularly issues of drugs and truancy as mentioned above. Tobias, sympathetic before his call for lock-up, sees meaningful employment as an effective antidote to the drug culture and its attractions, namely its profitability: without jobs, "if [the boys] want to eat, they have to sell drugs."¹⁴⁰ Beyond those youth that sell drugs, of course, lie another group who simply do nothing: who have left school before graduating but remain out of work. Calling for them to reclaim the trajectories of their futures are signs posted on the doors of each announcing the Young Adult Internship Program, an initiative of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) targeting for young people aged 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor work. "Everything you need to help you succeed!" it promises, citing a "neighborhood-based opportunity" involved fourteen weeks of paid orientations and trainings.

Rev. Janice, who helps to organize the partnership between African Refuge and the DYCD, speaks proudly of the program, noting that it gets the young people back into doing something worthwhile, with most of the program participants either reentering school or gained regular employment. At the same time, she admits that many of the employment prospects gained through the Young Adult Internship Program remain stop-

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

gap measures, providing income and discipline but rarely opportunities for growth. (The parallels with the voluntary organizations' approach to employment are apparent.) In recalling recent job placements, Rev. Janice cites a cashier, a maintenance worker, and a babysitter: none truly speak of the opportunity that "America" is supposed to represent to the newly arrived refugee.¹⁴¹

Of more pressing concern are the social and educational programs that support the ability of a parent – or, more accurately, a mother – to work outside the home. Many interviewees decried the dearth of alternative childcare options for their elementary- and middle-school-aged children. They say that they sometimes have to choose between working or being at home with their kids, or that their children's homework interferes with their home work. It is not that no such services exist. Many of the small houses on the streets surrounding Park Hill Avenue and Targee Street host daycare centers, sunny names and bright balloons adorning the small signs hanging outside, scattered toys adorning the small, patchy gardens in front. These do not fit the needs of the Park Hill Liberians, but it is unclear why: Are they too far? Are they too expensive? Do they not provide acceptable services?

African Refuge, of course, also provides after-school programs, one for elementary students and another for middle school students. The elementary program is "successful": the children assemble in an extra room in the bottom of 140 Park Hill Avenue, coloring on the table and throwing a basketball around, wrestling on the ground and asking the

¹⁴¹ Harris. Interview.

two adults incessant questions.¹⁴² On the several days I have visited, perhaps ten students – many of them the same from time to time – have been present. This is “successful.”

Sophie lends support to African Refuge’s youth programs, saying that she regularly takes advantage of them, that Rev. Janice truly does a lot to help “carry the kids,” even sometimes taking them on small outings. At the same time, however, she describes the need for more extensive youth programming, particularly of the educational variety. IN terms of educational assistance, she says, “There is nothing [at the after-school program]. They don’t help with learning. They need more helpers for the kids’ homework.”¹⁴³

Consistent and reliable homework help would relieve Sophie of quite a bit of anxiety, both due to the stress she feels helping her son as well as her constant worries about the quality of his education. Amelia, however, disagrees: of the after-school program, she says, “It needs a lot of stuff,” from better maintenance to proper day care, and that the neighborhood is begging for more after-school activities, such as youth sports clubs.¹⁴⁴

The middle school program, Rev. Janice says, is much more challenging: where 50 students are meant to assemble each day after school, only a small fraction regularly do.¹⁴⁵ This lack of participation points to an issue touched upon by the prevalence of drug dealing in the neighborhood: a lack of meaningful connections to and responsibilities for the neighborhood. Without them, the young people may stray; with them, they can become stewards of their community and their people, as are the young people who intern and volunteer with Rev. Janice every week.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Sophie. Interview.

¹⁴⁴ Amelia. Personal Interview. Feb. 15, 2016.

¹⁴⁵ Harris. Interview.

Informality at Work and Play: the Community Market

The most notable employment program of African Refuge – indeed, of the entire Park Hill community – takes the form of the Women’s Foundation. As with African Refuge as a whole, the Women’s Foundation runs according to a strikingly simple mission: to get women back on their feet. The methodology is similarly direct: raise fees for licenses so that women can start owning businesses.¹⁴⁶ As such, most of the work revolves around the informal women’s market developed over several years on Park Hill Avenue. First created to supplement the existing food markets in the area (inadequate, expensive, or far, as discussed above), the market began as a group of women selling familiar foods on the sidewalks and parking lots of Park Hill Avenue, Bowen Road, Sobel Court, and Targee Street. They were unorganized and unaffiliated, merely looking to cater to the wants (needs?) of their own people. They sold fish, hot peppers, tomatoes, groundnuts, items from gardens in New Jersey or wholesalers in the Bronx.¹⁴⁷ They sold knitwear that they made themselves and other African products, too, if they could get them. The ladies set up their wares on a small table or perhaps on the ground, wherever they could find a place. Every so often, of course, the police would hassle them, chastise them, fine them for selling in public without a vending license. Because their work was informal, it was also illegal.

Margaret sits on a stool on Sobel Court under an afternoon sun quite intense for a day in late February, her box of shiny earrings arrayed on a table beside her. “Earrings from Ghana,” she says to me. “*Fabriqué en France*,” it says on the card. “Guaranteed to last

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. and Oyedele, Akin. “Liberian Women Miss Income from Summer Market.” *Voices of NY* (Jan. 8., 2014). <http://voicesofny.org/2014/01/liberian-women-miss-income-from-summer-market/>.

for ten years. My son is there; he sends to me.”¹⁴⁸ Margaret comes out to sell her earrings in her free time, when the weather is good and she has nothing else to do. She carries her earrings with her in a box, much easier to do than hauling cloth or home decorations. She enjoys sitting outside, even if she doesn’t make too many sales: while she sits and waits, she is also “chatting with my people.”¹⁴⁹ For Margaret, her little market is not only about making some money or providing familiar goods to her neighbors, though these motivations surely play some part; for her, vending is a social experience, an activity which enables human connections to take place out in the open, where anyone can join in (as I did). Margaret’s sentiments match exactly those recorded by Bernadette Ludwig: her new Liberian friend told her, “We can sell at the small market... and [we can] meet our kind.”¹⁵⁰

PARK HILL COMMUNITY MARKET



Grand Re-opening Saturday, June 1, 2013

Re-opening/Ribbon Cutting Ceremony: 11:00 am

Market Hours – Monday thru Saturday 8:00 am – 7:30 pm daily
June thru October

Lot on the corner of 140 Park Hill Avenue

Sponsored by: Staten Island Liberian Community Association Inc.
in collaboration with: Empowerment Zone Inc. & Island Voice Inc.

Men Who Build Inc. (MWB)

People United for A Better Park Hill (Park Hill Tenant Association)



For further information and to register contact:
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Figure 10. Park Hill’s periodic ladies’ market sometimes seeks a wider customer base. (Island Voice)

¹⁴⁸ Margaret. Personal Interview. Mar. 17, 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Margaret. Interview.

¹⁵⁰ Ludwig, Bernadette. “Liberians: Struggle for Refugee Families.” in Fonder, Nancy, ed. *One out of Three: Immigrant New York in the 21st Century*. (New York: 2013). p. 209.

As a way to guard against any adverse reaction from the authorities, the Women's Foundation at African Refuge began trying to organize for licenses and some level of formalization of the business activity, gathering the women into a group and holding a more regular market in one of the parking lots in between the apartment buildings. While not eliminating the prospect of police citations, gathering together immediately constructs a communal atmosphere conducive to collective activity. Just as Margaret uses her days selling earrings as a chance to socialize among her countryfolk, the market women can use the event as an opportunity to get out of their apartments, something particularly important for the older generation.¹⁵¹ Having a regular social outing is important, too, for newcomers. Sonnie, in reflecting on her first year in Park Hill, remembers the unease she felt at first, a frightened newcomer in a strange new culture. Then she started spending more time with her grandmother, who sells food in the market: the women there helped teach her where to go to fulfill daily wants and needs, how to navigate the complexities of the city. Many of them also became her friends, prompting her to declare that her "first year was great!"¹⁵² In this conception of the market, says Rev. Janice, the women sell their goods while wearing their bright, traditional clothing, both as a way of contributing to the lively atmosphere typical of the market in Liberia and as a particularly visible and yet tasteful exercise in branding.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Sonnie. Interview. Feb. 24, 2016.

¹⁵³ Harris. Interview.

The occurrence of the market has even been advertised online, with a release appearing on the *Island Voice* website inviting people to the corner of Park Hill and Osgood Avenues. The advertisement makes the market sound very attractive, indeed:

The new market space is strategically located to attract multicultural communities. The Park Hill Community Market will serve as a place of commerce for handmade arts and crafts, locally grown fresh fruits, and fresh vegetables. The market will provide a glimpse into the rich multicultural heritage that flourishes in the Park Hill neighborhood. Park Hill is the home to the largest Liberian population in America, dubbed ‘Little Liberia.’ Organizers, sponsors, and the community hope the ‘Market’ will put the Clifton/Concord neighborhood on the map as a cultural and tourist destination.¹⁵⁴

In this rendering, the market takes on a wildly new dimension and responsibility: that of being a cultural magnet and an educational resource. This may not be a fair responsibility to expect of Liberian refugees who have struggled to make a new home after fleeing their country in warfare; it also does not accurately describe the situation of either the market or Park Hill. The market holds value as a community resource, meeting the needs, social and physical, of the people who live there: as Ludwig writes, the market is important because it offers a sense of home to Liberians and other West Africans in Staten Island, give them a chance to gossip and serves as a handy excuse for cooking elaborate Liberian meals and generating much needed income. She quotes one woman as saying, “When I miss home I go down to Park Hill to buy African food, meet friends, and visit family members.”¹⁵⁵ That is, she goes down to Park Hill to be reminded of what it is like to be Liberian.

The market does not have to hold value as a tourist draw. It is likely that, with greater interest in and larger groups of people visiting the market, the visibility of the

¹⁵⁴ “The Staten Island Parkhill Community Market.” *Island Voice*. <http://www.islandvoice.org/phcm/>

¹⁵⁵ Ludwig. “Liberians.” p. 210.

arrangement will increase, making it difficult for authorities to ignore the lack of licenses and, it is likely, taking umbrage with the flouting of city hygiene standards. The contradiction of vending in an area zoned for residential use is also sure to create problems with greater visibility. According to Rev. Janice, many of the women are quite satisfied with the market as it stands now, though some would prefer to open a shop while others continue to sell in familiar locations on the sidewalk.¹⁵⁶ Given the shortage of resources for more permanent spaces, others have simply called for a more reliable space for the market, perhaps supported by licensing to reduce the risk of closure or protected from the elements to enable sales in the winter. As Martha Wilson, the head of the women's market, says, "We need a regular market where we can sell, for the people to come to say 'yes, this is an African market.'"¹⁵⁷

Public Spaces for Play, Relaxation, and Community

The market, then, serves an invaluable role in providing a sense of identity and community to the Park Hill Liberians. It becomes, when it operates, a veritable public forum for the Liberian ladies. As Wilson laments, however, New York's frosty winters, worlds away from what the refugees have grown up with in Liberia, take that resource away.¹⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the neighborhood boasts no public spaces for play and relaxation to fill the void in winter or when the market is not operating. To be certain, there are several basketball courts scattered in the empty spaces between Park Hill's housing blocks. often peopled after school with older kids trying to shoot hoops while younger

¹⁵⁶ Harris. Interview.

¹⁵⁷ Oyedele. "Liberian Women."

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. As the present study took place in winter, the market remained invisible throughout the course of neighborhood research. It exists, for me, primarily through word of mouth and written accounts.

kids skirt the poles on their bicycles. There is also one green lawn between 185 and 225 Park Hill Avenue: clipped grass with a diamond-shaped path skirting a messy pile of bushes.



Figure 11. Public space on Park Hill Avenue.

Amelia, mother and 15-year resident of the neighborhood, passes the frustration with the lack of public space to her children. When they want to play, when she wants to take them to have fun, there is nowhere to go: they must travel to another neighborhood, timing their leisure to the vagaries of the Staten Island bus schedule.¹⁵⁹ Amelia and her children may be a particular case: the kid's choice of play is ice skating, and ice rinks are generally hard to come by. Nevertheless, the fact that Park Hill does not offer many enticing alternatives – no space to kick a ball around, no forest groves to turn into one's castle, no safe stretch of space lending itself to footraces – means that she cannot easily

¹⁵⁹ Amelia. Interview.

convince her kids to substitute other forms of physical activity for their preferred ice skating. Sonnie echoes this to an extent: she suggests that kids can play behind the buildings on the eastern side of the road.¹⁶⁰ Aside from a decrepit jungle gym, however, the only play space is a long parking lot dotted with oversized dumpsters.

For adults, too, usable space is at a minimum. Inviting space is even more scant. Tobias, the decades-long Park Hill veteran, complains of the community's lack of street life. "Everyone just stays in their apartments all the time," he says, noting that the small playground on Bowen Street, tucked as it is between two desire-path trails through a thicket of new-growth trees, is really the only place where one can sit down and chat with one's neighbor.¹⁶¹ The lack of a place for the community to stop and rest outside frustrates Alex, too. "The government keeps this space [between buildings] clean," he concedes, "but we don't use it; we just pass through on our way to the shops."¹⁶² In his view, the community needs open park space, needs a context for communal activities: "They should fix it up and put some benches in. They should make it usable."¹⁶³ His words are not simply a plea to be able to sit outside. Rather, Alex sees a social and community function in usable public spaces. As a musician and singer, he and occasionally others sometimes go from door to door asking if people are interested in hearing a little tune; according to him, most are, and many join in. In his mind, and in this particular community, these outbursts of familiar songs "remind people of back home," and yet they are confined to singular apartments in a federally-subsidized brick housing

¹⁶⁰ Sonnie. Interview.

¹⁶¹ Tobias. Interview.

¹⁶² Alex. Interview.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

block.¹⁶⁴ What if activities, celebrations, such as this could be moved back into the public realm, as they were back in Liberia? What if people were allowed to bring a little bit of themselves and their histories into a new version of Park Hill Avenue, rather than resigning themselves to a post-Park Hill identity? If the market can exist and provide a sense of hope to the Liberian ladies, perhaps public space for communal gathering and singing can do something similar for its men.

Beauty and Beholders and Notions of Home

The Liberian refugee community in Park Hill can be defined by its access to the fundamental needs of urban living; it can be defined by how secure they feel in their homes or on the street; it can be defined by the ways in which people negotiate work and play and congregation and historical identities. Can it be defined in terms of beauty? Wanting to understand how the Park Hill Liberians saw themselves and their community, I asked a simple question: “Is this neighborhood ‘beautiful’ to you?” This question did not aim at a purely aesthetic assessment of the space: beauty can never fully shed its subjectivity.

Some of the interviewees had difficulty associating the neighborhood with beauty. Amelia answered simply, “I can’t say it is a beautiful place.”¹⁶⁵ Tobias spoke of what it could be and what held it back: “It’s a beautiful place if they can keep the boys off the street.”¹⁶⁶ That is, rid the place of its self-inflicting pains, its drug dealers and hustlers,

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Amelia. Interview.

¹⁶⁶ Tobias. Interview.

and the opportunity arises for Park Hill to become a great neighborhood. Angelina, a recent arrival from Liberia, responded in a different way, saying quickly. “Of course, it’s beautiful,” she said. “We got water, got light, got playground, got school.”¹⁶⁷ To her, the neighborhood warranted the designation “beautiful” for its offerings of what are, across the US, taken for granted as standard, even unthought, inclusions in a house. Her answer reflects the wide gulf that separates life in Liberia from life in America, something that can be often forgotten when speaking with refugees who have lived in this country for years or decades. The material improvement may be worth noting. It is, however, unthinkable to accept that the provision of the most basic of services equates with beauty: surely, this city has a greater responsibility to its arrivals than to offer slight improvements over conditions in a still-war-ravaged country.

Sonnie introduces a different way of thinking in response to the question: “It’s kind of beautiful. You know, we have trees and we have all these people.”¹⁶⁸ At the same time, she has wider visions for how beautiful Park Hill could be: “There should really be a better mix of people, of different races and nationalities. That would help people get to know each other better.”¹⁶⁹ For Sonnie, beauty seems to be premised on belonging, both to the immediate community but also to the city at large: she seems to be convinced of not remaining isolated as a group. Annie Gibson looks also at impact of people on her life and that of the community of which she is a part. “There are a lot of Africans here,” she says. “You feel at home when you know people and share the same foods you had at

¹⁶⁷ Angelina. Interview.

¹⁶⁸ Sonnie. Interview.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

home. I love it here.”¹⁷⁰ For her, the comfort of the familiar and the unbreakable connection back to Liberia create beauty out of the boxy blocks and asphalt lots. The question of neighborhood beauty aimed to see what invisible elements operate within Park Hill that the outsider, the occasional visitor, even the student cannot see. Here: strong bonds, even if other concerns seem more pressing.

In a related question, I picked at the meaning of the word “home” by asking, quite rudimentarily, “Is this neighborhood ‘home’?” Asking people who had fled a different country and now lived, with little prospect of return, in this one, I entered into Park Hill expecting one of two answers: “Yes,” because that is where they live now and for the future; or “No,” because one’s first home is always their last home. The responses did not fit so neatly into my categories.



Figure 12. A bright spot: the pan-African colors decorate a street tree.

¹⁷⁰ Gibson. Interview.

Amelia, as with the previous question, saw her surroundings as bleak: Park Hill was certainly not her home. “I don’t want to be here... there’s a way that people treat you here, but there are no opportunities.”¹⁷¹ Because it was never her decision to live in Park Hill nor is it really her decision to stay, she feels stuck, unable to move from her brick block because of the expense of housing in other places but equally unable to truly settle in to a place she sees as having few resources or cares for herself and her children. Sophie repeats Amelia’s concerns: “If you are African and you have no money, then you have no choice.”¹⁷² Unable to pay for a better life, she thus feels unable to even attempt to pursue it, held down by her truth and also by her context: “This place is not very suitable to make a home. You just live and survive.”¹⁷³ The sense of resignation in Sophie’s words is one colored by a lifetime of hardship, of a constant attempt at betterment met by continual setbacks. For her, living in Park Hill is itself a setback, one which has entrenched itself over many years and which manifests in the relentless challenges of daily life.

Tobias and Angelina exhibit a different type of resignation, one built on pragmatism. Tobias says, “I spent my whole life here. I reside here. I will die here. I know that.”¹⁷⁴ By the simple fact of living in Park Hill, it has become his home. He also ties his entire identity to life in Park Hill, seeing the neighborhood as definitive of the rest of his life. Other refugees expressed neither sorrow or resignation, but instead proclaimed proudly

¹⁷¹ Amelia. Interview.

¹⁷² Sophie. Interview.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Tobias. Interview.

that Park Hill is, indeed, their home. Young Sonnie once again draws on the presence of people in her life: “There are lots of friends and family, lots of people you know here, so this has to be my home!”¹⁷⁵ How could a place full of one’s loved ones not be home, she seems to ask? Annie Gibson, too, defines home in terms of the people in her life, saying that being in Park Hill means that you are among Africans, and so “this really is a home away from home.”¹⁷⁶ While nothing can quite replace Liberia as her true home, Annie knows that it is unlikely that she will be able to return there, focusing instead on the home that she has made for herself on Park Hill Avenue. Angelina, eager to bring the communal solace of song back to the neighborhood, simply smiles. “Of course this is my home,” he says, “and there’s no place like home.”¹⁷⁷

Reflections on Research: Positionality and Subalternity

We think about what interests us and we try to understand what we do not know about. That is how we learn new things and create new ideas. What is unknown, what is apart from our own experiences, what is “other” is precisely what we should strive to become familiar with and informed about. That which intrigues does so because it offers, behind a veil of ignorance and inaccessibility, something to learn. At least, these are the things that I told myself as I ventured to Park Hill Avenue and tried to carry out this thesis.

I do not know if what I am writing is an “urban planning” thesis. Certainly, it is “urban.” It looks at people and things in the city. It tries (I think) to ponder how this

¹⁷⁵ Sonnie. Interview.

¹⁷⁶ Gibson. Interview.

¹⁷⁷ Angelina. Interview.

assemblage of people and things connects to the physicality of the city at large and, maybe more importantly, to the idea of “city.” Talking to people, listening to people. Trying to say the right things, to walk the right way or to wait until a quiet moment to snap a photograph, in order to convince the neighborhood that there was a point to my presence, that I was not just some type of voyeur of despair. And yet that was exactly what I was. And that is exactly what the whole premise of this thesis was based upon, was it not? My plan was to learn about this place called Park Hill, but I had already decided what it should be like. I sought out confirmation. My plan was to learn how refugees could live there, but I had already come up with the emotions that they should feel about it. I did not want to be surprised.

Here is what a typical research outing was like for me: I left my home or my old haunt in the urban planning studio at Columbia University and got on the 1 train. At 96th Street, I would switch to the 2 or 3 train, which run express. As the train rumbled underneath the scores of streets above it, I would try to mentally prepare myself for Park Hill Avenue: worrying that I had brought too unwieldy a bag, cursing myself for leaving an important folder behind, hoping the sun would keep the streets warm today, that people would be out and about. At Chambers Street, I would cross the platform and step back onto the 1 train for the jaunt to South Ferry, where I could catch the ferry to Staten Island. I would wait in the hall with hundreds of other passengers, wondering what they all could be doing out and about on a winter’s day. I would see people wearing West African cloth and speaking in inflected English. “Should I speak to them?” I would ask myself. “Should I find out why they’re over here, in Manhattan?” Until I learned that West

Africans from many different countries lived in all of New York's corners, I just assumed that the people I saw must be Liberians, must be part a part of "my story." But not everything is what I think, and not everything has to be the story that I tell.

The ferry. I would find a seat upstairs, and glue my eyes to the window. I would look at the churches and gantries of South Brooklyn and picture sunny days on Governor's Island. I would marvel at the barges and container ships lounging in the harbor, wondering where they were coming from or what port they would call at next. I would look back at the immensity of Manhattan's skyline, amazed that just several hundreds of years could have produced so colossal a creation. And then the Lady would appear, hundreds of yards to the west and yet somehow right above our heads. Hoisting high her lantern of welcome, holding in her hand the very best of America's promises of opportunity, the lady would hold me in her green gaze. Her eyes were fixed upon the far horizon, but I began to think that they might be peering toward the heights of northern Staten Island, toward a place where it seemed like the newest huddling masses, the crowds banished from their Liberian homes for a new kind of life on Park Hill Avenue, were still yearning, ever yearning, to breathe free.

The bus, S74 and S76 buses became my routes of choice. Crowded and raucous, the bus led me away from the brief stateliness of St. George, through the bustle of small-town Stapleton, and into the more desolate roads of Clifton and Park Hill, where I would get off and walk across the street to Park Hill Avenue, always with a host of six or seven others. It seemed like everyone on the bus had a friend, someone they were bumping into,

someone with whom to chat about the latest gossip on the block, someone they knew from work or school or church or family. I had no one. I felt out of place, sitting quietly and wondering if anyone was going to ask me what I was doing there. They never did, of course, but I always made sure that some questionnaires or some sketched-out maps were accessible from my bag, ready to be shared and explained as a way to justify my journey.

I felt the same way on Park Hill Avenue: standing among its housing blocks, waiting to be questioned on my presence and always aware that I was an outsider. My whiteness, unavoidably, plays a large part in this. Park Hill Avenue is overwhelmingly black, both African and African-American, and this reality is palpable as soon as one steps onto the street. This is not a place of diversity, where people who look different live together and interact. This is not a place that offers its culture as a commodity, either, to be consumed by all types of people from all types of places. This place, with its succession of brick blocks and its assortment of parking lot bleakness and its smattering of shuttered storefronts, is one where you are if you have nowhere else to go. So, I was very aware of the message that my body sent: I was there not to live my life, but to get something. (In all of my trips to Park Hill, I encountered three other white people. I know this number because, each time, I was very surprised to see them, curious about their reasons for being there. Just as everyone else was probably curious to know my reasons for being there.) My pads of paper and my two green clipboards and my digital camera slung across my shoulder only offered further confirmation of this.

*Was I using this place, its people, in pursuit of a piece of parchment with the words
Columbia University strung across the top? Did I use this place, its people?*

*Deleuze, in conversation with Foucault, says of the latter, "...you became aware of the
necessity for confined individuals to speak for themselves, to create a relay..."¹⁷⁸ This
thesis project and the way in which my findings are presented is informed by that idea: I
have attempted, as much as possible, to use direct quotations from the refugees I spoke
with and then to organize the ideas contained within those quotations around a certain
collective narrative. I conceived of the project as a way to use my pages to place the
voice of the Park Hill Liberians within the realm of planning as a discipline.*

*At the same time, however, this process places me – white, male, educated, non-poor,
American – in the role of arbiter of the message, as the regulator of information coming
from people very different from me in many respects: black, often female, less educated,
poor, refugee. I have allowed myself to become of the owner of these words, even as I
have tried to give over the page fully to the words as I recorded them. But I am the one
who decided how to use them, on which pages to place them and in support of which of
my arguments to employ them. I live generally in accordance with the dominant societal
and political paradigm that exists in this country and culture, and this study inevitably
places the experiences of those who do not, who cannot, within the understanding of this
same paradigm. As much as I can try to use paragraphs like these to reflect upon the
legitimacy of myself as an author of this study and present it as a piece of activist*

¹⁷⁸ Deleuze, Gilles and Michel Foucault. "Intellectuals and Power." in Bouchard, Donald F., ed.
Bouchard, Donald F. and Sherry Simon, trans. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays
and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. (Ithaca, NY: 1977). p. 206.

scholarship, I cannot fully escape the reality of my location within the hegemon: this fact touches all aspects of this work.

The inescapability of being who I am goes beyond my ownership of a downtrodden population's words, of course, and extends to the process of carrying out research as the very obvious outsider that I am. Speaking to people on Park Hill Avenue meant saying, "I am a student at Columbia University and I am doing research for a thesis project." It also meant asking people who I did not know to open up to me, to tell me about their concerns and experiences and emotions, most of which were not easy or comfortable. I have never been to Liberia, and I have never studied the history or sociology of its conflict in any great detail. I have never known war. I have lived (briefly) as an outsider in another culture, but always with access to choice and opportunity and the chance to change my existence. I fall, quite admittedly, into that group about which Spivak says the "Other as Subject is inaccessible..."¹⁷⁹ In each interview, the process of negotiation going on in the minds of those I spoke with must have been immense; the "truth" that I present is what they felt comfortable sharing with a stranger largely unfamiliar with the local and personal dynamics at play who was carrying out a research endeavor with no likely practical outcomes. So why would anyone on Park Hill Avenue open up to me? Why should I be the one to tell this story?

What I learned and what I present in these pages cannot be definitive or even suggestive of "a refugee experience." It cannot be definitive or even suggestive of "a Liberian

¹⁷⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: 1988). p. 282.

experience.” What I learned and what I present in these pages is a photograph of a particular community in a particular place experience some very real problems and largely ignored by decision-makers and power-brokers. As with any photograph, I am the one who pointed the lens, controlled the exposure, set the aperture. And as with any photograph that is also a portrait, a degree of posing is bound to have occurred: simplification, omission, and distortion – resulting, certainly, from the distance between my subjects’ experiences and my own and the very real differences in our potential futures – color what I write and (re)present. I would like to make a claim to exhaustiveness and to universality, but I cannot.

The role of planners in working toward meeting the needs of the future demands a firm understanding of the realities of today. If planning is to face real challenges and attempt to redress inequities, then it needs to know, first, what those challenges are and who is affected by those inequities. Often, this means drawing underserved and downtrodden populations into planning as active participants aware of their agency and confident in their voices. My aim, through these humble pages, is to begin that process for a group of New York’s refugees who have very much been left out of planning efforts that affect their lives; at the very least, these words attempt to raise this population to greater visibility and offer a first step toward comprehending societal problems that too often elude the realm of planning. This attempt stands, admittedly, upon my positionality as a white, male, educated, non-poor American privileged enough to pursue an education in this field: I hope, through the words on these pages, to provoke the field of planning to engage more fully with the refugee population.

Synthesis and Recommendations

The city does not plan for refugees. Job training and English classes, certainly, exist, as do special programs such as Workforce One or the Young Adult Internship Program, relying on partnerships with community organizations. Job centers, supported by the Department of Social Services, pop up on street corners in neighborhoods across the city. Housing support, too, finds its way from NYCHA and the Department of Housing Services onto the streets of the five boroughs, often connecting those precariously housed with financing and other forms of rental assistance put forth by the federal government. After-school and summer programs abound, as do experiential learning projects and alternative education approaches designed with the non-mainstream in mind: some of these stem directly from the Department of Education, others rely on non-profit organizations or local groups. Some of these programs specifically target new Americans, though many are intended generally for the unfortunate. While refugees often share characteristics with other manifestations of New York's downtrodden, they also experience unique challenges. These must be considered by city policy and program makers, who might be able to draw refugee concerns into such programs where they are relevant but who may need to devise new ways of meeting refugee housing and employment preferences.

From “I have a friend who...” to “Our framework is...”

The voluntary resettlement agencies responsible for placing refugees in New York City's neighborhoods – Catholic Charities, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Lutheran Social Services, the International Rescue Committee – draw upon many of these programs as

they seek to take care of the perceived fundamental needs of housing and employment. Supplementing these programs for the voluntary agencies are personal relationships with landlords, business owners, and previously resettled, well-established refugees. This notion of personal connections is important. “I have a friend who...” becomes a substitute for “Our framework is...” In this way, resettlement organizations give up some of what makes them valuable – constructing and implementing norms for the resettlement of newly arrived refugees – in favor of a resource largely already available to refugees themselves. If, as Harvey Paretzky of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society says, many of today’s refugee newcomers arrive in America to meet familial relations or acquaintances, then the notion of “I have a friend who...” already exists: newly-arrived refugees can receive assistance from those who have already lived the experience of arrival and resettlement, have already navigated the complexities of resettlement and integration, have already done the work to construct a network of assistance and responsibility.

For resettlement agencies to rely upon personal relationships for programming may have value in fulfilling immediate needs, yet should not stand in place of a policy framework for transplantation. The reliance upon personal relationships equates, in a certain way, with an outsourcing of resettlement assistance: the implementation of such assistance depends not on the work of the refugee resettlement organization but rather upon the friend, the acquaintance, the relationship which could sour or end at any time and which is not directly transferable to other individuals within the organization. Rather, refugee resettlement agencies should draw on these existing relationships and the opportunities they present to construct something akin to a resettlement toolbox, a collection of

regularized avenues or principles – malleable and customizable to account for contextual variation – directing refugee resettlement. Such a toolbox could include institutionalized access to mandatory skills training programs, temporary settlement homes for a particular duration of acclimation, and language and cultural lessons and orientations highlighting the ways in which refugees can navigate the public sector landscape of licensure and regulation. Refugees can be remarkably innovative and resourceful when it comes to their own livelihood, but they often need innovative resources in order to get started. Such should not be left to the chance that someone might know someone who can help.

Issues of housing and employment, while truly fundamental and at the heart of the definition of the term, “resettlement,” capture not the heart of the lived experience of resettlement in Park Hill. The Park Hill Liberians have, for the most part, moved beyond the period of continued assistance from either direct federal government programs, typically lasting just several months, or the voluntary agencies, which generally continue providing service for one year (plus the time it takes to secure a green card). The majority are securely housed and gainfully employed (though the gains may vary and generally remain small). Indeed, this fact may suggest that the work of the voluntary agencies in these regards is fruitful and fulfills the groups’ missions. And yet the challenges of resettlement do not disappear after three months or one year: they persist even after one unlocks the door to their apartment or clocks in for their first day of work.

Understanding Histories and Presents: Contextualizing Resettlement Criteria

The Park Hill refugees' safety and security concerns occupied the thoughts of many of the individuals interviewed for this study and they certainly present a huge challenge to the transformation of Park Hill into a desirable place to live. While planning has a large role to play in ensuring safety and security, understanding how to reduce criminal behavior and to keep residents safe is outside of the scope of this study. Looking more deeply into security issues to discern their genesis can, however, inform future resettlement decisions and result in a more holistically beneficial model of planning for refugees. Some of the issues of violence and crime in Park Hill stand unique as signifiers of the particular conflict from which the Liberians fled. According to some, for example, more than 20,000 youths became soldiers during the conflict, taking with them to America a learned propensity towards violence: "A kid who has been carrying an AK-47 is not going to take much from other kids."¹⁸⁰ Histories such as this were then settled into a neighborhood widely known for its plague of heavy drugs and violence, described in rhyme as "the house on haunted hill / Every time you walk by your back get a chill... Now I'm chokin', smokin', hopin' I don't croakin' from overdosin'."¹⁸¹ Such a mix is bound to be toxic, certain to facilitate, rather than mitigate, lethal conflict and contribute to an atmosphere of despair. The prevalence of drug dealing and the reclusiveness that it has fostered among the Park Hill Liberians over the past several years speaks to the long-term dangers of short-sighted resettlement decisions.

¹⁸⁰ Saul. *Collective Trauma*. p. 151.

¹⁸¹ Wu Tang Clan. "Gravel Pit." *The W*. 2001.

Concerns about safety and security suggest that, if the city is to offer welcoming communities rather than entrapments to its refugee newcomers, more care must be taken in selecting spaces of resettlement and in supporting opportunities for constructive and contributive activities. Park Hill was not – and in many ways still is not – a good fit for Liberians. In contrast, the visibility and accessibility of Arabic-specific resources in Bay Ridge – from multi-lingual health centers to a variety of housing options, from the prevalence of small retail spaces encouraging of new small business ventures to easy and frequent transportation in addition to its embrace, evident even in Third Avenue’s retail signage, of continuous waves of new Americans – have made it an excellent workshop for the integration of Iraqi refugees over the past decade. In the next decade, the same neighborhood is likely to welcome a large number of Syrian refugees, who will surely benefit from the combination of familiarity and opportunity present there. The existing population of Arabic-speaking Egyptian and Syrian immigrants certainly contributes to Bay Ridge’s welcoming capacities, and any neighborhood criteria should assess the existing population for the prospects it presents in terms of refugee integration.

To assess the existing population for the challenges it may present, too, should be incorporated into resettlement criteria. As Eric Tang points out in *Unsettled*, the rather homogeneous and violence-ridden northwest Bronx very much muddled the Cambodian refugees’ visions of successful resettlement, so much so that many remain today in precarious positions.¹⁸² Paretzky made this necessity explicit in singling out “citizens who don’t have a problem with people who are not like them” as a neighborhood element

¹⁸² Tang. *Unsettled*.

that makes a community attractive to his organization.¹⁸³ Successful resettlement – understood in terms of long-term stability, comfort, and happiness – thereby necessitates an understanding of the context from which refugees come as well as that into which they will be placed.

Beyond the population, however, resettlement organizations should adopt a general understanding of the physical aspects of the neighborhoods of the city so that they can better select neighborhoods suitable for refugees arriving from a specific context. Maintaining a compendium of each neighborhood's building stock as well as its various housing types would greatly assist any well-informed resettlement process. For some refugee groups, dependent upon their traditional or habitual living styles and familial arrangements, may fit better in larger, single-family homes, where many generations can live under one roof; others may flourish in small apartments above storefronts and the public life offered by the street and open spaces, utilizing home as a place primarily of rest than anything else. Prior to living in the brick housing blocks on Park Hill Avenue, for example, most of the refugees I interviewed had never lived in an apartment, had never opened the front door of their home to be greeted by a long, impersonal hallway shared by myriad other faces. It may be that a survey of the Liberian lifestyle, coupled with the knowledge of different housing types available in different areas of the city, could have produced a safer, more comfortable, and more supportive living arrangement for the refugees of Park Hill.

¹⁸³ Paretzky. Interview.

Contextual understanding presents further opportunities for a resolution of the security problem which may, concurrently, address issues of livelihood and of familiarity and comfort. In Park Hill, these opportunities manifest in the women's market noted by so much of the recent discourse and a focal point of Rev. Janice's work at African Refuge. The women's market is a resource that could, with cultivation, become a truly great institution in Park Hill: a cultural translation that lends an identity to Park Hill other than that proposed by the Wu Tang Clan; a daily reminder of the old home that the refugees had to leave behind in order to find their new one; a source of pride that present quotidian necessities and provides opportunities for deep community engagement.

Creating a Market, Creating Ourselves: Licensure and Zoning

Strengthening the market could, if supported institutionally, draw on the young men of the community to assist the ladies as they procure their wares or take charge of setting up and maintaining the marketplace. If they can become part of something central to the Park Hill community, and if they can become necessary facilitators of that something, perhaps "the boys" will recognize the power of constructive engagement. This hearkens back to Henri Lefebvre and his notion of the right to the city. "Only social force," he writes, "capable of investing itself in the urban through a long political experience, can take charge of the realization of a programme concerning urban society."¹⁸⁴ In this conception, only collective action on the part of the city dweller – of the Park Hill boys – can create a meaningful social change in urban society – or in the social mores of Park Hill Avenue. Through their involvement in the drug trade, the boys have already

¹⁸⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. (Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, trans.) *Writings on Cities*. (Cambridge, MA: 1996). p. 156.

experienced the urban alterations that abet the personal, described by David Harvey as the “right to change ourselves by changing the city.”¹⁸⁵ Imagine the changes that could take place, both to themselves and to the city, that might sprout from their commitment to the flourishing of the women’s market.

The notion of strengthening the marketplace submits several new approaches to planning for refugee communities. First and most apparent is the question of informality that the women’s market raises. Unquestionably an unapproved use of public or semi-public space, the vending that comprises the market draws on the daily norms of food provision that the refugees made use of in Liberia. While American cities offer us food wrapped in plastic from climate-controlled boxes, each already portioned and stamped with a barcode, the West African market relies on interaction and negotiation. Choosing what you want and how much and then agreeing upon a price involves a conversation studded with jokes and adulations. New York City’s planning approach, and planning approaches in many Western cities, do not leave space for informality, instead laying out rules of acceptable uses and forms and setting up a system of punishments for those in violation. In New York, vending outside requires a license, which are generally reserved for veterans.¹⁸⁶ Food vendors face additional licensing requirements as well as the prospect of citations for health code violations; they also require overhead coverings wherever food is sold.¹⁸⁷ All licenses come at a fee, of course.

¹⁸⁵ Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.” *New Left Review*. Vol. 53. (Sep.-Oct. 2008). p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ *General Street Vendor License*. <http://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/service/2938/general-street-vendor-license>

¹⁸⁷ NYC Health. *Permits & Licenses*. <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/business/permits-licenses.page> and NYC Health. *Updated Regulations for Mobile Food Vendors: What you need to know*.

Obtaining licenses and ensuring compliance with all rules is often difficult for the most well-read of Americans, and becomes much more confounding to newcomers from very different cultures: the very notion of obtaining a license to sell common food ingredients may, in fact, seem completely outlandish to someone who has relied upon this mode of commerce for their entire life. This attempt at formalizing a model of food distribution that begs to be informal makes it very difficult for the women of Park Hill to create a completely legal marketplace. While Rev. Janice speaks of working to cover license fees, it seems appropriate to question the very basis of licensure for small-scale, community-based food vendors.

Regulations for selling fruits and vegetables draw on the example of Green Carts, which require few special conditions aside from a covering; meat or fish, on the other hand, limits sales to products that are “processed at an approved food processing facility,” “prepackaged and properly labeled,” and “kept at required cold temperatures;” packaging or slicing of food cannot take place outside of a “retail food store.”¹⁸⁸ Everyone can agree that health and sanitation is of utmost importance. Processing facilities, prepackaged items, and constant cold temperatures, however, are not characteristics of many food markets, least of all in Liberia, which generally turn over food quite quickly and therefore reduce issues of sanitation. In addition, such standards require significant overhead costs in addition to licensure, the accumulation of which is likely to render the act of vending unattractive to poor refugee women. This conundrum could be easily solved, if only the city and state could rethink the parameters of licensing. An easy option is to streamline

¹⁸⁸ *Agriculture and State Markets: Sanitary Regulations for Direct Marketing*.
<http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/FS/industry/sanitary.html>

and expedite the process of licensing for refugees, perhaps reserving a specific category of license for refugee entrepreneurs. The city already sets aside large numbers of permits specifically for veterans: this precedent should be extended to the refugee community. Another, admittedly more complicated option is to relax certain regulations in particular contexts, whether in regards to a specific population or location, type or quantity of good, or intended socio-economic outcome. Such a relaxation may enable new refugees to help themselves through income generation while also building a sense of community that draws on their collective past.

Vending in an informal marketplace set up on the parking lot of a housing estate also brings up problems relating to non-conforming land uses. The entirety of Park Hill Avenue is zoned as a residential R-6 zone surrounded by other residential zones, a small commercial overlay reserved for the Home Depot and its oversized parking lot. With no commercial activities permitted in the area, all vending thus becomes a violation of the city's zoning code, susceptible to enforcement actions and usually requiring an appeal or a variance in resolution. Such a prospect is unlikely in the case of Park Hill, to be sure, but the absurdity of the notion of the Park Hill ladies being legally barred from action generally innocuous and potential quite constructive begs for a consideration of the applicability of current zoning norms in refugee neighborhoods. Perhaps, for example, a certain magnitude of informality could be recognized for the benefits it provides and thus be written into the zoning code as a permissible, though indefinite, use. New York's zoning already effectively enables, often encourages, non-conforming uses by inscribing overlays into certain districts and by promoting programs, such as FRESH, that purport to

help underserved communities by attracting the necessary service providers. Allowing a measure of informality would achieve a similar goal, with the added benefit of supporting local resident-entrepreneurs.

In addition, the introduction of flexible zoning acknowledging different uses during different times of the day or year would facilitate activities such as the women's market in locations otherwise off limits to retail activity. Such would keep the women, and all refugee entrepreneurs trying to help themselves get by, on the side of the law. Flexible zoning could also greatly assist refugee newcomers in growing their endeavors into more permanent, reliable activities: spaces normally underutilized, such as the rooms and lobbies on the ground floors of subsidized housing blocks, could host incubator-like programs that allow new refugee arrivals to operate at low cost and with little risk while also enlivening and making use of largely abandoned areas. Models such as Made in the Lower East Side or one-month retail tenancy programs in Boston, which seek to place new businesses into physical storefronts for short testing periods at little cost to the business, provide useful precedents. In Park Hill, the implementation of flexible zoning could allow for the construction of a permanent space (with a roof) for the market, perhaps as an adaptable space anchored in one of the many underused parking lots. (This, in itself, would provide a meaningful opportunity for the Park Hill boys to engage.) Such would allow the market to comply with food vendor regulations as well as operate in winter, when many the women cease their market due to their discomfort with the weather, and could accommodate other uses when not occupied by the market. In other

neighborhoods and with other populations, flexible zoning may promote other activities, yet it is still likely that similar social and economic benefits would accrue.

Services and Institutions: A Call for More

Nearly all of the refugees who contributed to this study relied rather extensively on social services provided them, largely through African Refuge: after-school programs for their children; the food pantry for acquiring staple pantry foods; advice on matters personal, legal, or otherwise. And yet, the availability of such services still appears inadequate.

While many churches exist in the community to provide community and spiritual sustenance and a community association meets as an outlet for grievances and to aid in political organization, service does not extend much past African Refuge.

Planning for refugees should take into account the services that a neighborhood intended as a resettlement destination has in place or, more likely, needs to develop. Jack Saul's analysis of visits to African Refuge suggest the services most necessary on a regular basis. First is the availability of computers and assistance with learning how to use them: refugees can use computers to communicate with family and friends back home or resettled in other countries as well as keep abreast of news in their home country. Computer availability and literacy also enables refugees to search for employment opportunities and to advertise that skill when seeking jobs. The "umbrella of social services" also occupies a top spot on Saul's list. Whether it is counseling, group discussions, or advocacy work, refugees often need someone who can help them understand what is happening and how to deal with it; well-established refugees can often

help in this regard, but their services cannot be guaranteed, especially in communities without this particular population. Social service centers should be in place and have the capacity to meet these needs. Third among commonly experienced needs is programming addressing education and youth, whether this is recreational after-school activities, arts education, college counseling and application assistance, or simple homework help. Many refugees are newly navigating an educational system different from that in their home countries; in fact, many of their home countries may not have as formalized or as extensive an education system as has the U.S: youth-centric programming helps make this aspect of resettlement a little bit easier. In addition, as described previously, after-school programs and homework help often translate into the ability of a mother to work and contribute to her family's livelihood.

Where such social services do not already exist as an arm of a church or community organization, refugee resettlement groups, in concert with the state, should establish and support them. New York City already boasts a huge number of such programs and higher-level government, including the federal government, regularly provides financial assistance to such groups: these need to be sustained and expanded so that their offerings can fuel even more improvements among the refugee population. Former refugees who have established themselves are an obviously relevant group from which to harness the management of such services: the government should incentivize this type of work, perhaps through the provision of benefits, among past refugee arrivals in an effort to construct truly welcoming and transformative service centers.

Furthermore, and most esoterically, the myriad actors and elements of the refugee resettlement system must cast off their disparity and forge a new model of institutional and organizational coordination. Today, it seems like so much of resettlement activity is carried out in isolation: as soon as responsibility for a particular refugee passes down to the next actor, that refugee disappears. It is also fundamentally worrying that, as responsibility passes, so too does the level of institutionalization of responsibility. While the State Department has very clear and formalized steps in its segment of the resettlement process, they extend, effectively, only the moment of a refugee's arrival in her new city. Refugee resettlement organizations, always in flux in relation to the federal government, also follow guidelines, though these appear to be more dependent upon opportunity or, as mentioned above, personal relationships. When the physical act of resettlement ends and community-based organizations take responsibility for the much more difficult task of integration, responsibility to the refugees has been almost entirely deinstitutionalized and personalized in the form of the organization's employees. Their efforts are noble and always in pursuit of the right goals, but successful resettlement and integration cannot sprout from inconsistency. From the highest levels of international negotiations all the way down to the realities of life on Park Hill Avenue, the level of institutional coordination must be recalibrated until knowledge, resources, and principles can follow the example of the refugees themselves and travel across seemingly insurmountable divides.

Final Thoughts

The dominant paradigms of planning in New York are aimed at generality and tend to privilege the pursuit of profit above other concerns. This leaves vulnerable populations largely outside the psychological milieu of planners and policy-makers at the level of the city. Instead, efforts and services supportive of integration – that is, efforts and services that help refugees to meet their basic needs and, therefore, to work towards “fitting in” – occur more locally and rely, almost exclusively, on personal connections and the propensity of individuals to assist, to help. Because issues relating to downtrodden communities and, particularly, refugee populations remain largely invisible to planning practitioners more used to viewing the city as a singular entity, problems and opportunities that exist disparately and variously hold less appeal as targets for public funding and action.

By attempting to provide a portrait of life and experience on Park Hill Avenue, this thesis strives to bring visibility and audibility to the group of Liberian refugees in Park Hill, Staten Island. While making no pretense of broad applicability, this thesis presents, in a certain sense, a “What if?”: an exploration of what it means to look at a long-ignored slice of the city and consider, if greater sensitivity and consideration entered into our city’s planning efforts, what that slice might one day offer. Fragmentation and a constant search for more funding for social programs has led to a landscape that makes refugee lives in New York City full of difficulty and, often, despair; more worryingly, the landscape has been viewed as natural, as an almost ecological construction unable to be altered through human programming. Planning reconceptualized might explore spatial

projects aimed at changing this landscape: neighborhood rezoning offers one example of how planning alters the landscapes of singular areas; programs and patterns targeting neighborhoods with large numbers of refugees might achieve something similar in a socio-spatially equitable way. The recommendations laid out above, while seemingly small when taken singly, are ripe to undergo a sort of alchemy when taken together; in concert, they suggest a new orientation for planning, one which can take into account, and *plan for*, refugees in their new home city.

Ultimately, this thesis may offer more thoughts about the planner who I, personally, can be rather than any exhaustive exploration of refugee living or planning for refugees. The process has been one of filtration, of viewing a neighborhood and its people through a certain (changing, yes, but nevertheless specifically-informed) lens. It has been one of listening to what other want to tell me and how they want to tell me, of hearing what I choose to hear and problematizing these things as I wanted. Experience cannot be seen as truth. It can, however, suggest how I, as an individual, can view the lives of a population so different from my own and how I can engage with the questions that such lives raise. By exploring the ways in which what can be seen and heard interfaces with what can be studied and known, planning can begin to access isolated, downtrodden communities in ways that increase those communities' access to planning. This thesis, by presenting the efforts of one person to do that, hopefully encourages the integration the Park Hill Liberians, and other groups on the perpetual periphery, into the realm(s) of planning.

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Appendix

Neighborhood Elements

1. Retail spaces
 - a. Food/grocery stores (products from other culinary traditions)
 - b. Restaurants (foods from other cultures)
 - c. Clothing stores (culture-specific fashions)
2. Social services
 - a. Refugee-specific services (local offices of volunteer organizations)
 - b. Community support groups
 - c. Government services (financial assistance, food support, job training)
 - d. English classes
3. Public signage in non-English languages
4. Transportation (type, distance, connections)
5. Education
 - a. Type of schools (public, private, religious, vocational, charter)
 - b. Language of instruction
 - c. Permissible age ranges
6. Religious institutions
7. Public spaces
 - a. Available area
 - b. Uses or programming
 - c. Density of use (number of users)
 - d. Design elements (plantings, furniture, water, open space)

Questions for Refugees

1. What country do you originally come from?
2. When did you come to this neighborhood?
3. What do you use most frequently in this neighborhood? (List specific examples.)
 - a. Food/grocery stores
 - b. Restaurants

- c. Clothing stores
 - d. Social services
 - e. School
 - f. Public space
4. Based on the above response, do you recognize more people in your neighborhood since you started using this program?
 5. Does this neighborhood fulfil your daily needs?
 6. Do you have to travel to another neighborhood to access necessary goods or services?
 7. Do you see yourself or your interests reflected in the spaces/shops/amenities here? (List specific examples.)
 8. Moving to a new city makes it difficult to know where to go for everyday needs, like food or home supplies. How did you first learn where to go to find these things?
 9. It can also be hard to meet people in a new city. How have you met other people here?
 10. Did you know anyone in New York before you moved here?
 11. (If yes:) What advice or help, if any, did they offer you when you arrived?
 12. What makes you feel most comfortable in New York?
 13. What makes you feel least comfortable in New York?
 14. Is this street *yours*?
 15. Are you proud to live here?
 16. Is this area *home*?

Questions for Refugee Resettlement Agencies

1. How are sites or neighborhoods selected for refugee resettlement?
2. What voice do refugees have in the selection of their resettlement neighborhood?
3. How does your organization interact with neighborhoods in which refugees resettle before, during, and after the resettlement?
4. What is the typical time frame of assistance? Are deadlines strict, or are they malleable according to individual need?

5. What sort of relationship does your organization maintain with resettled refugees once they are no longer in the formal resettlement system?