



The Production of Just Space:
Climate Change and the Future of the New York City Housing Authority

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Michael Perles
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“Pressure from below must therefore also confront the state in its role as organiser of space, as the power that controls urbanization, the construction of buildings and spatial planning in general. The state defends class interests while simultaneously setting itself above society as a whole, and its ability to intervene in space can and must be turned back against it, by grass-roots opposition, in the form of counter-plans and counter-projects designed to thwart strategies, plans and programmes imposed from above.”

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974)

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Abstract:

The scientific community is all but certain that the planet is warming as a direct result of human interference with natural climatic systems. Climate change will affect everyone and everything on the planet but these effects will not be distributed equally or in the same way. It is clear that the most marginalized populations on the planet - the (urban) poor, women, children, people of color, the LGBTQ community and the elderly - will be most severely affected. Historically, national and international progress has been inadequate in addressing the profound issues surrounding climate change. Substantive progress is being made, however, in cities, especially in New York City. This thesis seeks to understand the idea that progress at a local, community level can affect city-wide policies and, potentially, larger scale (inter)national climate goals. The New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) Resident Green Committees (RGCs) are used as a lens to examine how pressure from communities can affect change in a climate agenda. Through a review of critical urban and spatial theory; interviews with RGC leaders, NYCHA officials, and public housing residents; and an analysis of the agendas and projects taking place at different housing projects and in NYC housing activism circles, an understanding of the ways in which socio-spatial justice influences our collective future will be completed.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me throughout the process of writing and researching this thesis. The work of my advisor, Joyce Klein-Rosenthal, has been immensely influential and inspiring in endeavoring to take on the task of researching climate policy issues as they relate to public housing. I would also like to thank all of those who have contributed their time and effort to this paper in the form of data sharing, interviews (both formal and informal), and constructive criticism. At NYCHA, the work of John Lisbon, the Resident Green Committee Coordinator, was vital in linking me with residents and programs to research. The Resident Green Committee Civic Corps members, Victoria Thornton and Christine Santiago, were equally as helpful and influential in my research. Bomee Jung and Rasmia Kirmani-Frye led this paper in a new direction and I'm humbled by the inspiring work they do every day to make public housing in New York City the best it can be. Activists at Families United for Racial and Economic Equality, Community Voices Heard, Community Service Society of New York, and many other groups helped me to contextualize the problems facing public housing and its residents. Thank you.

This paper is dedicated to those who live in, work for and prioritize public housing communities in New York City. Residents of NYCHA, even under sometimes bleak and marginalized conditions, humbled me by demonstrating the fundamental necessity of human relationships. New York City's greatness is forever indebted to the vibrancy of these people who celebrate life and refuse to give up in the face of an uncertain future.

A Note from the Author

This paper and the subjects it addresses are at times intense. These topics are certainly not easy to problematize. This work is a small contribution to public housing literature and its intersection with climate change. If anything, the project assisted me with understanding public housing and the challenges it faces as our society continues to contribute to a warming planet. The paper is structured as a series of interviews, both formal and informal. I wanted to humanize the issues as much as possible and, because of this, large-scale data analysis would miss the nuanced human scale. As mentioned in the paper, many multi-year studies from large organizations have already worked on macro-level number crunching. Various interviewees preferred to remain anonymous and I assured them of this right. In studying these topics, there are contradictory statements, feelings, and policies. I wanted to highlight this in order to demonstrate the importance of *people* in the housing issue and the fact that information can be dialectical. From my work as a student studying the multilayered complexities of urban planning, one topic continues to hold ultimate priority: that of the well-being of people, their communities, and the space they occupy. As a white, middle class man, it can be problematic to enter the spaces of residents of public housing. I was never met with friction and residents always welcomed me into communities in which I was foreign. It was my honor to speak with these residents and, as often as possible, this thesis uses the direct words of community members, activists, and administrators to argue a point. Although there are many quotes, I firmly believe that using the words of those affected

by public housing are a more effective tool to tell a story than any experience I could have from map making, analyzing data, or studying policy reports. It is my desire that by conducting this research, if anything, I have demonstrated that *housing is a right for all*, regardless of race, class, income, sexuality, age, nationality, or religious belief.

All text in brackets [] are additions and / or points of clarification from the author.

Statement of Purpose

Issues of social, environmental and spatial justice are becoming increasingly central to the themes of climate change mitigation and adaptation, especially as they relate to urban planning. Intersectionality is a vital topic to explore when discussing the effects of a warming planet, especially on the most marginalized communities in urban spaces, including the poor. NYCHA's Green Agenda programs are especially relevant because they are fundamentally concerned with issues of justice and environmental racism. NYCHA's Resident Green Committees (RGCs) are completely resident organized and leadership is voted on collectively, making their outcomes particularly useful in studying bottom-up approaches to climate action plans. The field of urban planning has experienced a critical shift from the dated, bureaucratic, top-down approaches of an all knowing governmental body to community-led, bottom-up collectives with innovative and site-specific approaches. Additionally, NYCHA is the largest landlord in the city, affecting 1/12 residents in New York City either directly through public housing or indirectly via other subsidy programs. Its housing stock is in a state of disrepair and funding for public housing is shrinking as costs to provide residents with adequate services and facilities are skyrocketing. This paper seeks to understand these problems, studying how climate change solutions are almost always improved by gaining insight from those who are most affected by the problem(s).

Introduction:

The scientific community is nearly certain that the planet is warming as a direct result of human interference in natural climatic systems. Since 1750, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) like carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide have significantly increased as a function of human activity and now immensely surpass pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2007). Climate change will affect everyone and everything on the planet but these effects will not be distributed equally or in the same way. Consequences of anthropogenic climate change will be felt both directly and indirectly as feedback systems exacerbate, proliferate, and reproduce problems in ever changing and more complex iterations. One thing is certain: the most marginalized populations on the planet - the (urban) poor, women, children, people of color, the LGBTQ community and the elderly - will be most severely affected (Satterthwaite, 2014) (Rosenthal et al, 2014).

Until 2015, national and international progress has been insufficient. Historically, the burden has been on nation-states which have been inefficient and embarrassingly unsuccessful in taking action. On the other hand, cities are making legitimate progress, preparing risk assessments and climate action plans with specific goals of GHG emissions reductions (Rosenzweig et al, 2010). In a talk with Steven Cohen, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, Emily Lloyd, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection stated, "What's fascinating is how much environmental policy is really bubbling up from the cities." Cynthia Rosenzweig et

al. (2010) elaborate, “Urban areas, home to more than half of the world’s people, are emerging as the ‘first responders’ in adapting to and mitigating climate change.” Cities all over the world, many of them in vulnerable locations along rising coasts or desertifying plains, are able to move quickly to adopt legislation and implement new design projects to safeguard their citizenry. In a paper concerning intersectionality as it relates to climate change (and more specifically localized climate action plans), Russo et al. (2015) argue “city-governments serve as one of the key laboratories for the creation, implementation, and examination of promising climate policies.” Ramaswami et al (2008) say cities “exert huge direct and indirect demands on our natural capital” while also being a stage to “engage vast segments of human populations.” As the majority of the global population lives in urban spaces (and as the proportion grows), climate policy at the city-level can be incredibly effective in genuinely reducing emissions. In New York City, different versions of Climate Action Plans have been implemented under different mayoral leadership, with murky and often poorly understood results. It is not yet possible to study the effectiveness of many of these plans as the impacts of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies on New York City, the surrounding region, and the planet are still relatively unknown. In addition, many goals set for the city are long term and abstract. A key pillar of the most recent Bill de Blasio Administration city-wide plan titled OneNYC (2015) involves an 80% reduction in GHG emissions from 2005 levels by 2050 (in this paper referred to as “80 x 50”), a lofty but attainable and absolutely necessary goal.

As New York City's largest landlord (as well as the largest and oldest public housing authority in the United States), the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is in a unique position to provide a legitimate contribution towards reaching the city's 80 x 50 emissions reduction. Some programs have already been implemented that are reducing NYCHA's carbon footprint as part of its 'Green Agenda.' In partnership with the Clinton Climate Initiative, NYCHA has replaced 178,000 conventional light bulbs with energy efficient compact fluorescent lamps (with plans to extend this program to many more units), replaced 450 hot water tanks, deployed advanced building technology to remotely monitor boilers, will replace 56,000 dated and inefficient refrigerators, and is actively involved in adding thousands of new trees and cultivating green spaces on its properties (NYCHA, n.d.). These efforts alone will not be nearly enough to bring the city toward its 80 x 50 goal but are an important first step. Recently, the authority has implemented a new program, GreenNYCHA, which seeks to affect change from the bottom-up through resident-organized groups called Resident Green Committees (RGC). These entities are comprised of public housing residents who are interested in fighting climate change and helping to preserve the housing stock of the housing projects in New York City. "We plan projects, organize events, and educate residents in their developments about environmental and energy issues... By increasing the energy efficiency of NYCHA buildings, improving green spaces, planting trees, exploring sustainable energy solutions and connecting residents with 'green collar' jobs, NYCHA will decrease its carbon footprint, save on energy costs, and help preserve public housing. *Resident participation is crucial to the success of the Green Agenda*"

[emphasis added] (NYCHA, 2014). These group are especially interesting to the urban planning process because they are independent and resident led. The RGC's "elect their own leaders, write their own mission statements, and decide what projects to take on... Since collective action is the only way to fight climate change, all residents, including seniors, youth, parents and people of all ages and backgrounds are invited to join the RGCs" (NYCHA, 2014).

A Changing Climate: Challenges in the Way of Effective Solutions

The entire world has watched as scientists, sociologists, architects, designers, planners, and theorists become ever more confident about the bleak fate of our planet, attempting to adjust their work to reflect a warmer world. The problems building up are becoming increasingly hard to fathom, understand, analyze and predict. Stephen Gardiner argues that these problems are *intergenerational*. Because molecules of the main greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, endure for centuries (and a significant proportion of those molecules stay in the atmosphere for thousands of years), it is impossible to know the definitive consequences that will result from the burning of these fossil fuels (Gardiner, 2011). Gardiner goes on to say that the “perfect moral storm” resulting from climate change has undermined effective policy in the United States and, as an extension, have stalled worldwide progress. “Leaders and their countries have been promising to act for nearly two decades now. But this has been a sad history of delay, obstruction, and broken promises” (Gardiner, 2011). Given neoliberal political cycles and the relatively short election terms politicians operate within, climate policy, not unlike policies related to public housing, are very often forced to take a back seat to programs with more immediately tangible threats. It will be hard to attribute “successful” and progressive legislation to the elected official who implements a program generations before results become concretized. If politicians can’t deliver immediate results, their public opinion poll numbers plunge. The mere mention of these issues can hurt a politician’s chance of (re)election. Some effects of climate change are far off and

there are myriad localized problems politicians need to address daily. Further complicating the issue, mega-capitalists and fossil fuel business interests often influence the political cycle, contributing false information, cover-ups, lies and often funding politicians who are willing to ignore science to solicit donations. In this way, Stephen Cohen (2006) rightly notes that “policy makers move away from problems rather than toward solutions.”

Policies related to public housing have followed a similar trend and are similarly poorly received, backed, understood and funded (Friedman, 1966). Indeed, facilitating the implementation of effective, progressive policy involves a necessary culture shift in the way we think about and conceptualize “society.” Subjects related to land use, resource consumption, materialism, environmental stewardship, economic growth, income (and wealth) inequality, and social justice must be problematized and critically examined in order for progress to be achieved. Often times, climate deniers who significantly delay progress understand uncertainty concerning climate science as misinformation or lies (Norgaard, 2011). In *A World After Climate Change and Culture Shift*, Jonathan M. Smith discusses the difficulties of preparing for and thinking about the future. He argues, “Futurology is always semi-fiction, just like history, but this does not mean it is sheer fantasy or idle speculation. Futurology and history are semi-fictional because their composition requires imagination as well as reason, imagination being the faculty by which one makes one’s self the subject of a reality that is not present to one’s senses” (Smith, 2014). Planning for the future is at best hard to conceptualize and at worst unnecessary in order to fulfill short term (and even some longer term) goals. This

problem directly relates to the malaise constituents exhibit concerning issues of social equity (such as public housing programs). Smith goes on to say that the idea of planning for the future can feel *uncanny*: vaguely ominous or peculiar. As human beings, we deal with this sense of “estrangement, angst, or alienation” (Smith, 2014) from the natural world through four different, sometimes overlapping and reinforcing “attitudes.” The first involves the attitude of rejection: a refusal to believe that planet earth is our *true* home, finding solace in religion and other forms of collective organization and “cosmic powers.” The second attitude deals with existentialism while the third involves feelings of naturalism: the idea that we have strayed far away from natural human ways and need a return to more primitive roots. The last attitude we demonstrate to cope with estrangement, angst, or alienation is the idea of escapism, commonly materialized in late capitalism as consumerism (Smith, 2014). All of these attitudes are present in our post-Fordist society and can explain much about the current state of inaction towards legally binding international climate action as well as effective and well-funded public housing programs. Toward the concluding thoughts, Smith mentions the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic, lamenting:

Catastrophic anthropogenic climate change will undermine confidence and complacency; in fact, it will appear as a slave revolt, the greatest nightmare of every comfortable ruling class. Romantic dreams of identification with nature are, after all, a luxury afforded to men who have dined well and are looking forward to a night of untroubled sleep in a comfortable bed. Men who miss meals and stand a good chance of

becoming a meal for something else see nature as an enemy (Smith, 2014).

These overlapping and perplexing issues inherently lead the (urban) public to argue for “the right to the city,” as made famous by Henri Lefebvre in his book, *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968). According to Peter Marcuse, the best definition given by Lefebvre of this complex idea says, “the right to the city is like a cry and a demand. This right slowly meanders through the surprising detours of nostalgia and tourism, the return to the heart of the traditional city, and the call of existent or recently developed centralities” (Lefebvre, 1968). Lefebvre describes the urban as a “field of relations,” the dominate relation being that between *time* and *space* (Lefebvre, 1968). Peter Marcuse explains this dialectic further in his chapter titled “Whose right(s) to what city?”, saying urban dwellers cry “out of necessity” and demand “for something more” (Brenner, Marcuse et al, 2012). Later, Marcuse mentions a previously developed framework he calls “Critical Planning” that is composed of three steps: *Expose*, *Propose*, and *Politicize* (Brenner, Marcuse et al, 2012). Although not explicitly examined in this paper, it is with this theoretical framework that this study will analyze NYCHA’s Resident Green Committees effectiveness in addressing urban climate issues.

In order to fully understand the theoretical issues at hand, a further exploration into Marcuse’s first step, *Expose*, is warranted. In exposing the issues related to housing inequality and climate change, a necessary introduction to the concept of spatial justice must be explored. In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Edward Soja (2010) defines spatial (in)justice as the idea that social justice is inherently influenced and exists as a

part of space. "Space is actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination" (Soja, 2010). Now, more than ever, "the spatial organization of human society" and the ways in which it shapes global cities and the perpetually expanding global economy is "widely recognized as an influential factor shaping human behavior, political action, societal development" and the physical structure and design of our cities (Soja, 2010). Given the issues facing the (especially American) contemporary city, Soja goes on to argue that justice today works most effectively "across cleavages of class, race, and gender to foster a collective political consciousness," create solidarity, and problematize the most challenging and existential crises that the contemporary world faces across many segments of the political spectrum" (Soja, 2010). Space, Soja continues, is similar to justice in that it "is never simply handed out or given... both are socially produced, experienced, and contested on constantly shifting social, political, economic, and geographical terrains" which means that "justice - if it is to be concretely achieved, experienced and reproduced - must be engaged on spatial as well as social terrains" (Soja, 2010). The planet is filled with spatial injustices, exemplified in the marginalization and concentration of the urban poor in housing projects, often far away from the center of the city, basic amenities, and open space. In his earlier book, *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), Soja expands on John Berger's idea that space can hide consequences from us, "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology." The historically discussed social injustices facing society today

are manifestations of socially produced space, “some of which are now being aggravated by the uneven geographical impact of socially produced climate change and global warming” (Soja, 2010).

These socio-spatial problems, much like a warming climate, can compound and reinforce themselves into fundamentally racist outcomes, whether the result is intended or not. Environmental racism, which Soja claims is a subset of spatial justice, is the idea that “environmental hazards are inequitably distributed,” with the world’s poor and people of color bearing a greater share of environmental risks, hazards, and exposures (Cole and Foster, 2001). Work against environmental racism and, more broadly, spatial justice must involve a grassroots struggle. “Grassroots struggles are a crucial arena in which to restructure social relations through systems of localized environmental decision making” and “Environmental Justice requires democratic decision making, community empowerment, and the incorporation of social structure” (Cole and Foster, 2001). Unfortunately, too often urban planners, urban designers, architects, and urbanists take the injustices they witness and attempt to act on the production of (social) space by becoming “doctors of space” (Lefebvre, 1991). Again, space conceals consequences from us. Instead of arguing that the result of these injustices are linked to our dysfunctional economic system, society often comes to the conclusion that there is a “sickness” in society and man has become a “monster, a mistake, a failed species on a failed planet” (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre argues that this leads “*necessarily* to nihilism” (1991).

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre's critical urban theory borders nihilism when he discusses the disappearance of (physical) natural space, a hauntingly foreshadowing thought when projected to present-day. It could also be read to include the concentration of marginalized populations at the frontline of this destruction of nature. He writes:

Everyone wants to protect and save nature; nobody wants to stand in the way of an attempt to retrieve its authenticity. Yet at the same time everything conspires to harm it. The fact is that natural space will soon be lost to view. Anyone so inclined may look over their shoulder and see it sinking below the horizon behind us. Nature is also becoming lost to *thought*. For what is nature? How can we form a picture of it as it was before the intervention of humans with their ravaging tools? Even the powerful myth of nature is being transformed into a mere fiction, a negative utopia: nature is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces. True, nature is resistant, and infinite in its depth, but it has been defeated, and now waits only for its ultimate voidance and destruction (Lefebvre, 1991).

This prediction is heavily influenced by Karl Marx who claimed that the modern age can be characterized by the urbanization (and exploitation) of the countryside. Neil Brenner describes most non-urban spaces as "operationalized" in some way to support the urban core. In many ways, *the entire planet is already urbanized* (Brenner, 2014). If we

continue our current path of hyper-capitalist urbanization, the dystopian futures that Smith, Lefebvre and Marx paint *de facto* become reality. All three would likely argue that it is a world in which we already live.

These arguments only make the grassroots struggle mentioned by Cole et al. even more vital in conceptualizing our collective future. When issues concerning housing inequity and / or climate change are localized, problems of environmental racism can be remedied through critical analysis using the lens of spatial justice. This environmental consciousness has the opportunity to “transform the possibilities of fundamental social and environmental change through redefinition, reinvention, and construction of innovative political and cultural discourse and practices” which can include “new forms of grassroots political organization” (Cole and Foster, 2001). Sherry R. Arnstein’s *A Ladder of Participation* (1969) notes that “It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the policies and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.” Many of the New York City Housing Authority programs on the Green Agenda, like the RGCs, inherently deal with a grassroots struggle for justice within NYC public housing developments. They are self-organized and encourage a collaborative nature of information and resource sharing between different RGCs of other NYCHA housing developments throughout the city. By studying these Resident Green Committees, I seek to better understand that citizen participation “is the means by which [have-not citizens] can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society” (Arnstein, 1969).

Housing and Flexible Accumulation

Is there an agenda to fundamentally undermine public housing in New York City?

In order to fully understand and problematize public housing in New York City, it is important to assert the notion of space in its history. Time has always been the dominate storyteller. For spatial justice purposes, this chapter will lay out a brief and selective history of public housing in the United States while exploring possible shortcomings, both geopolitically and socio-spatially.

Initial attempts at housing reform were done primarily through building code enforcement, mostly bubbling up from abysmal tenement style housing in New York City (and other densifying cities) in the 19th century. Documentation and journalism during the end of the 19th century recorded the atrocious state of housing of the “other half” due to the enormous greed and concentration of wealth from a small handful of New Yorkers (Riis, 1891). Because there already exist exhaustive, incredibly well-researched volumes on this subject, this paper will not go into depth with this history. Instead, the motives and spatial dynamics of this process will be explored.

According to many of the most widely cited and well-circulated publications, public housing was officially “created” during the prime of architectural modernism, with the Federal Housing Act of 1934, which set out to make (private, single family) homes and mortgages more affordable, also creating the Federal Housing Administration, the United States Housing Authority, and engendering the New York City Housing Authority that same year (National Housing Act of 1934, 1934) (Consolidated Laws of New York

State, 1934). The United States Housing Act of 1937, also known as the Wagner-Steagall Act, followed just a few years later, bulking up some programs and attempting to clarify others (United States Housing Authority, 1937) (Friedman, 1966). This federal legislation was not initially intended to serve the “poorest of the poor” but to house certain divisions of the working class during and immediately after the depression as well as to provide jobs in a sluggish economy (Stoloff, 2009). This provision to create jobs not only allowed the housing legislation to pass congress, it also informed the priority (or lack there of) in housing people of the lowest incomes by writing into law slum clearance and urban renewal, what can only be defined as a disastrous, racially charged urban planning policy (United States Housing Authority, 1937) (Marcuse, 1995). Strict income limits were imposed on residents that had the effect of “penalizing residents for upward mobility” (Stoloff, 2009). The Housing Act of 1949 expanded the authority of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and, along with it, the ability for the US government to continue and bolster slum clearance – Title 1 of the federal act (United States Housing Authority, 1949). Many, notably James Baldwin, labeled the slum removal program “negro removal” as the racialized policy of powerful officials removed more housing than was actually replaced (Baldwin, 1963) (Chronopoulos, 2011). Questions of the motives of these housing programs also arose. Was public housing created to improve the lives of the poorest people in the country or to alleviate the negative externalities those poverty-stricken residents created on higher income properties across the street?

The widespread belief that public housing was created to house the poor and improve their lives is, according to Peter Marcuse (1995), false and hides the true nature of the policy. He argues that the widely accepted and understood paradigms of public housing and the benevolent nature of federal (as well as state and municipal) governance in public housing rests on two assumptions, the first being that the “subject” of public housing exists and its purpose is to provide decent housing for the poor. The second assumption is that the “subject” of housing policy exists and “is intended first and foremost to address issues of housing” (Marcuse, 1995). “From the point of view of historical analysis, these assumptions are true only at the level of triviality; from the point of view of planning or policy analysis, both are deceptively wrong” (Marcuse, 1995).

It is argued that public housing programs have in fact been the product of widely differing forces, ranging from fear of social unrest to the desire to abate unemployment to concerns for the ill-housed to the search for profits in the real estate and allied industries to the needs for redevelopment to racism and anti-racism to political considerations of constituency stabilization (among other forces); that a large, not random, pattern can be discerned in the interaction of these forces; that the result is, not one public housing program, but perhaps seven different programs, held together primarily by the name given to them and the section numbers of federal law governing them; that these programs have been, in each case, not the results of any deliberate housing policy but rather the side effects

of the pursuit of quite other (non-housing) goals by the decisive actors involved (Marcuse, 1995).

Charles Jencks declared the end of modernist architecture as the exact moment in time when The Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis, Missouri fell: July 15th, 1972 at 3:32PM. David Harvey opens “Flexible Accumulation Through Urbanization” with this, arguing that with this fall, postmodernism grew out of the ashes. In the early 1970’s, “Modernism had by then lost all semblance of social critique. The protopolitics or Utopian program (the transformation of all social life by way of the transformation of space) had failed and modernism had become closely linked to capital accumulation

through a project of Fordist modernization characterized by rationality, functionality, and efficiency” (Harvey, 1990). Post-modernism appears as a method or justification to spatially intervene in development, necessarily finding “cultural logic” in late-capitalism, a concept made famous by Jameson. In lieu of criticism, urbanization and developmental logic becomes



Figure 1 – Pruitt-Igoe from above (Source: United States Geological Survey)

subservient to capitalism and its grotesque manifestations.

Harvey goes on to describe what this can do to a group of people. Low income populations, unable to overcome or command space, find themselves trapped in it. Without ownership of the basic means of reproduction, space can only be dominated through:

“continuous appropriation. Exchange values are scarce, and so the pursuit of use values for daily survival is central to social action. This means frequent material and interpersonal transactions and the formation of very small scale communities. Within the community space, use values get shared through some mix of mutual aid and mutual predation, creating tight but often highly conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both private and public spaces (Harvey, 1990).

This creates an attachment to turf and a heightened sense of boundaries often demonstrated in public housing projects. “Is it only through active appropriation that control over space is assured” (Harvey, 1990). Advanced capitalism prioritizes spatial over historical processes through territorial competition, Alejandro Zeara Polo argues, and the “battle becomes territorial instead of class-oriented” (1994). Chaos in the whole system leads to incoherence in policy as citizens who have been marginalized look to the state for help but find none. “The state is largely experienced as an agency of repressive control (in police, education, etc.) rather than as an agency that can be controlled by and bring benefits” to the public (Harvey, 1990). This only reiterates what Lefebvre and other social justice advocates have cried and demanded since Karl Marx.

“True empowerment for the presently disempowered must be won by struggle from below and not given out of largesse from above” (Harvey, 1990).

The first meeting at a public housing development I attended for research took place at Atlantic Terminal Site 4B, often referred to as Atlantic Terminal houses, on February 24th, 2016 in the campus’ community center. The housing development is a single, 31-story “tower in the park” on the corner of Carlton Ave and Atlantic Avenue in Fort Green, Brooklyn. It is the tallest NYCHA residential property and contains 300 units and approximately 600 residents. The building takes up approximately 17.4% of the campus land and the average rent for a four-bedroom apartment in 2015 was \$485 a month (NYCHA, 2015). In terms of household composition, the largest subsets of the residents are single seniors (making up 23% of the population) and single non-seniors (making up 26% of the housing development). There are only 5% of couples with children of any age while 29% of households are single parents with children of any age. 54% of the population is unemployed (MyNYCHA, 2016). Interestingly, this project was completed in April 1976, only a few years after the fall of Pruitt-Igoe and during the beginnings of what Harvey, Zera Polo, and other spatial theorists define as postmodernism.

This meeting at Atlantic Terminal houses was meant as an event to inform residents of different programs, organizations and opportunities available to them. Michael Higgins, a community organizer from Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), presented on participatory budgeting; the police were supposed to present on work they were doing to better protect and work with the community (they

didn't show up), and John Lisbon from NYCHA presented on the program he organizes, Resident Green Committees (RGCs), a resident led initiative from NYCHA's Green Agenda. A full agenda of the meeting can be found in *Figure 2*. John had been in contact with the Resident Association (RA) president from Atlantic Terminal houses. She was excited by the opportunity to create gardens in the green spaces on her development and to get the residents involved in conserving energy and working on projects, together as a community. She mentioned, "I think it's important for us to be able to grow our own food, eat healthy, and know where the food comes from."

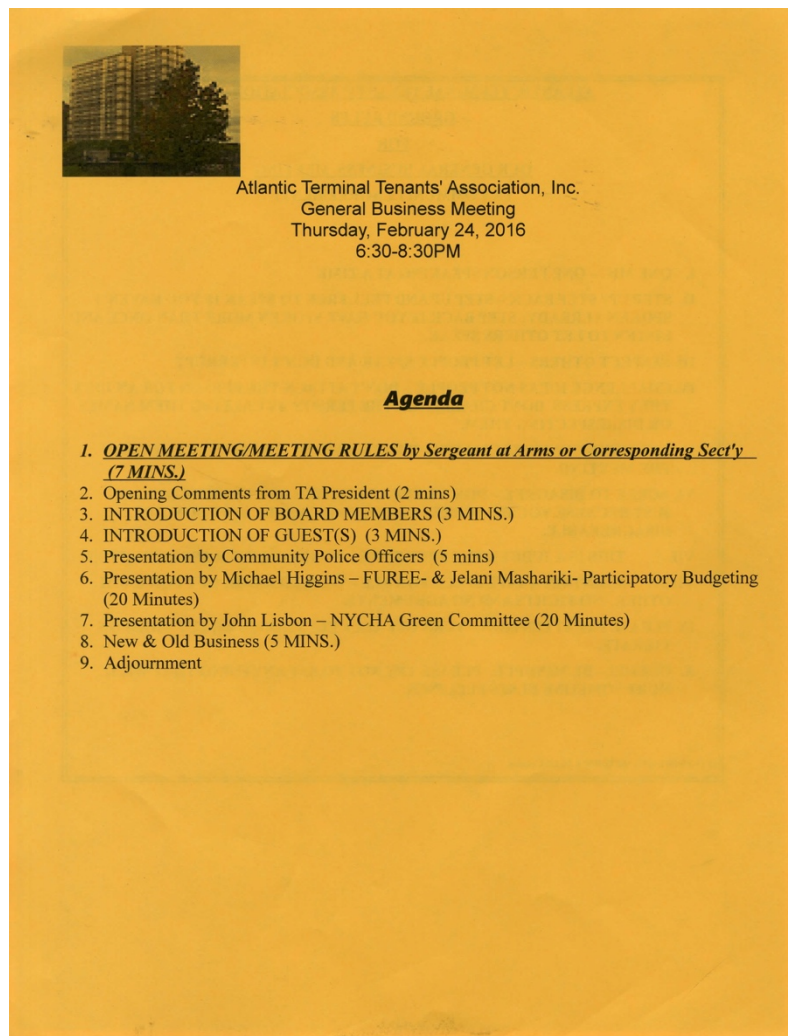


Figure 2 - Atlantic Terminal Tenants' Association General Meeting Agenda

One of the main goals this RA president established was to plant Japanese Cherry trees, from which cherry blossoms would bloom on her development's housing grounds. John had connections with tree planting community organizations and came to tell the president she would be getting the trees. After the meeting, the president mentioned that "aromatherapy gives a sense of place. The first thing you notice [about a place] is the smell." This seemingly simple but vital sense-of-place is important in what the author would describe as cold, ominous towers looming over other 4-6 story buildings in the neighborhood. The fact that this development stands out in the context of its surroundings, however, is changing. The redevelopment of Atlantic Terminal is rapidly bringing residential towers that are higher than NYCHA's Atlantic Terminal Houses, but these new expensive apartments are unaffordable to the present community, and thus appear intended for wealthier residents. Later, when asked about the Atlantic Terminal RA president, John elaborated,

Her whole idea of having some kind of aromatherapy in terms of planting different trees that give off pleasant scents, calming people, I think it's amazing that she thinks that way, that this can cause mood changes for some of the people [on the campus]. Especially in the warmer weather months where you have fights and all kinds of things taking place in some of the developments. This can change people's moods. It's quite interesting. People usually want to plant trees and plant gardens because they look nice. But in terms of changing people's mindsets, that was new to me and it was quite interesting. They have different reasons for creative

RGCs but all of them are positive and they all tend to make the developments a better place (Lisbon, 2016).

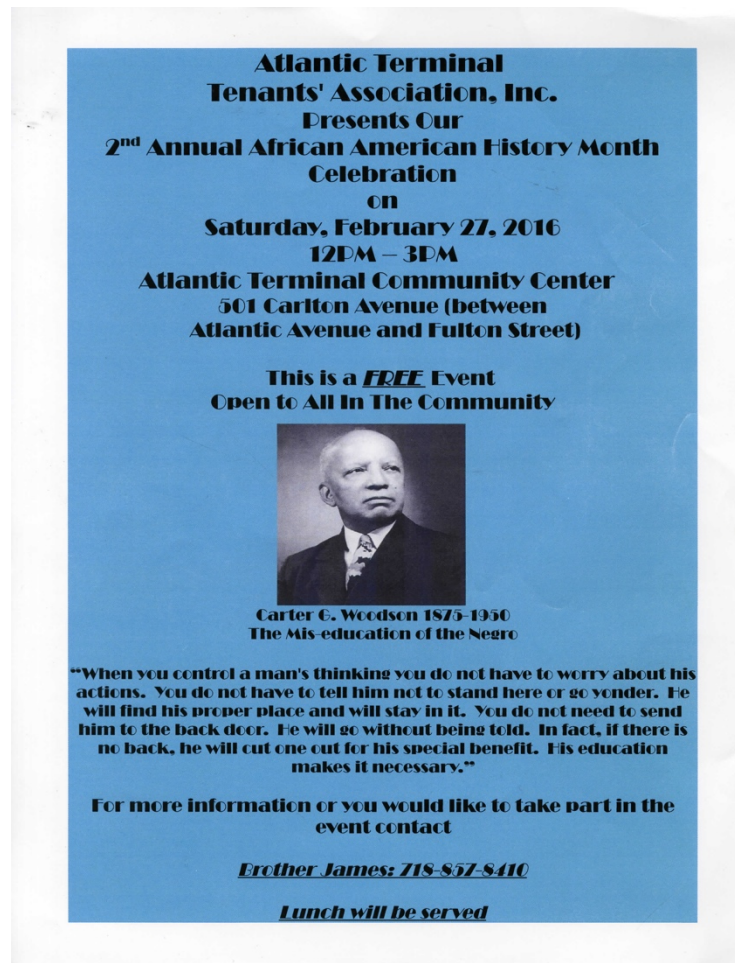


Figure 3 - Flyer given out at Atlantic Terminal Houses for a Black History Month celebration

Unfortunately, the meeting at the community center at Atlantic Terminal houses only drew three residents from the development: two men and a woman, all adults. The RA president expressed her frustration and mentioned that there was a lack of interest in the meeting at her development. Regarding residents' attitudes to these kinds of meetings she said, "I don't think [they think] it's important. It's not what's on their agenda." When asked to about the barriers to reaching residents, the president was quick to interject: *attitude*. Not having any knowledge on a subject, she told me,

discourages people from wanting to learn about new programs. This, in her mind, is the main problem for organizing residents to build a community garden, plant trees that have pleasing smells, or enact energy and water saving conservation measures in their development. She suggested that if they knew these programs would save NYCHA money and this money would be put back into capital improvements on the Atlantic Terminal houses campus, more people would be in attendance. The conversation ended with physical frustration at her residents and the state of public housing. Commenting on the future of NYCHA, the RA president told me “It’s going to get to a boiling point and then its going to burst. It’s just like a bubble. Let’s just hope we’re going to survive.” A flyer given out at this meeting for an upcoming Black History Month celebration had a quote from Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (shown in *Figure 3*) “When you control a man’s thinking you do not need to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and stay in it. You do not have to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back, he will cut one out for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary” (Woodson, 1990). It was at this meeting that I learned of the Public Housing Legislative Agenda and the trip up to Albany taking place mid-March, 2016 (from the flyer shown in *Figure 4*).



#PUBLICHOUSINGMATTERS!

JOIN THE
Public Housing Legislative Agenda (PHLA) Committee
Other Resident Leaders and Hundreds of Residents
As we take over ALBANY to say
PRESERVE AND IMPROVE PUBLIC HOUSING!

What do We Want: MORE FUNDING FOR PUBLIC HOUSING
When: WEDNESDAY MARCH 16, 2016
Where: ALBANY LEGISLATIVE OFFICE ALBANY, NY
Time: BUS DEPARTS 7:00AM SHARP RETURN: 6:00PM

(Trip is free; lunch and light snack will be provided)

RSVP by Friday, March 11th to reserve spot, see bus locations below:

Bronx:	Mo (212) 860-6001 ext 27	TBD
Brooklyn:	Shatia (718) 852- 2960	Atlantic Terminal/ One Hanson Pl.
Manhattan:	Gabe (212) 860-6001	Harlem St. Office Bldg. 163 W. 125 St.
Queens:	Gabe (212) 860-6001 ext 28	TBD

Sponsored by

Community Voices Heard (CVH), CVH Power, Community Service Society of NY (CSS), Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), Mothers on the Move (MOM), Public Housing Communities, Public Housing Legislative Agenda, Real Affordability For All (RAFA)

The future if we don't act NOW



Figure 4 - Flyer given out at Atlantic Terminal Houses Business Meeting on February 24th, advertising the Public Housing Legislation Agenda trip to Albany


Pressure from Below: Culture Shift and a New Generation of Public Housing

The Public Housing Legislative Agenda (PHLA) Committee organized a trip up to Albany on March 16th, 2016 to demand state funding for public housing. This committee is comprised of many local, New York City based activist groups sponsored the event, including Community Voices Heard (CVH), Community Service Society of New York (CSS), Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), Teamsters Local 237, and Real Affordability for All (RAFA), among others. The 2016 meeting brought up 15 buses of public housing residents (and a few organizers and allies) for the day-long event, which included speeches from elected officials and community activists, private legislative visits with representatives, and New York State Assembly Chamber visits (schedule in *Figure 5*).

The demands of the PHLA were simple: more money to lead New York City public housing into fiscal sustainability. The agenda pushed for \$5 Billion dollars over the next ten years (also alternatively posed as \$2.5 billion over the next five) in state funding for major capital improvements for NYCHA buildings. To put this in perspective, many considered the 2015 New York state budget of \$100 million to be a giant step forward and a huge success. This was “the first infusion of state funds for NYCHA since 1998” (Youdelman, 2015). The 2016 PHLA group requested that their \$5 billion plan be developed in parallel to the Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Affordable Housing Plan. Additionally, the agenda looks to allocate \$400 million in Battery Park City Authority

SCHEDULE

#PublicHousingMatters Albany Advocacy Day



7:00 am Buses depart from New York City

10:00 am Buses begin to arrive at the Empire State Plaza
(Drop off location is at 279 Madison Avenue; Walk along concourse to Convention Hall.)

10:30 am Orientation in Convention Hall, including Legislative Visit Training
(First meeting teams - with meetings at 11:00am - will train and depart quickly.)

11:00 am - 3:00 pm

MAIN PROGRAM	LEGISLATIVE VISITS	CHAMBER VISITS
Throughout the day, in the Convention Hall, there will be large group program activities including things like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the Day • Call Out of Power Team • Review of Asks • Ongoing Prep for Legislative Meetings • Visits from Elected Officials • Report Outs from the Visits • Speak Outs on Key Public Housing Topics 	Meetings are scheduled with Legislators (Assembly Members and Senators) between 11am and 3pm. Small teams of 5-8 people will head to these meetings. Each Team has a Team Leader that has a 20-minute meeting agenda and report out forms so that we can make sure to capture what commitments we get and what we learn in the meetings. Other Teams will do "drop-offs" of information packets to legislators that we don't have scheduled meetings with.	At particular times during the day, individuals that are quick on their feet will be asked to join teams to go to the Assembly and Senate Chambers and pass along messages to the larger legislative bodies. We'll visit the outside of each of the chambers while the legislative bodies are in session, and hand out fliers to people - both legislators and other advocates - so that people know why we're in Albany today and our presence will be felt!

12:30 pm LUNCH – Convention Hall (For Ticket Holders ONLY)
Ticket holders have paid for lunch in advance. Lunch will be available in the Convention Hall starting at 12pm. If you're in a meeting, grab it when you return!
Note! If you do not have a ticket, you will have to purchase lunch on your own.

Program and Legislative Visits Continue Throughout

3:00 pm Wrap up of official Advocacy Day Program!
(Please wait for your bus number to be called, then move to concourse pick up area.)

3:30 pm Buses begin departing; All buses have pre-set departure times

5:00 pm Last buses take off and head back to NYC

Figure 5 - Public Housing Legislative Agenda Committee Albany Advocacy Day Schedule

excess revenues for these improvements. According to flyers handed out at the meeting (Figure 6), this can be accomplished by the Governor, NYC Comptroller, and NYC Mayor signing the agreement – Governor Cuomo and NYC Comptroller Scott Stringer are allegedly in support of this. Additionally, the PHLA is asking for the creation of an independent oversight council, made up of elected officials, community stakeholders, advocacy groups and NYCHA residents that would hold NCYHA “accountable to

funding allocation commitments and achieving fiscal solvency” (Public Housing Legislative Agenda, 2016).

NYCHA RESIDENTS & ALLIES:
We are tired of NEVER hearing a plan to Preserve Public Housing
We DEMAND a Parallel Affordable Housing Plan
\$5 Billion (over 10 years) in STATE FUNDING TO RESTORE DECENT LIVING CONDITIONS

The Need

- NYC public housing is a major affordable housing resource—179,000 apartments housing a half-million New Yorkers—the largest such program in the country.
- Without adequate operating and capital funds, buildings will fall into greater disrepair. Some may have to be vacated. Others may be “privatized” to bring in private capital for major improvements.
- Washington is not going to provide the necessary funds for the foreseeable future. State and city investments are needed to sustain NYCHA public housing

Why Does the State bear Responsibility?

- NYCHA's failing physical and financial condition over the last 15 years is the result of government disinvestment at all levels—federal, city and state.
- The state contributed heavily to the crisis. In 1998, Governor Pataki ended operating subsidies to 15 state developments, leaving NYCHA with an operating shortfall of \$60 million annually. The cumulative shortfall amounts to \$720 million.

What we are Demanding From Albany--\$\$\$

State:

- Develop a plan parallel to the Governor's Affordable Housing Plan. Which commits \$5 billion in State Funds over the Next 10 Years to Major Capital Improvements in NYCHA Buildings
- Continue the agreement of dedicating \$400 million in Battery Park City Authority excess revenues to NYCHA capital improvements. *This can be accomplished simply by the Mayor and Governor signing agreement.*
- Develop an Independent Council made up of Elected Officials, Stakeholders, Advocacy groups and NYCHA residents to hold NYCHA accountable to funding allocation commitments and achieving fiscal solvency.

Figure 6 – Public Housing Legislative Agenda Housing Plan

These demands were especially pertinent given that the same day, *the New York Times* published an article titled “U.S. Investigating Elevated Blood Lead Levels in New York’s Public Housing” (Navarro, 2016). The article points out that the New York City

Housing Authority might not be providing housing that is “decent, safe, sanitary and in good repair” (an issue many NYCHA residents are quick to bring up when discussing their living conditions). As reports of elevated blood lead levels in New York public housing are studied, the US courts are investigating whether the city falsified claims to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development of lead poisoning to garner funding. As this unfolds, issues of long term lead poisoning are being exposed in Flint, Michigan; Newark, New Jersey and countless other cities in the country and around the world (Wang, 2016). As more information becomes available, the issues only become more complicated and the long-term impacts more severe (Mazzola, 2016) (Fonger, 2015). These three cities, both comprised of a majority of African Americans and both with median family income significantly lower than the United States average, are sites where racism is spatialized (US Census, 2010).



Figure 7 – Public Housing Legislative Agenda Albany Meeting, morning session

The lack of attendance was the first thing that became apparent at the housing meeting in Albany. As compared to the 500 NYCHA residents that showed up in 2015, there were estimated to be only 100 residents in 2016. The author believes that this could have been because the previous year's efforts were considered a success as \$100 million in state funds were allocated, because an all-day and very early morning commitment was required, or because of a general lack of interest. Either way, the those who were in attendance were predominantly seniors and predominantly women. Daniel Barber, the President of the Residents Association at Andrew Jackson Houses in the Bronx, told the crowd he was proud of a handful of young people who came out to support the PHLA, but was still disappointed in the overall turnout of the event. "We should be ashamed of ourselves because there needed to be more of us" (Barber, 2016). Although it was immediately apparent to the author that there was a massive push from organizers and the event was, overall, well thought out and coherently planned, organizers admitted that the turnout was lower than everyone expected. Regardless, the day started off energetically and most public housing residents in attendance were eager to speak with legislators and elected officials to demand additional funding to their budget-starved housing campuses.

Early during the morning plenary session, an older female resident of NYCHA who preferred to remain anonymous told a group of residents:

We want a fair share of the tax dollars that we pay put into public housing.
Ask your TA [tenant association] presidents to make sure you have voter

registration cards in your rooms and make sure that every resident is registered to vote. We have four major elections coming up in this city and we need to stand up and be counted so that elected officials understand that we do vote and we're not playing. We're going to look at their records and if they're anti-NYCHA, they're anti-us! ...They need to understand that we are organized, we mean business, and we need to hold every elected official - from the President down - accountable!

There was an eagerness, almost a desperation from residents to have their voices heard, and more importantly, respected. One resident was furious about the lack of respect she felt she received from those in power. Bringing up the controversy surrounding Mayor Bill de Blasio allocating funds for a horse carriage in central park, she burst out, "Do they think the horses are more important than the people in public housing? If they're making that kind of statement, we need to get louder and say we do not accept that!"

This idea that the people should have a say in their state funding schemes was echoed by many representatives that addressed the crowds. Michael Blake, an assemblyman of the 79th district in the Bronx (representing portions of Concourse Village, Morrisania, Melrose, Belmont, Claremont and East Tremont neighborhoods) told the day's attendees, "You elect us to do our job. You elect us to do something different. You don't elect us to just win a campaign. You have folks who are talking a big game but they won't stand up for folks who live in public housing right now" (Blake, 2016). Blake reiterated that sentiment that these residents do matter. "A budget shows

someone's values. A budget shows someone priorities and this is when you hold us accountable." (Blake, 2016) In addressing the many issues with the conditions of public housing structures in New York City, he stated, "It makes no sense whatsoever that we are in a society where we're not fixing it when someone has mold in their apartment, where security locks are broken, when someone's trying to figure out how to get in my house. Where they don't have heat in their home. It is injustice. It is inhumane" (Blake, 2016). The assemblyman had the same passion as many of the residents in the convention hall in Albany.

And for those elected that don't stand up for you, vote them out. If they won't stand up for you, kick them out. They have to do their jobs right now. Tell them to stand up for you. Because if they can have a nice house, if they can have good heat, if they can have good water, you should have good heat. You should have great water. You should have protection. If they can have security on their locks, you should have security on your locks (Blake, 2016).

The next senator to speak was Felix Ortiz, the assistant speaker of District 51 in Brooklyn, covering parts of Red Hook, Greenwood, Gowanus, and Sunset Park. He started by announcing, "*This is your house. You belong here. Nobody can tell you otherwise. You put us in office, you sent us here to do the people's work... You deserve better*" (Ortiz, 2016). Speaker Ortiz was in a unique position because his district is incredibly vulnerable to raising seas. It was significantly inundated by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The speaker represents Red Hook Houses, the largest NYCHA development in

Brooklyn and the second largest in NYCHA's portfolio. Because of these vulnerabilities, Red Hook Houses resiliency efforts have been some of the most responsive of all NYCHA developments post-sandy, working with the community on rebuilding, with funds coming from FEMA, NYCHA, as well as City, State and Federal agencies (Hewes, 2015). Commenting on the impact of the storm on the public housing community in his district, Mr. Ortiz was passionate:

When Sandy happened, everybody came together. Everybody bonded together, everybody helped each other, everybody talked to each other and everybody came to the rescue of each other. But now we need to remember Sandy and come to the rescue of ourselves to help us to demand from this government, as I was mentioning before, we need to demand from the city, from the state, and furthermore, we need to keep the pressure on the federal government. The federal government hasn't done anything to insure that we can have new development in the city, in the state, and in this country. *No new money has come from the federal government to build for low income families* (Ortiz, 2016).

Mr. Ortiz urged the audience to *cry out* for change. He said he refused to have New York's public housing developments eliminated. He urged those listening to pressure their representatives to work toward improving funding on capital repairs. He also stressed the need to keep the Section 8 program (also known as the Housing Choice Voucher program) alive. This program offers vouchers, administered by NYCHA (the largest section 8 program in the country), that subsidize rent in private housing for low

and moderate income families (New York City Housing Authority, n.d.). This was a point that many brought up throughout the day: the rhetoric around housing affordability from all three levels of government: local, state, and federal, has not been focused on low income residents.

Speaking again to the importance of the preservation of public housing, Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, who represents the 34th Senate District in the Bronx, said,

I think we have to spread the word that NYCHA developments are not only important to each and every one of us who live in them. *NYCHA developments are an important part of the communities that they're located in.* Let me tell you something, if NYCHA goes down, those communities are going to go down with them. So we have to make sure everyone understands that *what's good for NYCHA is always good for the surrounding community.* That's something that's extremely important (Klein, 2016).

Senator Klein has a proven record of not only supporting NYCHA but advocating for its residents. He demonstrated the importance of NYCHA as well as the need to fight for low income people in New York regarding new agendas and recently enacted policies:

Everyone's talking about affordable housing. Well you want to know something? *The best example of affordable housing is NYCHA developments.* And if we don't keep those apartments in good repair and if we don't keep those buildings fixed up properly, we're going to lose the

most important affordable housing that we have in the City of New York.

We have to make sure that doesn't happen (Klein, 2016).

Senator Klein along with Ritchie Torres, a Council member for the 15th district of the New York City Council in the Bronx, released a study that, according to the both of them, demonstrated what the housing residents have been saying for years. "We found mold in buildings where 55% of the young people that live there have respiratory problems. That's a disaster" (Klein, 2016). The senator was frustrated by what he called a lack of oversight. In Klein's mind, the authority was incorrectly using the state funds he fought for last year. Acknowledging that he would continue to fight for funding from the state, he added, "It becomes very, very difficult for me to convince my colleagues around the state of New York who don't represent any NYCHA developments when NYCHA still hasn't made the repairs from the \$100 million that we gave them last year" (Klein, 2016). He argued that the funds he approved were not being properly used and there was no evidence that these funds had been directly put into capital repairs, the deficit of which sits at \$17 billion (New York City Housing Authority, 2016). By the end of his speech to the residents, Klein was furious. "NYCHA is the worst landlord in the City of New York. You know, if this was a private building, owned by a landlord, they'd take the building away from them. They wouldn't allow tenants to live under these circumstances." While the author may not agree with all of Klein's opinions, it was encouraging to see how much Senator Klein cared for the people he was speaking to. It was obvious that Klein had his constituents' best interest in mind. Perhaps the rhetoric that was being used was severe in order to make an impact. He ended with a call to fix

the living conditions in the units not only in his district but in all of New York City's public housing stock. "We don't need a band aid approach. We need roofs fixed. We need major capital improvements. We need intercoms, we need all of the things that make NYCHA developments the housing stock it should be. That is extremely important" (Klein, 2016). Most people working on housing issues in the United States would likely agree with this, regardless of whether or not they would agree with the rest of Senator Klein's statements.

To complicate NYCHA conditions further, elected officials in Albany appeared to be apathetic toward NYCHA residents. To the author, it appeared that the lobbying trip was a political revelation for many residents who started to realize their perceived status amongst lawmakers and officials. Throughout the day, more and more people brought up the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Although Klein, Ortiz, Blake and a few others in Albany were clearly passionate about the issue and were fighting for NYCHA residents, of the private legislative visits I attended, the senators and assembly men and woman who scheduled meetings with residents were visibly more concerned with other, non-NYCHA issues. Of all the private, 30 minute to hour-long meetings that took place that day (scheduled months in advance and were planned to be between the elected official and NYCHA residents), I heard of only one meeting where NYCHA residents actually meet with their elected official. Most officials had their press secretaries, interns, or other staff members meet with the NYCHA residents and activists. Amongst the NYCHA residents, the frustration over their reception was widespread. Abraham Weight, a longtime NYCHA resident reflected on the private meeting with a senator. He

told me, “We asked for more money and it seemed like he didn’t know what we were talking about... They think we’re not worth it, but we are” (Weight, 2016).

Here, an article published in *The Nation* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward from 1966 is particularly fitting. In “*The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty*,” the authors make the argument that signing up all who are actually eligible for welfare benefits would cripple the government and force it to fundamentally restructure its system. The final outcome, they imagine, would be guaranteed annual income. (Piven, 1966). An interesting point is made regarding the fact that welfare costs are (almost always) shared by federal, state, and local governments. “If the past is any predictor of the future, cities will fail to procure relief from this crisis by persuading states to increase their proportionate share of urban welfare costs, for state legislators have been notoriously unsympathetic to the revenue needs of the city, especially where public welfare and minority groups are concerned” (Piven, 1966).



Figure 8 - NYCHA resident *Destiny* discusses her experience with NYCHA

“Today we are here to fight for low income housing. They’re trying to take low income housing away from us.” Destiny, a young girl no older than ten from James Weldon Johnson Houses in East Harlem mentioned this in Albany (pictured in *Figure 8*). She received permission from her school teacher to attend the meeting with her mother so long as she reported back her experience. The fact that many public housing residents feel their housing is being taken away from them should not be understated. Exposure is critical. When elected officials who represent the entire state do not meet face-to-face with residents, it becomes nearly impossible to prioritize the issue and demonstrates how marginalized this population truly is. When the issue of public housing is not prioritized, we are left with public housing as it currently stands. As a result, residents suffer. Someone who deals directly with the issue is Shola Olatoye, the Director and CEO of the New York City Housing Authority. At a breakfast at the New York Law School on March 18th, she told the audience, “I’ve now visited more than 130 of our 328 developments. I think I have another half year to go if I continue at this pace” (Olatoye, 2016). Shola is making a concerted effort to meet face-to-face with residents to understand their experience. From all of these meetings and conversations she’s learned the standard atmosphere of a typical housing meeting.

I have been to many meetings where we stand in front of a room and get yelled at for 45 minutes and then everyone goes home. All the NCYHA residents know that that’s just a NCYHA meeting. The challenges are, is that truly productive? Are we actually coming up with and identifying issues? Are we actually coming up with strategies? In all seriousness, /

understand that anger, but how do we have a more productive conversation? (Olatoye, 2016)

With this, Shola made a point to say that NYCHA is “in the business of housing people, not evicting” them. NextGeneration NYCHA was the main topic of discussion at the event. NextGen NYCHA, as it’s colloquially referred, is a 10-year strategic plan to

protect and strengthen public housing (New York City Housing Authority, 2016). The four main goals of this plan are to 1) a fund goal to change the way NYCHA is funded; 2) an operation goal to change they way NYCHA operates; 3) a (re)build goal to change how NYCHA looks; and 4) an engagement goal to change how NYCHA engages with its residents

(see Figure 9). A small

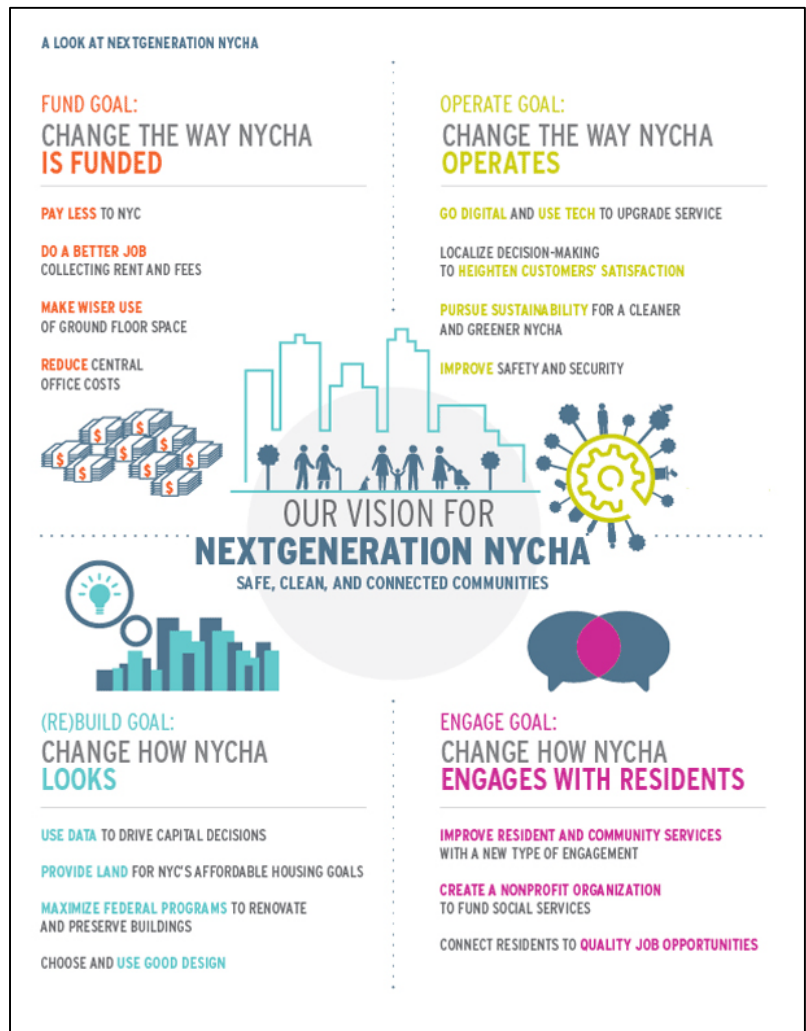


Figure 9 - NextGeneration NYCHA Goals (Source: New York City Housing Authority)

section of this plan (and definitely the most controversial) includes intent to build private residential development infill on leased land from existing open space on NYCHA,

publically-owned property. “The land remains in the ownership of the public sector for its entirety” (Olatoye, 2016). The developments that have already broken ground are all, 100% affordable and those that are in final stages of planning are a mixture of market-rate (the most lucrative for the housing authority) and affordable units: the current ratio is 50/50. This is all a part of Bill de Blasio’s plan to build or preserve 200,000 affordable housing units in *Housing New York: A Five-Borough, 10-Year Plan* (Housing New York, 2015). “New York City and the de Blasio administration is seeking to turn the page and write a new story for public housing and its residents. While we forcefully and loudly believe that all levels of government must support the preservation of its public and affordable rental housing in this country, we can no longer ignore our financial reality” (Olatoye, 2016). From the author’s perspective, Shola wants what is best for NYCHA and, more importantly, it’s residents. Of course, no one at NYCHA wants to take away open space from existing public housing campuses, but, Shola says, “With the continued decline of federal funding, we have to find other unencumbered sources of revenue to sustain our operations. While we are thrilled that the state is back in the funding game for public housing and we welcome the continued support there, we have to continue to look for other resources. There are not a lot of options” (Olatoye, 2016). Acknowledging the immense amount of work this will require is also necessary. Shola at one point highlighted the fact that the program was named NextGen NYCHA because the initiative “is a generation’s worth of work” (Olatoye, 2016).

She mentioned the cultural shift that was necessary to preserve the state of public housing. The parallels of the tasks faced by a housing authority and a group

fighting for climate justice become obvious, especially when considering the previously mentioned essay by Jonathan Smith, included in *Climate Change and Culture Shift*. This culture shift involves rethinking the policies, funding mechanisms, and overall prioritization of the public housing stock in this country. Like climate change, many of those working to reform New York City's public housing will not get direct attribution and will not see the fruits of their labor immediately; progress will be gradual and will be met with resistance from residents. It is a shift not only away from the recent decline in attention but from the original mission of public housing, a mission that was not necessarily focused on the improving the lives of people of lower incomes. This shift is difficult and is, unfortunately a relatively unique mission for a housing authority. Shola elaborates:

New York is unique in that we are not talking about tearing down our buildings. We're talking about preserving them, not only for the residents of today but for the next generation. But let's be clear that is a very different approach. It is not in line with the federal funding sources and so it requires a bold and pragmatic approach to new sources, not only for the preservation but the continued operation of these buildings. That is what NextGeneration NYCHA will accomplish. We believe that through our plan and the series of very specific strategies, we will begin to eliminate the reoccurring deficits that the authority has operated under for the past decade and really begin to, essentially, break even and get to a point of financial sustainability (Olatoye, 2016).

NYCHA Employees: Reflections on Residents Green Committees and the Green Agenda

In order to get a better understanding of the Resident Green Committee program, its history and its function within NYCHA and its 328 developments, I spoke with the five NYCHA staff members who work on these projects: Victoria Thornton and Christine Santiago (both Civic Corps members, officially Resident Engagement Associates), John Lisbon (the resident coordinator and the civic corps members' supervisor), Rasmia Kirmani-Frye (Director of the Office of Public / Private Partnerships), and Bomee Jung (Vice President of Energy and Sustainability). Victoria said the tasks between the civic corps members were primarily to help each RGC recruit volunteers, host community service projects, and provide technical assistance in the form of grant writing and database collection. The volunteers go to different community events and meetings (like the Resident Association meeting I attended at Atlantic Terminal Houses or a recycling kickoff) and table at different events to inform residents about the program and try to get them actively involved and excited about RGCs.

The Resident Green Committees are in their 7th year. They started under Commissioner Margarita Lopez as part of the NYCHA's Green Initiative. In Victoria's words,

It really focuses on empowering residents to take ownership of their own community and encouraging their friends and neighbors to go green. With maintenance fees, it gets really costly to sustain NYCHA. So they're

saying each resident contributes by recycling or gardening. It will help reduce the overall cost and reduce the overall emissions of NCYHA (Thornton, 2016).

Under Lopez, when the program started, there were over 50 resident green committees with 10 different civic corps members who went out to all five boroughs to spread the word about creating new committees. These civic corps members often only serve 10 or 12 month terms. With short residences at NYCHA, administration of the program was difficult to maintain. The 10 civic corps members fell to five or six, and at one point there were no civic corps members at all. It became very difficult to maintain the 50 separate volunteer programs. “A lot of the resident green committees fell off or became inactive because they were solely dependent on the civic corps members. Our job now is to reactivate at them and get more popping up” (Thornton, 2016). Currently, only 13 RGC are in existence. Victoria admitted managing these 13 programs as a three-person team was challenging. In order for a housing development to create an RGC, ten residents must sign up, with eight on the leadership board. These groups are required to meet once a month, however, some meet more frequently if issues require more intensive work.

When asked about the goals that these RGCs work toward, Victoria said large scale environmental objectives were accomplished through external NYCHA partners. For example, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection worked extensively with an RGC in the Rockaways to reduce the amount of grease that was poured down drains at various developments. DEP did community outreach and

educated the residents on how to properly dispose of the waste. Data conducted before and after the outreach showed that the amount of grease poured down drains was significantly reduced.

Describing how a typical RGC gets started, Victoria said many are born out of already established gardening communities or clubs in housing developments. That's specifically what she and her team look for. They approach a club and inform them that they have resources and knowledge to share to help the gardeners expand their mission. Sometimes it's as easy as having a gardening board transfer leadership over to RGC positions. If a gardening club isn't already in existence, the team identifies one or two members in a development who express interest. They then set up an information session to inform potential new residents about their process, and attempt to get a leadership board at these informational meetings.

Unfortunately, Resident Green Committees do not get funding for NYCHA to help fund community greening projects. Funding for projects through grants is something the NYCHA employees work with residents to secure. An external partner, Citizens Committee, gives small grants every year for projects that many RGCs take on. These grants range from \$1,000 - \$3,000. Victoria said Citizens Committee tells NYCHA employees outright that they want to fund RGC programs. According to Victoria, "it's enough money to successfully complete a service project" (Thornton, 2016). The resources for these community services projects are there, it just takes some encouragement from the NYCHA employees to identify partners and assist with grant writing.

This work isn't easy. When asked about the falling membership numbers and where she sees the future of the program, Victoria mentioned, "I feel like sometimes the residents think that they can't speak up because they don't have any leverage, they don't have anything to offer. It's very difficult even just getting residents to work in their own community" (Thornton, 2016). When asked to elaborate, she mentioned architectural building design and planning on a larger scale as potentially stunting the community's ability to expand beyond its immediate area.

In the way the different developments are constructed, it can isolate the community from the rest of the city... I was at an RGC meeting last week and they were saying 'I've never been to this part of the City' and it was really close to [their home in] Ravenswood. Why don't you just exit? Is there something that's keeping you here? I feel like sometimes the residents feel they cannot leave, that this is where they live and they have to stay in this small area, which would then feel like they can't also speak out because they're only relegated to this one area. I feel like because the developments are isolated, very isolated sometimes from businesses or different resources, it becomes difficult for them to feel like they're a part of a larger community. Maybe that's the reason why they feel like they don't have a voice. NYCHA is so large and they could have such a large impact on the city if they worked together (Thornton, 2016).

Lastly, when asked about residents' general attitudes towards climate change, Victoria was honest. "People don't take climate change as seriously as it should be taken, but

that's an education problem" (Thornton, 2016). She thought of potential ways to get residents to care about it while also taking care of more immediate issues. "I know a lot of residents complain about the trash that's not picked up, because there's a lot of trash on the sidewalks, or maintenance. Maybe those issues tied in with climate change? They all inevitably work together. Maybe that's something they can mobilize around (Thornton, 2016). Christine, Victoria's partner in the office, separately discussed the need for residents to be cognizant of the issues. "The biggest challenge is awareness. I believe in my heart of hearts, if more people knew about the programs they would be involved in the program in a heartbeat. I think it's a matter of people not even knowing this program exists. That's why we don't have the turnout we would like to have" (Santiago, 2016).

John Lisbon expanded upon this idea as well as the collaborative nature of RGCs and their ability to partner with different external organizations. In his opinion, when his team goes to present a NYCHA-led initiative, they're jaded. They say, "Yeah we've heard this before, it's not going to happen. It's not going to work.' Letting them understand that they actually have a hand in how [an initiative] is being rolled out and explaining to them that this is a collaboration this time with DSNY (the Department of Sanitation New York)" (Lisbon, 2016).

The housing authority when they implemented this program was committed to helping residents to create these green committees and assist them with different ideas the residents had in terms of "going green." What I found from residents is that they appreciate the fact that

NYCHA is helping out with this in that they provide technical assistance and sometimes financial assistance. *I've spoken to residents who are starting to believe that NYCHA is really trying to change their behavior and that NYCHA is listening more to residents and what they want.* Because of that, these residents are feeling more positive and optimistic about where they live and really moving forward to try to change the stigma around what NYCHA is and also change the mindset of their neighbors because they see that NYCHA is supporting them and try to get their neighbors to believe. Because in fact most times when you talk to them they don't believe anything that's said from NYCHA, or very little. The only thing they think NYCHA wants to do is go up on the rent. Now you have advocates from within NYCHA. If I'm a resident and you're a resident and now you're advocating for some of the programs that NYCHA has, I'm more inclined to trust and listen to you than I am sometimes who works at NYCHA who doesn't know me. Now you have a better opportunity convincing me to get on board. So, if it's recycling or if it's planning gardens, if it's just doing clean-up days, I'm more likely to do that. These residents have had a really positive influence on their neighbors and because, through my position and city corps members, we're aiding them with some of the things they want to do. They're really stepping up some of the things they're doing because they believe NYCHA is going to support them in all of their efforts (Lisbon, 2016).

What about the issue of long-term climate change? Are the RGC doing anything to work toward climate change adaptation or mitigation? John mentioned that climate change issues do come up from time to time, but he said long-term goal setting isn't really the mission of RGCs. He said there are plenty of other initiatives related to climate change elsewhere in the bureaucratic city government. This doesn't mean that certain RGCs don't work toward changing this:

There are some of them that are very active in terms of climate change. I believe it was last year when they had the climate march, they organized and got a bus from their development in the rockaways and went to the climate change march. But we could not be involved, because it's a political issue. There are people who don't believe that climate change is an issue. There are politicians who don't believe that climate change is a real issue, so we could not take a stance. We could not directly organize the residents, but we were able to organize the residents and say 'you know there's this climate change march, you might want to get involved.' So, in the rockaways, you had some RGCs who, because they were hit by Superstorm Sandy, they understand that due to climate change, storms will become more powerful and they're starting to affect them in these adverse ways (Lisbon, 2016).

Still, he said most RGCs don't think about the long term effects of climate change. "They're trying to do things today: cleaning up the neighborhood, making sure the spaces are nice" (Lisbon, 2016). Naturally, NextGeneration NYCHA came up:

So now you have this NextGeneration NYCHA, this 10-year plan but clearly they won't be in office in 10 years. So when a new administration comes in, what happens to their plan? My thing was, I want to get these RGCs connected to each other because they're all doing fantastic stuff. While one is really just greening the space you have another one over here that's conserving energy. They would like to green their space but they may not be well versed in that. So, it's about being able to connect people so that they can all start to understand the big picture. Because each of them has some of the puzzle pieces and if they all start talking to each other about the pieces that they're missing and they can help them put in, then they would all be working together to make the puzzle whole, even after NYCHA decides that they're going to move away from this direct engagement from residents and from these green committees... *I believe they all have the answers to each other's challenges* (Lisbon, 2016).

In order to do this, a critical mass must be reached between these different RGCs and their members. In 2015, John set up a series of leadership workshops where RGC leaders discuss member retention. Ultimately, he confessed that being able to have trainings and available resources comes down to the budget, a challenge NYCHA struggles with in many departments. He is obviously passionate about the program and the effect it can have on communities, both within and outside of the immediate public

housing campus. He mentioned Ingersoll houses, located in Downtown Brooklyn, with its massive community garden. John described the scene:

You have a lot a Bengali residents gardening, you have Asian residents and you have African American residents. When I came on board, Lee [John's supervisor] and I used to go out there on a regular basis because there used to be this fighting: disagreements about how things should be done. Traditionally, Asian gardeners garden in a different way than American gardeners. Getting to see the beauty of different cultures and how they do things was a challenge. But today, it's an RGC that's recently transitioned from just a gardening club to doing more sustainability programming, and they have Asian gardeners and they're trying to get one of the Bengali residents to be part of the board, so that they can communicate with the other Bengali residents and bring them on board. That's a really promising site (Lisbon, 2016).

Rasmia Kirmani-Frye, Director of the Office of Public / Private Partnerships (and recently appointed as President of the Fund for Public Housing) and Bomee Jung, Vice President of Energy and Sustainability, are two women who are working incredibly hard at NYCHA to ensure that success stories, like that the one in Ingersoll houses, are possible and become more frequent. Their jobs are not easy. Rasmia explained the necessity for the housing authority to set a distinct path forward in order to remain fiscally viable in the future. "NYCHA has to get very clear on what its mission is and get back to its core area of business - which is being a landlord - and that means making

difficult decisions” (Kirmani-Frye, 2016). NYCHA, knowing it was unable to handle the financial responsibility of being more than a landlord, admitted it was in over its head with programs and sub-organizations that were intended to make life in a housing project more pleasant. To put things another way, in recent years, it bit off more than it could chew. Currently, “NYCHA is duplicating the direct service work that those organizations [non-profits, settlement houses, etc.] are doing on the ground. In order for NYCHA to get back to its core business function, which is being an efficient and effective landlord, we really need to stop being everything for everybody” (Kirmani-Frye, 2016). At times, the parallel between Shola and Rasmia’s way of speaking or call to arms were strikingly similar:

New York City cannot, *cannot* go the way of other cities in the country. Chicago I’m looking at you. In Chicago there is no public housing left. In New York City, that is not acceptable. There are 180,000 units, if you add Section 8 housing (with vouchers distributed by NYCHA), it’s even more than that. It’s over 500,000 people including section 8, the top three employers of NYCHA residents are the NYPD, the Education Department, and NYCHA itself. People who live in public housing are the people who make New York City run and public housing needs to be invested in. That’s why we need to do things differently (Kirmani-Frye, 2016).

This change in direction comes at an absolutely vital time for the well being of the housing authority. Under the current administration (perhaps unsurprisingly), sustainability is focused on NYCHA’s bottom line. Employees at NYCHA constantly

reiterated that they are a *landlord*. Referencing the four previously mentioned goals of NextGen NYCHA, Bomee Jung said:

Our focus of sustainability is narrowly defined by responsibility as a landlord. We have said that we are reinvesting in our role as a housing provider, so our sustainability plan is trying to be comprehensive in the way that we look at how sustainability touches all of those four responsibilities. It's not comprehensive in the way that we're trying to add every little thing under the sun that falls under the rubric of sustainability in our plan (Jung, 2016).

Bomee went on to say that the sustainability plan is focused on doing two things, both of which have been previously mentioned in this paper. The first is to articulate the explicit priorities of NYCHA as a housing provider and the second is to be very unambiguous about how her team partners with external organizations. Elaborating on this second point, she said, "again, sustainability in a broad sense is not something that you owe as a landlord. It's something you do in communities" (Jung, 2016). Bomee continued, "We are trying to say these are things that we are bringing to the table, we're coming with an open mind and open arms in terms of our desires to participate in a broader dialog around sustainability in the areas that we serve. Here are the specific ways that we are trying to make it easier for external organizations and community based groups and resident led initiatives to partner with NYCHA on these priorities" (Jung, 2016). In terms of these sustainability priorities, Bomee admitted that they were relatively short term. These priorities are to cover a 10-year period, the same 10-year period that *NextGen*

NYCHA and de Blasio's *Housing New York* cover. These priorities differed from the past energy efficiency programs in that, according to Bomee, they are no longer simply about utility cost-control. They are about how residents actually experience their homes. "We have to be clear about the fact that what we are looking for is *improving the quality of life of the residents*. In order to do that, we're looking into managing energy, water, and waste effectively as well as efficiently" (Jung, 2016). This will be measured by whether or not residents are more comfortable in their homes. "Are the homes healthier to the best of our knowledge within the building management industry? Are we doing what we need to do as landlords to take responsibly for the decisions that are within our purview for climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation?" (Jung, 2016)

In speaking about working more closely with external organizations for resident engagement, Bomee mentioned that NYCHA needed to get into the habit of outlying explicit expectations as a landlord. "We are not a social service agency. We are not an environmental advocacy group. We are a housing authority." Prior to these goals being set, NYCHA did many outreach programs themselves, often with unsuccessful results. She brought up the Resident Green Committees and spoke about the transition taking place at NYCHA and the move to push for external partnerships.

As part of that transition, we're moving toward a model based on partnerships and working with community organizations that do this day-in and day-out. We're going to be looking at not only how are we transitioning the remaining senior centers to nonprofit organizations but

we're also looking at some of the environmental programs we have and we're moving those to a model of partnerships as well (Jung, 2016).

In this, Bomee seemed to suggest that the RGCs were being phased out, with an external organization working on organizing the residents rather than NYCHA doing this work directly. This was never mentioned outright, but it did seem to be suggested in this interview.

Rasmia then mentioned an example of this transition: The Urban Agriculture Initiative. Red Hook Houses, previously mentioned in this paper, created a gardening program that currently produces over 4,000 pounds of food every year. NYCHA distributes this food to residents as well as other community members. This program is a collaborative effort between 13 city agencies and nonprofits, including city hall, NYCHA, Green City Force, Added Value, the NYC Department of Sanitation and NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCHA, 2013). Here, NYCHA is a *stakeholder*. Rasmia said, Green City Force knows “you can’t just helicopter into a community and say ‘hey look at how awesome this is.’ That’s just recipe for disaster” (Kirmani-Frye, 2016). She justified NYCHA moving away from responsibilities as an agency that provides more than housing services by saying:

“Whether it’s gardening or something else, all of us rely on networks. That’s no different for public housing residents. Part of our goal is really to extend those networks beyond a public housing campus. It is things like gardening and sustainability and working with external partners and

hearing what residents think that help to broaden and increase those networks for people” (Kirmani-Frye, 2016).

In Bomee eyes, every dollar that NYCHA spends on capital improvements has an impact on sustainability in some way. She mentioned that two thirds of the capital funding is used for building envelope improvements. With the goal of a 60% reduction in the emissions from NYCHA buildings, Bomee admitted that this is not something that happens with an incremental approach.

A 60% reduction is a situation where even if you do everything that you already know how to do to the best of your ability and you get as much performance out of everything that you’ve already got, you’re looking at a significant gap that you’re going to have to bridge by some sort of fundamental change in the building system. Whether it’s a fundamental change to the building envelope, or a fundamental change to the MEP [Mechanical, Electrical, and Plumbing] system, something really big has to happen” (Jung, 2016).

Conclusion

Where does this leave the state of public housing and the climate change programs that (directly and indirectly) affect it? The \$17 billion capital deficit facing NYCHA is enormously burdensome, both for the employees trying to manage it and for the residents who are living under it. For many, it feels insurmountable and can be discouraging. From my discussions with leadership at NYCHA, it appears that many of the climate programs that are currently headquartered at NYCHA will soon be dissolved or led by third party organizations, with NYCHA playing more of an engagement role and less of an administrative role. This is a direct result of a lack of funding from all levels of government and is complicated by the fact that information differs depending on the source and the involvement of the provider.

An example: the recycling program mandated from the City of New York over 25 years ago was not initially implemented at NYCHA. After long delay, the housing authority started to slowly adopt to the rules. As NYCHA learned what worked and what didn't, resident involvement unmistakably was the key to the success, like more or less every other program at NYCHA. The NYCHA employees I spoke with all seemed to celebrate this community process that informed this program and considered the recycling program as it stands today an accomplishment. The residents of NYCHA I spoke with, however, had different opinions. Bins are not well-labeled and residents end up mixing papers with plastics and bottles. Often, trash ends up in these recycling bins as well. Frustrated with the program, I spoke with a few residents at East River Houses

in East Harlem who agree that the program as it currently stands is a failure. Resident engagement is incredibly complex and differing opinions are always frustrating to parse out, but it is vital to hear these attitudes and legitimize peoples' feelings about their community. What works in one housing community in the Bronx might not work for another in central Brooklyn. Programs that do not have this in mind are bound for failure.

During my research, I've met with many NYCHA employees (many of whom are longtime or lifelong residents of NYCHA) and their passion for preserving public housing is palpable. Since 2014, NYCHA has released and updated scores of information on its website and in reports in an effort toward fiscal, structural, and organizational transparency. Of course, more information can always be shared and more data can always be released, but pointing fingers is not an effective way of solving the colossal issues the housing authority faces. Critics like senator Jeffrey Klein are right to want the best for public housing residents, but to suggest those working at NYCHA aren't doing their jobs or are completely failing to provide for the residents is poorly informed, especially given the amount of work many at NYCHA face and the historical disinvestment and apathy (among other racist tendencies) countless leaders and elected officials in this country hold toward public housing residents. As the Chair and CEO of NYCHA mentioned, although resident disappointment and anger is understandable, it is usually not productive, does not solve the problem at hand, and often leaves everyone worse off.

Given funding trends, NYCHA is right to focus exclusively on its primary mission: housing low income New Yorkers. It's apparent that there were, and perhaps still are, too many different programs that exist in NYCHA, many programs which separate community organizations specialize in and many that have overlapping or unclear goals. A significant issue this poses is the scattering of sustainability programs and green agenda goals. From the time I spent with Resident Green Committees, there is already a problem with recruitment and retention of residents. With NYCHA changing direction, it is possible that engagement with programs like RGCs will only diminish, regardless of the administrative body. As most residents, employees or activists familiar with NYCHA will admit, there is a problem with resident agency. Many are reluctant to express certain feelings or to get involved at all, which is a reason that the timing of this program is so unfortunate. Many feel that NYCHA is changing and is making a concerted effort to listen to its residents. I hope that in returning to a focus on being a landlord, residents' other programs (like Resident Green Committees) are not ignored or forgotten.

If residents do not feel they can work with NYCHA in order to plan programs to reduce their building utility usage, emissions footprint, or start community gardens on their campus, how would engagement with third party groups work? If the one centralized location for partnering disappears, will resident involvement disappear along with it? What about when the third party has to get permission or inform NYCHA about certain plans? How much longer will this drag out the bureaucratic system that residents already express frustration with? Perhaps the best solution is to make NYCHA a stakeholder in programming or development that involves its residents. The housing

authority would no longer need to be “everything for everybody” as Bomee Jung stated, but could still be actively involved in the initiatives that non-profits and other community groups work on. One exciting case study is at Red Hook Houses and the Urban Farm Initiative started there. It’s ok if RGCs don’t do large scale environmental projects, but if a third-party does this work, NYCHA will inevitably have to be at the table to discuss what is allowed (or who needs to be contacted to change what is allowed), who residents can reach out to, inform administration internally of plans to garden or green open space, work on energy efficiency initiatives, etc. If someone at Manhattanville houses wanted to start a large-scale urban farm like the one at Red Hook Houses and had resident support, what first step would they have to take? Who would they reach out to? Could the program have as much success as the one in Red Hook? If NYCHA was able to be involved not as administrator but as a stakeholder, leading its residents to a community organization that is able to organize interested tenants, it would use fewer resources, be able to focus on its primary goal of being a landlord, and still be involved in discussions related to the use of its property.

Similar to housing, the issues surrounding climate change are overwhelming. Although the problem of a warming planet takes place at a larger and more scientific scale, both housing and climate change are related and their current solutions share common shortcomings. Thankfully, many local-level governmental bodies are working toward making a difference, even if state, national, or international policies and treaties are not or are inadequate. New York City is working on solutions for both, but it does not have all of the answers. Programs like Bill de Blasio’s affordable housing initiative are

absolutely necessary, especially as we know other cities in the country and around the world study them to gauge effectiveness and to adopt certain policies of their own. However, there are critics. Some see the mandatory inclusionary housing (MIH) zoning amendments released by the de Blasio administration as nothing more than justification for developing new, luxury buildings in poor areas, regardless of percentage of affordability that is allocated (never mind that many of the affordability levels for these units are already out of reach for many). Some wonder if these goals just reduce the weight of gentrification put on developers' shoulders. Of course, this is not the intent of the policy makers, but those writing the policy should listen to those critiquing it.

The evidence of the spatio-environmental racism and classism that informs public housing policy and funding is impossible to deny. What happens after this paper is published will be especially interesting to study to see where the future of public housing stands. As with many urban policies and trends, cities and municipalities in the country and around the world will look to New York City as a case study. Rasmia Kirmani-Frye is absolutely right to assert that networks and community are a vital component of housing (and, more broadly, city) success and viability. Because of the weight of this issue, much more research should be done, particularly focusing on how climate change adversely affects those in public housing on a macro, global level. Another study that would be productive would be a large-scale survey of NYCHA residents' opinions toward and ideas about climate change, including perceived threat, adaptation and mitigation strategies, potential preferences for different revenue generation strategies released by NYCHA, emergency preparedness, and agency

residents feel they have toward tackling these issues and having their voices heard. As I've learned, it is almost always the case that those best equipped to answer these immense questions are those who are most directly affected by the problem.

As problems become more immediate, the effects of a warming planet will marginalize those of low incomes more than any other population in New York City. Spatially, we've seen racist and classist patterns unfold related to environmental conditions (among many other factors). Historically, this can be at least partially attributed to those at the city planning level who have refused to acknowledge or celebrate everyone involved in making a community, city, state, country, and planet vibrant and exciting. The fact that one in twelve New Yorkers either live in public housing or are signed up for housing subsidy programs distributed by NYCHA is incredibly important. New York City needs to recognize that this housing stock is a vital *force multiplier*: "multiuse assets that serve several purposes at once (Byles, 2016). One man from a housing protest told a crowd in March, 2016, "I hear people say all the time 'Oh you live in public housing, that's such a privilege.' *It's not a privilege to be offered housing. It's a right!*" He is absolutely correct. As we look to the future of public housing, climate change, and redistribution and equalization of power and rights, James Baldwin offers prudent advice, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist" (Baldwin, 1963). There is an incredible amount of work to be done.

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