

**ALIEN SPACES: PLANNING, REFORM, AND PRESERVATION ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE,  
1880-2002**

**by**

**REBECCA ANN AMATO**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of History in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

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**This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty of History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

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## **Abstract**

### **ALIEN SPACES: PLANNING, REFORM, AND PRESERVATION ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE, 1880-2002**

**By**

**Rebecca Ann Amato**

**Advisor: Gerald Markowitz, Ph.D.**

In this project, I trace the ways in which reform and urban planning discourses, shored up by a desire for ethnic and racial regulation, defined the Lower East Side as an “alien space,” both removed from and problematic for the rest of New York City over the long twentieth century. I argue that this sustained discourse of “alienness” in the service of regulation – varying from Progressive reform efforts at the turn of the twentieth century to the racially-charged citizen participation efforts of the mid-twentieth century urban renewal era to the battle for community preservation in the face of increasing gentrification at the turn of the twenty-first century – had a direct impact on the built environment of the Lower East Side. This approach to the neighborhood’s formation and development not only links language (the discursive production of the area) with action (its demolition, construction, reconstruction, and preservation), it also highlights the profound fissures that existed in liberal reform, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity. Even when ambivalence toward the Lower East Side’s ethnic population was not readily apparent, as in the language of social science and the maps of urban planning, it was implied by ongoing questions about the fitness of Lower East Siders to determine the fate of their own neighborhood.

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**To the memory of Georg Ann Zussman,  
teacher, activist, and mother.**

## **Introduction: Conquering the Urban Frontier**

This dissertation is about New York, and it is particularly about a section of New York that has been the subject of more literature, examination, data, sensation, and mythology than almost any other in the nation: the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There, generations of workers -- native-born, foreign-born, and migrant -- have for decades built homes and planted communities bonded together by religion, ethnicity, shared values, cultural pursuits, commercial (sometimes criminal) gain, and simple proximity. At times, the Lower East Side has been the most crowded corner of the world; at others, the most abandoned in an emptying city. Depending on whose narrative is being heard, it has been homeland or prison, place of pilgrimage or source of ill omen. Sometimes, it has been all of these. Indeed, over the past century-and-a-half, few observers have left the Lower East Side without a clear and passionate opinion. Such a place is busy with ghosts, many of whom merely visited, several of whom never stayed for long.

Thus, the Lower East Side is both overdone and under-examined – the former by journalists, memoirists, guidebook writers, heritage seekers, novelists, and nostalgia hunters, the latter by scholars whose inquiries rarely deviate from or critique the narratives of poverty and immigration that permeate the area's history. Since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the celebrations of the nation's ethnic diversity that followed alongside these battles, the Lower East Side has emerged as the premiere site of Jewish American heritage, thereby bringing the neighborhood into the popular spotlight. Memoirs and novels of the immigrant Jewish experience on the Lower East Side, many of which were written in the early part of the twentieth century, were reissued in the 1960s and into the 1970s to feed a burgeoning interest in

the area's history. Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917, reissued in 1960), Anzia Yezierska's *Breadgivers* (1925, reissued in 1975), and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934, reissued in 1962), which captured the feel of a competitive, impoverished, and crowded Lower East Side in which immigrants balanced the ideas of the Old World with the call of the New, gave voice to the individual struggles that Jewish Lower East Siders experienced at the turn of the twentieth century. Similarly, popular histories such as Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976) and Milton Hindus' *The Jewish Lower East Side* (1969) helped reclaim the Lower East Side as an American Jewish homeland where both survival and assimilation in the fast-paced American city forced American Jews to develop a determined and resilient character.

While this Lower East Side revival occurred outside academia, a growing interest in social history in the 1960s and 1970s attracted many scholars to the area's role in the history of immigration, housing reform, and poverty relief. Roy Lubove's *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917* (1963) and Anthony Jackson's *A Place Called Home: A History of Low-Cost Housing in Manhattan* (1976) examined the history of tenements, which blanketed the Lower East Side's spaces, while Thomas Kessner's *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (1977), Elizabeth Ewen's *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars* (1985), and Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (1986) brought to life the journeys toward America and assimilation that immigrants on the Lower East Side traveled. At the same time, historians such as Allen F. Davis in his *Spearheads of Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (1967) and Judith Trolander in *Professionalism and Social Change: From the Settlement House Movement to Neighborhood Centers, 1886 to the Present* (1987) debated the importance of Lower East Side (and other)

settlement houses and the social reformers who ran them in helping new immigrants contend with the poverty, poor health, and poor housing that plagued them. With little variance, these themes have continued to dominate any examination of the Lower East Side and its meaning in the history of both New York and the United States. Few and far between have been texts such as Christopher Mele's *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (2000), Janet Abu-Lughod's *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (1994), and *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida* (1996), which extend the history of the Lower East Side past World War II, and broaden it to include narratives of diverse immigrant and migrant experiences, as well as ongoing struggles over the space and meaning of the neighborhood. It is this more capacious and more spatially oriented history of the Lower East Side that has most inspired my own approach to the neighborhood.

Despite the geographical focus of the history I tell, however, its spiritual origins lay further to the west in the booming and busy city of Chicago. There, in the summer of 1893, two simultaneous events took place that provide an interlocking framework for the way in which the Lower East Side -- thousands of miles away -- would develop. These events -- the July meeting of the American Historical Association at the Art Institute of Chicago and the summer-long World's Columbian Exposition taking place seven miles to the south in the city's Jackson Park -- self-consciously placed the United States on the brink of the modern age. Each in its own way demanded not only serious discussion, but also bold action, that would reimagine American identity for the twentieth century. Chicago in 1893, the organizers of these events assured, would be the nexus connecting the current chaos with the hope and vision of the years to come. All that was necessary were the will to thrive and a bit of hard work, two qualities Americans

embraced as endemic to its national character. At a time when the country and its people were folding under the strains of yet another desperate economic slump; when immigration had reached its highest peak yet in U.S. history; and when, as historian Robert Wiebe put it, the nation was experiencing an unprecedented and unplanned “rush to the cities,” the assurance that America would survive intact -- and better off -- was well-received.<sup>1</sup> In Chicago, that optimism prevailed. In the words of Robert Herrick reporting on his visit to the Exposition: “In that lovely hour, the toil and the trouble of men, the fear that was gripping men's hearts...fell away from me, and in its place came Faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner echoed Herrick's buoyant strains in his influential lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” delivered at the American Historical Association conference. Hoping to place the current moment of anxiety in the context of the preceding decades, Turner, a professor at the nearby University of Wisconsin, eloquently argued that the continual push westward over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had offered its own encounters with the unknown “wilderness.”<sup>3</sup> In this difficult “social evolution,” the nation earned both practical and intangible rewards.<sup>4</sup> On the practical end, the westward conquest had added territory and increased the possibility of land ownership for the nation's growing population. New landscapes provided new resources for the national safe-box, while the prospect of cheap property produced a relief valve for Americans who might otherwise crowd into limited spaces, crippled by the daily tasks of getting and spending. Psychically, too, the frontier “furnish[ed] a new field of opportunity; a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and ideas, and indifference to its lessons.”<sup>5</sup> This line of negotiation between “savagery and civilization” forced Americans to consider what they meant by liberty and democracy, rights and

civic responsibility. In other words, the frontier, like the colonial possessions of foreign powers, was the crucible in which American-ness was defined. While this essential motivator of national consciousness was, Turner finally announced, now “gone,” the end of the frontier had merely “closed the first period of American history.” Indeed, “it would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has...ceased.”<sup>6</sup> The American story and imagination would go on, but not in accordance with the same rejuvenating processes of the past. A new frontier -- perhaps metaphorical, perhaps within -- might be ahead. Almost two decades later, Turner would admit that American imperial expansion in the Philippines, Hawaii, and the Caribbean were natural progressions of the continental frontier and that reconciling racial difference in these territories would require a “reconsideration” of “the rights of man and traditional American ideals of liberty and democracy.”<sup>7</sup>

What America could be and how it might continue to tread the line between civilization and savagery were inquiries also dramatized at the world’s fair. If pressed to define the new frontier, the fair’s organizers would have suggested that it was an urban one, that cities and the cultural dynamism they represented would lead the United States into the next century.<sup>8</sup> Architect Daniel Burnham and his colleagues embodied this vision with their neoclassical “White City,” a series of centralized, palatial structures that glistened across Chicago’s shoreline. The clean, rationally planned micro-city was to act as a prism through which Americans might view their unique, leading position on the world stage. The new urban frontier would be equally utopian and orderly, technologically stunning and aesthetically uplifting. Spectators of the fair understood the message clearly. In her review for the *Century* magazine, writer Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer reported that “Most Americans...will go to [it] with some serious purpose before them -- if not to study carefully any of the collections, then to make a careful

general survey of the Fair itself, as illustrating the present condition of our nation...and likewise its promises and prospects for the future.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly and charmingly, in her book *Two Little Pilgrims’ Progress: A Story of the City Beautiful*, children’s writer Frances Hodgson Burnett equated the fair to the Celestial City, the source of Christian salvation in the classic seventeenth century tale from which she derived her story’s name.<sup>10</sup> For one of her young pilgrims, Meg, the beauty and enchantment of the White City testified that “perhaps men and women can do anything if they put their minds to it.” Even Henry Adams, president of the American Historical Association and a curmudgeonly visitor to the fair, admitted that it was “the first expression of American thought as a unity” he had yet encountered. “One must start there,” he argued, “if one were to understand the direction in which the nation was heading.”<sup>11</sup>

Behind the pure white structures, the electric lights, lagoons and canals, fine art and even honky-tonk amusements lay another message about what America would become. If its new frontier were to be urban, then the United States would also have to contend with a new cosmopolitanism where daily encounters with the racial and ethnic other were not only commonplace, but acceptable. At the same time, such encounters demanded strict regulation; racial and ethnic hierarchies were to be made legible both discursively and spatially. If, as James W. Ellsworth, a director of the fair, explained “The reputation of America is at stake” with the success or failure of the Columbian Exposition, then its racial identity was also primed for display.<sup>12</sup> And, as historian Robert W. Rydell has bluntly described it, “Non-whites discovered...that the appellation ‘White City’ connoted more than the color of the buildings surrounding the [fair’s] Court of Honor.”<sup>13</sup>

The message that racial and ethnic hierarchies were necessary to sustain the American project was evident in the ghettoization and arrangement of the fair’s foreign and anthropological

exhibits. Placed under the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Ethnology, exhibits that showcased the cultures and accomplishments of nations around the world were located outside the central foci of the fair itself. The majority of foreign pavilions were scattered in between larger exhibits that themselves displayed a coherent architectural theme of formality and refinement. Thus, as Eric Sandweiss has suggested, an “architectural hegemony of United States buildings” existed that diminished whatever triumphal affect the foreign exhibitors might have intended, thus emphasizing the American nationalism present at the international fair.<sup>14</sup>

The foreign pavilions, which showcased the culture and accomplishments of nations around the world, were located just north of the Court of Honor, as well as in the long, narrow corridor of the Midway Plaisance to the west of the main fairgrounds. Rydell has underlined the fact that the Midway, where the Chinese as well as Native American exhibits were placed, was an entertainment area meant for commerce and cheerful diversion. Small villages in which natives performed everyday tasks and rituals from foreign lands were erected up and down the strip of land. Meanwhile, “The Streets of Cairo,” where jugglers, dancers, and commercial hagglers crowded into a bazaar-like arena, allowed for interactive immersion in an imagined East. Ethnic displays in the Midway were, as Rydell put it, “a source of amusement, not respect.” Rydell and other scholars have contended that this exhibit placement also hinted at racial and evolutionary categorization. German and Irish village exhibits were located closest to the Court of Honor, while the Middle-, South-, and East-Asian displays were located at the center of the Midway Plaisance. At the very end of the Midway, furthest from the Court of Honor, stood the African and Native American exhibits.<sup>15</sup> While the precision of this categorization is complicated by the interspersions of an Austrian exhibit next to the Dahomey one near the end of the Midway and Pacific Islander exhibits across from the German Village,

the public may have interpreted an evolutionary narrative nonetheless. Reflecting on the fair after its conclusion, editors at the *Chicago Tribune* commented that, through the Midway, “an opportunity was here afforded to the scientific mind to descend the spiral of evolution, tracing humanity in its highest phases down to its animalistic origins.”<sup>16</sup>

Visual theorist Ellen Strain has argued that this sheen of scientific truth in the exoticized Midway was highly intentional. The displays, for example, were organized by an acclaimed Harvard anthropologist, Frederic Ward Putnam, and they emphasized the ethnographic turn toward contextualization of subjects in their native -- if, in this case, fabricated and exaggerated -- environments. Moreover, the blend of science and sensation was a popular cultural trope that existed before and beyond the Columbian Exposition: other fairs, stereoscopic photography, novels, guidebooks, “slumming” tours, and the early cinema all employed it in the late nineteenth century. As Strain writes, “One outcome [of this blending of science and touristic sensation]...was the visual objectification or the conversion of the cultural Other into spectacle; the separation of the tourist from the toured; and the identification of the tourist with a figure of mastery such as the explorer, colonialist soldier, or anthropologist.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere on the streets of Chicago, as well as on New York’s Lower East Side, this scientifically endorsed “visual objectification” was commonplace, particularly, as we shall see, in the practice of slumming. Later, the language of social science, which relied on surveys, maps, and other data to make objective the observations of social reformers, could not help but be influenced by these early spectacular approaches.

Visual and spatial classification of ethnic exhibits at the fair overall, as well as the message that civilization could be equated with the whiteness of both the White City and its inhabitants, reached deep into the racial anxieties of the modernizing nation. With all its

liberalism and progress, innovation and rhetorical grabs for global leadership, the United States still envisioned the racial and ethnic other as unequal to the task of American civilization and, in turn, citizenship. The relegation of non-whites at the World's Fair to the savage outskirts of the fair's civilized "center city" -- literally to inferior positions of the White City -- was a premonition of how the modern American city would encounter the racial and ethnic other in the decades to come.

It is hardly surprising, then, that these broad ideas -- the frontier, the dawning of an urban America, and the spatial regulation of race and ethnicity -- would find articulation outside the World's Fair and in other growing American cities. The urban future, the introduction of new, non-white populations, and the constant renegotiation between civilization and savagery produced an appetite for order, one that the World's Fair helped satisfy. If such a successful city could be built on a temporary basis, why not make its principles more permanent in the nation's metropolises? Burnham himself would make this practical leap in the years to come with plans for Cleveland, San Francisco, and Chicago that derived from the basic templates of the World's Fair. These "City Beautiful" techniques of classical architecture, broad plazas, centralized municipal and cultural institutions, and stately avenues would offer an attractive plan for the mastery of the chaotic urban environment. They would also clarify the boundaries between civilization, marked by the grand geometries of the plan, and savagery, which was indicated, ironically, by its erasure. That is, the savagery of the city -- denoted by its slum areas -- would be conquered by marginalization, if not outright demolition.

Historian Carl Smith has noted that Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, for example, "anticipate[d] one of the more unfortunate methods of post-World War II urban renewal when it recommend[ed] cutting broad thoroughfares" through the poor, immigrant neighborhoods of the

city's West Side, an area Burnham called an "unwholesome district."<sup>18</sup> The 1912 proposal for a civic center at Foley Square in Lower Manhattan, was also "motivated" by "racial politics and social control aspirations," according to historian Jon Ritter. Quoting a 1915 *New York Times* editorial in favor of the project, Ritter notes that the newspaper "cheerily anticipated the 'wiping out of sordid Chinatown by the proposed civic centre' and that its "'deletion' became a primary goal of the project."<sup>19</sup> While most "City Beautiful" plans never came to full fruition, their influence on the planning profession and the usable strategies they envisioned for making the "savage" areas of the city – the slums – conquerable helped formulate a spatial solution to the non-white urban population. Slums were easily accommodated in plans and they were already identifiable as "problem areas" on the city map. Now home to an increasingly polyglot and immigrant population, the slums – acting as a new urban frontier -- aided in the regulation of race and ethnicity.

For the nation's quintessential slum, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, these incipient planning ideas and intensifying anxieties toward the new immigrant population, had a direct impact on the meaning and geography of the area in the late nineteenth century. In this project, I trace the ways in which reform and urban planning discourses, shored up by a desire for ethnic and racial regulation, defined the Lower East Side as an "alien space," both removed from and problematic for the rest of New York City over the long twentieth century. I argue that this continued regulation – varying from Progressive reform efforts at the turn of the twentieth century to the racially-charged citizen participation efforts of the mid-twentieth century urban renewal era to contrasting movements for "community preservation" – had a direct impact on the built environment of the Lower East Side. This approach to the neighborhood's formation and development not only links language (the discursive production of the area) with action (its

demolition, construction, reconstruction, and preservation), it also highlights the profound fissures that existed in liberal reform, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity. Even when ambivalence toward the Lower East Side's ethnic population was not readily apparent, as in the language of social science and the maps of urban planning, it was implied by ongoing questions about the fitness of Lower East Siders to determine the fate of their own neighborhood.

While cities had long suffered the mistrust of Americans who deemed them the equivalent of “sores” on “the human body,” as Thomas Jefferson did in 1785, or “a seething mass of humanity, so ignorant, so vicious, so depraved that they hardly seem to belong to our species,” as *American Magazine* writer Alan Forman did in 1885, slums such as the Lower East Side in particular carried the twin blemishes of alienness and danger.<sup>20</sup> Much of this could be attributed to the realities of crime and disease, which permeated the areas in which poverty prevailed. The popular imagination, fueled by salacious tales of mayhem in the “shadows” and “darkness” of New York, also cast the slums as, at best, foils to the parts of the city that were thriving and truly American. Scaffolding this evidence, however, was a growing concern over what Matthew Frye Jacobson calls the “fitness for self-government” of slum dwellers. As Jacobson explains, “fitness” was one of the “throughlines of American political culture” starting as early as the Revolution and it was very often tied both to the race and economic status of the potential citizen.<sup>21</sup>

For immigrants who arrived in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Jacobson notes, “race was the prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship and the relative merits of a given people.”<sup>22</sup> Even Progressive thinkers made race a crucial element in matters of citizenship. Writing in 1911, economist John R. Commons, a colleague of Frederick Jackson Turner at the University of Wisconsin, worried that “if in America our boasted freedom from the evils of

social classes fails to be vindicated in the future, the reasons will be found in the immigration of races and classes incompetent to share in our democratic opportunities.”<sup>23</sup> Some races, according to Commons, were capable of eventually gaining democratic proficiency, while others would never have the aptitude for self-governance.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the achievement of “whiteness” was the measure of one’s “fitness for self-government,” but, as Jacobson points out, even whiteness alone could be provisional and insufficient depending on the situation at hand. That is, one could be both white and different from other whites; one could be white when voting, but racially different in the workplace. Some immigrants who had achieved whiteness, and thus adequacy for citizenship, Jacobson argues, had only done so on a “probationary” basis at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Others failed to earn whiteness at all. The slums of the Lower East Side, home to immigrant “probationary whites,” as well as those whose whiteness would always be in question, were therefore also defined by these shifting boundaries of race and citizenship. Alienness and contestation were ascribed not just to the inhabitants of the Lower East Side, but to the space itself: it was neither of the city nor apart from it, neither American nor necessarily assimilable to American ideals.

I trace the origins of this progression to the late nineteenth century. Beginning with the practice of “slumming” in the 1880s (Chapter 1), which brought reformers and tourists alike to Lower Manhattan in search of danger and delight, the Lower East Side began to emerge as a definable and bounded space with a distinctive, foreign character. Slummers not only described the social ills of overcrowding, crime, delinquency, and disease, they mapped these elements in relation to the ethnic communities afflicted by them, ensuring that the ethnic character of the slum would be conflated with its devastation. Through geographic indicators such as ward boundaries, ethnic “colonies,” the concentration of tenements, and the locations of areas of

infamy, slummers of both the reforming and pleasure-seeking variety helped create the boundaries of the Lower East Side slum that would be sustained for decades to come.

In my next chapter, I explore the transformation of this sensational and defining discourse into one imbued with the weight of science. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, young women and men educated in the nation's emerging social science departments began to look to cities as incubators for progressive political and social change. In the urban chaos – particularly in the slums – this new cohort of reformers saw an opportunity to apply scientific methods toward the identification and elimination of social inequities such as labor abuse, inadequate housing, infant mortality, and even poverty itself. For those reformers who settled in New York, the Lower East Side became both an incitement to action and a laboratory to test the methods they believed would solve society's ills. In looking to the Lower East Side to provide data for their work, however, they also helped to lend credence to some of the less savory, racially motivated biases that previous reformers and tourists had assigned to the area. One event – the 1908 Congestion Exhibit, organized by many of the more prominent of these scientific reformers – serves as an influential example of how the seemingly objective techniques of social surveys and mapping served to enhance the conflation of poverty with ethnicity. For the Lower East Side, such messages indicated that the area was virtually unsalvageable in its alienness and, therefore, worthy of destruction. While the area persevered beyond this condemnation, the demolition mentality it engendered helped pave the way for a strategy of slum clearance less than thirty years later.

This story of slum clearance and its reliance on a narrative of obsolescence, atavism, and alienness on the Lower East Side is the subject of Chapter 3. Beginning in the late 1920s, the congested Lower East Side was fast becoming the emptying Lower East Side. Between 1905

and 1930, population declined 54% from a total of more than 540,000 to less than 250,000. Many residents had simply moved to other areas of the city as their fortunes rose, while others found their crumbling tenements increasingly uninhabitable. Reformers, as well as local business interests, turned to the technologies of urban planning to re-envision a Lower East Side that would be both modern and integrated into the rest of the city. Yet the differing agendas of each of these groups, and the evidence they used to support their claims, revealed an approach to the Lower East Side that was suffused with concerns about its ethnic character. Technocratic planners reiterated the strategies of the City Beautiful, which argued for the deletion or marginalization of slums, and viewed the Lower East Side as obsolete and inefficient, ripe and ready for total demolition. Local business leaders hoped to modernize the Lower East Side to retain and attract a middle-class population, while simultaneously cleansing the neighborhood of its ethnic folkways, “backwards” institutions, and poverty-stricken population. While many residents who affiliated with tenants’ organizations and the radical left also supported clearance and the construction of modern, publicly funded housing, evidence began to emerge that the social and ethnic ties that had sustained the neighborhood through decades of poverty struggles were worthy of preservation. Yet for those who saw the Lower East Side as primed for development, sentiments such as these provided further evidence that the area had been left in disarray too long and had cultivated too many primitive – and “un-American” -- behaviors.

Apprehension over the fitness of the Lower East Side population to govern its own affairs also informed battles over urban renewal after World War II. In Chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which reform and planning groups with varying ties to the Lower East Side community contended with a changing population and the kinds of plans that might best serve it. Specifically, I examine the policies toward housing and planning that emerged from the

federally-funded, experimental social program, Mobilization for Youth (MFY), and from the locally organized citizens' coalition, the Lower East Side Neighborhoods Association (LENA.) The former hoped to empower the area's most poverty-stricken residents – mostly newcomers of Puerto Rican descent – to participate in political battles in favor of voting rights, education reform, and housing improvement. The latter, originating from a league of local social settlements and churches and serving – in addition to Puerto Rican and other newcomers -- a population of longer-term, mostly white ethnic residents, focused its efforts on consensus-building and comprehensive social planning. While neither group voiced a desire to serve a specific ethnic constituency – and, indeed, aimed to bring together a diverse base of supporters – differing attitudes toward proper citizenship practices, and the ways in which these practices were assigned an ethnic character, made each group almost totally ethnically exclusive. When this ethnic specificity was translated into conflicting visions of the Lower East Side's built environment, battles over who had a right to determine the future of the area's physical spaces took on a racial tone. Low-income, Puerto Rican residents represented by MFY believed their housing needs were being trumped by more powerful, middle-class, white ethnic residents represented by LENA. LENA's supporters, on the other hand, argued that an increase in low-income housing for their Puerto Rican neighbors, rather than the development of an ethnically and economically "balanced community," would mean the further alienation of the Lower East Side from the rest of the city. In the end, inter-ethnic conflict, enhanced by class disparities between the ethnic groups, resulted in a long-term deadlock over how the Lower East Side should be developed.

By the late-1980s, the ethnic bifurcations in the political and physical spaces of the Lower East Side became even more evident in the movement to preserve the immigrant history

of the area. For years, small organizations such as the United Jewish Council of the East Side had published brochures and guidebooks marking the mostly Jewish heritage of the neighborhood. Architecturally and socially significant structures such as the Daily Forward Building, the Bialystoker Synagogue, and the First Ukrainian Assembly of God earned landmark status between the late 1960s and 1980s, while burgeoning public discussion over the importance of the Lower East Side to the nation's immigrant past sparked a desire to preserve more of its buildings. Meanwhile, Lower East Siders of Puerto Rican heritage who claimed "Loisaida" (a Spanglish term for the Lower East Side) as their own, battled landlord abandonment, a rising tide of gentrification, and the potential loss of their homes. These residents also hoped to preserve their community, but they were less interested in its immigrant history than its abandoned and poverty-stricken present. Chapter 5 examines how contrasting definitions of preservation highlighted the different meanings assigned to the neighborhood by its predominant ethnic groups. On one hand, Puerto Rican Lower East Siders, represented by the arts organization CHARAS/El Bohio, hoped to preserve a low-income neighborhood of the "noble poor" for those who made their homes there. On the other, heritage seekers and the descendants of immigrants, particularly Jewish Americans, who directly and indirectly traced their roots to the Lower East Side, aimed to preserve landmarks of nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigration. This goal, most powerfully told through the development of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, redefined the Lower East Side not as an alien space, but as a national treasure. As both organizations worked to enact their visions of an authentic and meaningful Lower East Side, however, the forward march of gentrification – a new conquest of the urban frontier -- forced each to reconsider who its allies were and whether any familiar version of the Lower East Side was likely to survive.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 12. Historian Timothy Gilfoyle has called the White City “an interpretive smorgasbord” in his essay, “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Mar., 1998): 175-204. In addition to the texts I cite here, Gilfoyle also mentions the following: Neil Harris, Wim de Wit, and Robert Rydell, *Grand Illusions: Chicago’s World’s Fair of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Peter B. Hales, “Photography and the World’s Columbian Exposition: A Case Study,” *Journal of Urban History*, 15 (1989); James Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago’s Utopias of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: University of Maryland Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Herrick, *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), 192.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 37-38.

<sup>7</sup> See Turner, “Social Forces in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History*, 1920. The full quote is: “[The United States] was obliged to reconsider questions of the rights of man and traditional American ideals of liberty and democracy, in view of the task of government of other races politically inexperienced and undeveloped.” (p. 315)

<sup>8</sup> Historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr. famously and tellingly spoke of the “urban wilderness” in his 1972 book of the same title.

<sup>9</sup> Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, “At the Fair,” *The Century Magazine*, 46, Number 1, May 1893: 7.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Two Little Pilgrims’ Progress: The Story of the City Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 67-8.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Adams, “Chicago,” in *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1918).

<sup>12</sup> *Final Official Report of the Director of Works*, Vol 1. p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Rydell, “The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893: Racist Underpinnings of a Utopian Artifact,” in *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (Summer 1978): 258.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Sandweiss, “Around the World in a Day: International Participation in the World’s Columbian Exposition,” in *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Spring, 1991): 5.

<sup>15</sup> Rydell, 269-70.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Rydell, 270.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen Strain, “Exotic Bodies, Distant Landscapes: Touristic Viewing and Popularized Anthropology in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Wide Angle* 18.2 (1996): 71.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Ritter, *The American Civic Center: Urban Ideals and Compromise on the Ground* (Ph.D. Dissertation: New York University, 2007), 243; “Call Court Mad Extravagance,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1915.

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond, VA: J.W. Randolph, 1853), 177, quoted in Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-17; 40-48.

<sup>25</sup> Jacobson, 7-8.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Identifying the Lower East Side”

In 1913, writer, journalist, and self-proclaimed bohemian, Hutchins Hapgood, published an article in the *New York Globe* entitled “Expression and the East Side.” In it, he mourned the supposed passing of the Lower East Side neighborhood he had come to know more than a decade before as a reporter for the *Globe*’s previous incarnation as the *Commercial Advertiser*:

“Formerly, [the East Side] had geographical reality. It was the home of definite idealistic thought...But now the east side is a figure of speech.”<sup>1</sup> For Hapgood, a St. Louis-born, Harvard-educated “Victorian” (as he described himself) to feel an attachment to a neighborhood so different from where he was raised and where he lived was unusual, but it was consistent with the ideals of the *Commercial Advertiser*.<sup>2</sup> Under the editorial direction of long-time newspapermen Lincoln Steffens, Henry J. Wright, J.S. Seymour, and Hapgood's brother, Norman, the newspaper had featured the journalistic insight of people like Hutchins Hapgood -- “fresh, young, enthusiastic writers who could see and make others see the life of the city” -- and dedicated itself to profiling the city's most colorful characters.<sup>3</sup> Hapgood and his editors had viewed neighborhoods like the Lower East Side as rich with the picturesque, endowed with a sort of spirit impossible to find elsewhere in the city. Indeed, both Steffens and Hapgood returned to the words “spirit” and “picturesque” time and again to describe their experiences with the East Side. “I had enjoyed and profited by my police reporter's interest in the picturesque Ghetto,” Steffens once wrote, “and I knew it was good -- good journalism and good business -- for my reporters to follow and report the happenings over there.”<sup>4</sup> Hapgood spent the next few years of his life embedded in the Lower East Side, writing almost exclusively about subjects like the

Yiddish theater; oddball characters like Chuck Connors, "The Mayor of Chinatown;" and the fiery neighborhood battles associated with the labor movement. He was drawn in by what he believed was a sense of genuine feeling and openness that was missing elsewhere in the city. So fruitful were his encounters with the East Side that, in addition to hundreds of articles, Hapgood published three books that dealt either wholly or mostly with people he had met in the neighborhood. It had become central to his idea of himself as a writer.<sup>5</sup>

Yet at the same time he embraced the Lower East Side, Hapgood worried over its eventual loss. He predicted the neighborhood's demise in his 1902 book, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, writing, "the time is not so very far distant when it will cease to exist altogether," and he saw occasions like the death of Chuck Connors and the mounting successes of social reform as siphoning the unique energy of the area.<sup>6</sup> Hapgood's brave lament in 1913 was, therefore, long-anticipated and poignant: "[One] may never go back to the Bowery nor ever drink tea on Grand Street, never hear the pure passion of the Neapolitan expressed in connection with a bottle of Chianti," he wrote. "[But] one may carry his east side with him wherever he goes" even if, as he would write in another article that same year, "little by little, [the neighborhood has] ceased its foreign aspect. Its atmosphere faded away into dull respectability."<sup>7</sup> Cultural assimilation; housing, health, and political reform; and even the battle against vice on the Lower East Side had drained the life, he declared, of the area he loved.

Hapgood's eulogy was, of course, premature. The East Side still thrived with activity, commerce, people, buildings, and culture. It still endured poor housing, poverty, crime, and overcrowding. Indeed, just a year before Hapgood wrote his article, journalist Alfred Henry Lewis published his pulp novel, *The Apaches of New York*, in which he described the Lower East Side as a gangland hotbed where "beasts of prey" and "lush-workers" who mugged drunken bar

patrons felt at ease.<sup>8</sup> Walter Laidlaw, in his *Population of the City of New York, 1890-1930*, demonstrated that the population density on the Lower East Side in 1910 was an astounding 543 people per acre and that the majority of its residents were immigrants born in Southern or Eastern Europe. This did change over time, but not considerably so by 1913, thus giving lie to the notion that the East Side had suddenly changed dramatically.<sup>9</sup> What Hapgood seemed to be mourning, then, was not so much the Lower East Side of immigrant folkways and struggles for survival, but rather his place in the midst of it. No longer was he one of the exclusive interpreters of the neighborhood's meaning, sharing his findings with the city-at-large, plumbing the depths of its unknown ethnic "colonies" and helping to define its spaces for those on the outside. By 1913, the Lower East Side was visible and identifiable to those on the outside. Hapgood had outgrown the neighborhood, had discovered in it what was valuable to him, but that did not mean others would not see it as an urban frontier and an enticement to conquest in the future.<sup>10</sup>

For Hapgood, the Lower East Side evolved from a meaningless space on a map to a place of incomparable inspiration to not much more than a memory -- in just over a decade. He had immersed himself in the exoticism of the neighborhood and was nostalgic for its imagined authentic past (however recent it was.) But Hutchins Hapgood himself never dared make his home on the Lower East Side. Like other bohemian writers and artists of his generation, including Robert Henri, George Bellows, and Eugene O'Neill, Hapgood saw romance in the neighborhood, but he had no desire to live there.<sup>11</sup> What, then, are we to make of a Lower East Side so beloved by a writer such as Hapgood, but one in which he would not set up residence? Perhaps more compelling: if the Lower East Side was so extraordinary as to exist at the center of his artistic identity, and if "the invisible east side acts as a constant check to the

value we give to mere respectability,” then what can account for the monumental desire of reformers, and later planners, to regulate its residents, demolish its landscapes, and begin anew?<sup>12</sup>

Even though they disagreed on what they observed in the neighborhood, both Hapgood and the reformers who irked him found it unlivable. They demonstrated that *from the outside*, the Lower East Side was a clearly demarcated space that was spiritually, ethnically, architecturally, and morally removed – like a literal constellation of colonies -- from the rest of New York City. Whether lauded or censured for its difference, the Lower East Side simply *was different*. In this chapter, therefore, I trace the ways in which the blurred spaces of Lower Manhattan, at first measurable through the shapes and lines of wards and streets, became a Lower East Side neighborhood overripe with meaning and as known by the narratives attached to it as by the boundaries that contained it. Here, as throughout this dissertation, I wish to pose a modified version of geographer David Harvey's question, "by what social process(es) is place constructed?" by asking: how did the descriptions and varying motivations of outside observers construct a place like the Lower East Side?<sup>13</sup> In other words, how does the way we describe and evoke a city space actually work to determine the layout and forms of its physical environment?

These are questions that historians have tended to overlook. Those who have addressed neighborhood formation and urban space, such as Kenneth Scherzer in *The Unbounded Community: Neighborhood Life and Social Structure in New York City, 1830-1875*, Kevin J. Mumford in *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*, and, more recently, Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, and Graham White in *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars*, focus primarily on census and crime data, which both over-determine the meaning of neighborhood and

underplay the power of language to shape urban space.<sup>14</sup> The long tradition of community history, in contrast, does succeed in including narrative and language in its approach, but is often hamstrung either by its retrospective view or by its focus on a particular, watershed moment, rather than on a longer arc. That is, community histories tend to either conceptualize neighborhoods as already formed without adequately examining the elements that combine to produce the origins of their geography and meaning, or to tell a focused, time-sensitive story to the detriment of a broader one.<sup>15</sup> Geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists, such as Harvey, Tim Cresswell, Doreen Massey, Jason Hackworth, and Janet Abu-Lughod have more recently produced a literature that analyzes the transformation of urban space into defined places with specific character, meaning, and social networks. Yet, while these scholars have often taken a long-view of place formation by nodding toward the historical processes that precede it, few historians have responded in kind, assessing the value of the “spatial turn” in understanding how cities and their neighborhoods have grown and evolved over time.<sup>16</sup>

In the following pages, I demonstrate the ways in which the Lower East Side emerged in the 1880s through the dual processes of touring and narrating.<sup>17</sup> I identify four categories by which visitors from the outside -- or slummers -- to Lower Manhattan began to map the area for themselves.<sup>18</sup> These categories included the administrative boundaries of wards and police precincts; ethnic "quarters" and "colonies;" areas and locales of infamy; and the architectural dominance of the tenement. Over time, these categories produced explorers. In turn, these explorers created both what Michel De Certeau calls "a rhetoric of walking" -- a set of established pathways -- and an actual rhetoric of language.<sup>19</sup> Slumming narratives ascribed meaning to the spaces slummers observed. Through these narratives and overlapping pathways, the Lower East Side neighborhood became a place so real as to be regarded both malignant with

danger and pregnant with possibility. More importantly, these narratives, which constructed the Lower East Side as variably a foreign place, an unconquered wilderness, or a primitive throwback to the pre-modernizing city, produced both insiders and outsiders – those who belonged there and those who were merely dropping in. As a consequence of this nebulous, but powerful, dichotomy, fraught contestation between supposed insiders and outsiders over the Lower East Side’s spaces would be one of its enduring legacies. Likewise, while the menaces of poverty, crime, poor health, and poor housing would long be attributed to the Lower East Side, the presence of the immigrant or “alien” other would contribute overwhelmingly to the notion that the neighborhood itself was alien and thus a separate entity from the rest of New York City.

## **Chaos**

As the nineteenth century stumbled toward its close, Manhattan appeared to be a roiling and chaotic tangle of people, streets, and buildings. Some, like one *New York Times* reporter, moaned that “the City is disgracefully dirty, not now simply, but at all times...it is unhealthy beyond all necessity or excuse, and...it is liable to epidemics in the Summer, produced in some cases and in others greatly aggravated by the condition of the streets.”<sup>20</sup> Others, like the society magazine writer who called himself “The Saunterer,” warned that the city was “a mass of fascinating evils that can ruin any weak nature.”<sup>21</sup> Still others were more specific about -- and less tantalized by -- the kind of evils that were worrisome, namely immigrants: “How many will find homes in the slums of New-York and other great cities, there to vex Health Boards and to menace the public health by their foul ways of living? How many, intending to remain only three or four years, will make the labor problem more difficult of solution by supplanting citizens

who cannot descend to the level of their habits?”<sup>22</sup> The city seemed to many to be ungovernable and corrupt. Reports of police misconduct blazed across the local newspapers as the Reverend Charles Parkhurst’s City Vigilance League, created in 1892, uncovered criminal activity not only ignored, but often aided, by the police force. Panicked calls for reform made by journalists and charity-workers alike drew attention to the evils of the city’s working-class housing. Gas mains, the water supply, sanitation facilities, food, factories -- none were in reliable condition and all were in the process of promised improvement. New Yorkers could not even trust their own neighbors, writer Stephen Crane argued in 1894 when he published a *New York Press* article entitled “When Man Falls, A Crowd Gathers: A Graphic Study of New York Heartlessness.”<sup>23</sup>

Nowhere was the chaos more apparent to city-dwellers than in Lower Manhattan. There, the rapid change in population and the social ills of poverty, crime, and poor health seemed most apparent. Indeed, in the eyes of longtime New Yorkers, urban decay was centered around Lower Manhattan and threatened increasingly to encroach upon the health and safety of the entire city. This sentiment was not without warrant. Beginning in the 1810s, New Yorkers of means began moving ever more rapidly uptown as cholera and yellow fever epidemics descended upon the population and as living where one worked became less desirable.<sup>24</sup> While, early on, “uptown” meant areas only as far north as today’s Astor Place, it took just a decade for the wealthy to move on to Gramercy Park (located on the east side above Fourteenth Street), Chelsea (located on the west side above Fourteenth Street), and increasingly exclusive Fifth Avenue, which began at Washington Square and extended up the spine of Manhattan for miles. For the “respectable classes,” including shopkeepers, barbers, and clothiers, sturdy housing became available uptown by the late 1840s.<sup>25</sup> Businessman and real estate investor, William B. Astor, whose family owned miles of Manhattan land, erected middle-class brownstone row houses in the mid-40s on

the West side, while equally respectable brick-front residences just east of Gramercy Park ensured that even the striving middling classes had homes far removed from the squalor further south.<sup>26</sup>

As these New Yorkers established themselves in the growing and expanding city, the areas they left behind fell into disrepair. Those who owned land in Lower Manhattan had little incentive to make improvements and those who were willing to construct anew were loath to do so as the city's economy climbed and dipped dramatically, particularly after the Panic of 1837.<sup>27</sup> When they did build, the product of the day was the tenement, a narrow structure meant to temporarily house workers and their families. Even before the panic, three-story structures, eighteen to twenty feet wide and forty feet deep were being constructed for those who could afford little more.<sup>28</sup> Anyone who earned too little even for one of these apartments could settle in the buildings' basements, attics, or cellars. After the panic, however, another option became available: the rear tenement, which occupied what would have been the tenement yard. While landowners had resisted building such housing prior to the economic downturn, the promise of additional rent while property values declined made them more appealing. Indeed, what seemed undesirable prior to the Panic of 1837 became the new, profitable norm in subsequent years.<sup>29</sup> All over Lower Manhattan's residential areas, tenements and rickety, "tenementized" houses contended with an ever-growing population that could not afford to live elsewhere. Overcrowding followed, as did disease. Forty percent of those who perished in the 1849 cholera outbreak were Irish immigrants, the vast majority of whom lived in only a few wards downtown.<sup>30</sup> When, decades later, wealthier New Yorkers pictured the grimness of poverty in Lower Manhattan, it was the tenement – and its typically immigrant residents -- upon which they fixed their sights.

Since the colonial period, New York had been the destination for several waves of immigrants, who not only bolstered the city's labor force, but overburdened the capacity of its housing stock. Before the Civil War, the largest of these waves arrived in the 1840s, bringing mostly Irish and German immigrants to the city. As laborers in industries that were centered in Lower Manhattan -- shipbuilding, dock-work, light manufacturing, furniture-making -- these new New Yorkers settled in places such as the city's Sixth and Tenth wards, in the center and east side of Lower Manhattan, which offered lodging within walking distance of their places of employment. Because large concentrations of these immigrant groups tended to congregate in certain wards, the wards themselves became associated with their predominant ethnic group.<sup>31</sup> Thus in the 1850s, the Tenth Ward was known as "Kleindeutschland, or "Little Germany," and the Sixth Ward, also known as the "Five Points" or the "Bloody Ould Sixth," was associated with its Irish population.<sup>32</sup> As the tenements that congested these wards began to deteriorate with age, disrepair, and overcrowding, immigrants became synonymous not only with their impoverished housing, but with the ills that seemed to attend it. Poverty, disease, crime, tenements, immigrants -- these were the presumed ingredients of urban decay that most distressed city-dwellers, and they were all located in the same geographical area, skirting the commercial and industrial districts at the tip of Manhattan. Concerns about this area only increased as the city itself grew.

Between 1870 and 1890, New York's population increased from less than 950,000 to over 1.5 million, a 61% growth.<sup>33</sup> In that same period, another wave of immigrants contributed to that population spurt, adding to the city's foreign-born population by thirty-five percent.<sup>34</sup> These new immigrants settled in the dilapidated neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan, represented by wards Four, Six, Seven, Ten, Eleven, Thirteen, Fourteen, and Seventeen, the same general

area that housed their immigrant predecessors.<sup>35</sup> Italians, Syrians, Greeks, Turks, and Jews arriving from places as diverse as Russia, Lithuania, Rumania, Poland, and Estonia crowded the area's tenements. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad system and the increase in trade with China, the Chinese population of Manhattan, concentrated around Chatham Square, also grew and mingled with its European neighbors. And despite a restriction on Chinese immigration in 1882, which distilled the demographic to mostly merchant bachelors, the population still climbed from a total of twelve in 1870 to 1,970 in 1890.<sup>36</sup>

The new, profoundly mixed, immigrant population was described by one long-established New Yorker as a concatenation of "long-haired, wild-eyed, bad-smelling, atheistic, reckless foreign wretches who never did an honest hour's work in their lives."<sup>37</sup> Their habits and customs, many feared, were unassimilable and their agendas in their newly adopted country were considered questionable. Blame for labor unrest and radical politics was assigned to new immigrants, particularly Russian Jews. And anxiety that immigrants would bring with them a lack of respect for the republican ideals on which the nation was founded ignited protest.<sup>38</sup> This, added to the accumulated anxieties of previous waves of immigration, made Lower Manhattan's teeming neighborhoods appear to be not only sinkholes of desperation, but warning signs that cities themselves were failing and that their failure could signal the demise of the entire American project. "We speak of a city's slums as though they were a local evil," argued one reformer, but, in truth, "they form a sore which denotes disease in every part of the body politic."

39

As respectable New Yorkers gazed upon Lower Manhattan's residential areas, then, they saw a problem that needed to be solved both for their own good and for the good of the nation. The strategies they developed to eradicate the problem revolved around the regulation of the

urban masses and control of the spaces they inhabited.<sup>40</sup> This required focused study of the areas that caused city leaders the greatest concern, as well as deeper scrutiny of the people who called those areas home. Social reformers with an eye toward alleviating the evils of poverty and the (to their minds) primitive habits of the newest New Yorkers took to the streets of Lower Manhattan to meet their subjects face-to-face. Soon joined by curious pleasure-seekers who saw in the alien neighborhoods an opportunity for excitement and even education, these visitors unwittingly collaborated to both identify and map the contours of the slum.

### **Locating the Slum**

While it was clear to many that Lower Manhattan was the source of most of the menace, the precise identification of the wards and neighborhoods that required concentrated attention came from both social reformers and tourists. Each camp informed the other and the line between them was often quite indistinct. The label “slummer” was attached to both groups, as they worked in tandem -- though not always for the same purpose -- to locate the “slum.” Slumming had its origins in London, where reformers intent upon uplifting the poor and rehabilitating the criminal set up religious missions and settlements in the city’s slums for the purpose of studying and educating their subjects.<sup>41</sup> Some of these reformers, such as James Granville Adderley of Oxford House in Bethnal Green or journalist Henry Wood Nevinson, elected to live among those they hoped to help, while others, such as Prime Minister Lord Salisbury and journalist James Greenwood, preferred to return to their homes after an evening of gruesome observation.<sup>42</sup> Still others simply took to the slums for the brutal spectacle itself, intent on catching a glimpse of what writer W.T. Stead termed “Outcast London.”<sup>43</sup> Even in London, however, no clear demarcation existed between pleasure-seeking and reform, except

perhaps in the degree to which each visitor was likely to spend time – and perhaps live – in the neighborhoods she or he observed. The perspective of city slummers, as historian Seth Koven explains, was framed by a "messier mingling of good intentions and blinkered prejudices" than either simple altruism or outright exploitation could account for. In other words, the label "slummer" was a broad one, denoting a person, usually middle-class and ethnically neutral, who took an interest in visiting, if not studying, the more notorious areas of the city.<sup>44</sup> The practice, once transported to America in the mid-1880s, remained equally open-ended and murky.<sup>45</sup>

Most curious slummers were drawn to their task because it brought them to a part of the city that few others of their class were willing to visit. To those for whom slumming was part of a moral imperative to help the poor, time spent in the slum was considered "unpleasant" at best, "dangerous" at worst. Such reformers tried to warn off those who might tour the slums only for fun. Helen Campbell, who began her reform work at the Water Street Mission in Five Points in the late-1870s, pleaded with her readers to understand that "any one who undertakes to 'see life' in the haunts of vice and crime in New York, especially by night, takes his life in his own hand, and courts danger in many forms."<sup>46</sup> Campbell herself was a well-educated, middle-class woman from upstate New York who, feeling dissatisfied with what she felt was the ineffectiveness of Christian teachings for the poor, went to Lower Manhattan to "see for [herself]" the "region of dark alleys festering with filth, and narrow streets alive with masses of people."<sup>47</sup> Guidebook and popular history writer James McCabe, himself a transplant from Virginia, also cautioned that to "venture under the shadow, is to court danger in all its forms. No matter how 'wise in his own conceit' a stranger may be, he is but a child in the hands of the disreputable classes of the great city."<sup>48</sup> Such admonitions had little impact on those who were determined to "sup on horrors and experience 'sensations' in the gruesome squalor and naked



THE SLUMMERS OF THE FIVE POINTS. A GROUP IN THE CITY PRISON. FROM A SKETCH BY A VISITING SLUMMER.



Fig. 1: Slummers in Lower Manhattan. The first is from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Press*, December 5, 1885, and depicts reform-minded slummers in the Five Points. The second is from *Munsey's* magazine, 1909, and shows touristic slummers exploring Chinatown.

vice” of the slum. A.E. Costello, a beat reporter for the New York *Herald* and author of flattering, late-nineteenth century histories of both the New York city police and fire departments, snickered about “‘elephant hunters,’ as ‘slummers’ are termed by the Central Office Detectives” who “are treated to a sight of an opium den, the ‘Big Flat’ in Elizabeth Street, and the stale beer or ‘all sort’ dives” on tours in the 1880s.<sup>49</sup> Others, described in an article from *Munsey’s* magazine, “are people who belong beyond the city’s gates -- eager, curious, prurient even, to know the worst that lies hidden within.”<sup>50</sup> Yet another article profiling the wife of New York Governor Roswell Pettibone Flower, however, placed participation in “slumming parties” on par with “work women are doing...in social, economic, political and reform leagues; in preservation of the birds and prevention of cruelty to animals; [and] in temperance.”<sup>51</sup> Ms. Flower may have been inspired by women like those described in one 1893 article in which “little bands of missionaries composed of three or four persons, of whom the majority are nearly always women, are familiar sights to the police and night loungers of the Chinese district and elsewhere in the slums.”<sup>52</sup> It seemed that slumming served as many purposes as there were slummers.

Still, New York’s slummers, whether seeking reform or pleasure, shared much in common with one another. They almost all relied upon “insider” informants to guide them through neighborhoods of interest; they were as fascinated by ethnic difference as they were by poverty; they relied upon heavily descriptive stories of personal encounter with the impoverished and ethnic “other” to illustrate the authenticity of their experience; and they agreed that the slum was alien and exotic, removed both geographically and sympathetically from the rest of the city. In the discourse they produced, they also shared a tendency to sensationalize their findings, making it difficult at times to discern whether reform or entertainment was the goal. Reform

writing may have intentionally borrowed from the language of guidebooks as a way both to repackage the dusty rhetoric of Protestant Evangelicism and to stir readers to action. This new discourse -- what literary scholar Robert Dowling terms "moral realism" -- brought together the romanticism of danger and discovery with the credibility of personal observation.<sup>53</sup> Whether morally persuasive or merely stimulating, slummers made the slum visible and definable through the language they used. At the same time they also reinforced the sense that slum residents were both quaint and dangerous curiosities. Mapping the slum meant collapsing its elements -- immigrants, tenements, disease, poverty, and vice -- into one grand, titillating, and exceptional problem.

In their reportage, slummers, who arrived on the scene in the mid-1880s, borrowed from an earlier discourse, which similarly blended tourism with reform and focused on the most crowded "tenant neighborhoods" of Lower Manhattan. Charles Dickens famously toured the Five Points in the 1840s, commenting on "the coarse and bloated faces at the doors" and suggesting that "debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old."<sup>54</sup> This symbiosis between building and tenant, with each defining the other, would be an ongoing theme among slummers in later years, though his concern was less with the ethnicity of slum residents, as later reformers would emphasize, than with the extremes of poverty. In his *Dangerous Classes of New York*, Charles Loring Brace, founder of New York's Children's Aid Society, described a similar tour of the city's Fourth Ward in the 1860s: "In visiting from lane to lane and house to house in the poorest quarters, I soon came to know one district which seemed hopelessly given over to vice and misery...Here were as many liquor-shops as houses, and the worst dens of vice, the 'Dance-Saloons,' where prostitution was in its most brazen form, and the most unfortunate sailors were continually robbed and murdered." Again, while Brace was convinced of the

relationship between personal character and poverty, he did not fixate on the ethnicity of his subjects.<sup>55</sup>

The city's Fourth Ward, located along the East River and to the east of today's City Hall Park, was also the subject of study in 1864, when the newly formed Citizens Committee of New York published a report on the city's sanitary conditions, finding themselves particularly horrified by their observations in that area. Sanitary Inspector Dr. Ezra Pulling described the tenements of the Fourth Ward as being "generally crowded into the smallest possible space, and...constructed in the cheapest manner." In one apartment, which he suggested was representative of most tenements in the ward, he found "two beds beside a quantity of bedding on the floor between them, indicating that this is the dormitory of half a dozen persons. A sickening and stifling odor, most offensive to the unaccustomed senses, pervades this apartment and poisons the atmosphere inhaled by the residents." Indeed, poisoned air was the focus of Pulling's study. Arguing that infectious disease, infant mortality, and other "pestilence" was rife in the ward and that its sanitary condition would have the direct result of city-wide disease, as well as political unrest, he passionately demanded housing reform lest the entire city suffer: "Under such influences have been reared a large class, already so numerous as at times to seriously disturb the public peace and to endanger the safety of our social and political fabric." Since more than half of those living in the Fourth Ward were foreign-born, the statement implied that such danger might come from those not thoroughly steeped in American ideals. Without attention to improving the condition of these impoverished New Yorkers, then, such pollution would lead to, in Pulling's words, "universal pillage, slaughter, and destruction."<sup>56</sup> To his mind, the connection between physical disease and moral disease was clear. Moreover, as Pulling's

research would foreshadow, the most worthy of suspicion were potentially the nation's newcomers.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Administrative Boundaries***

Armed with such precedent, the slummers that took to the streets in the 1880s made conclusions similar to those of Ezra Pulling in the 1860s. As with previous visitors to the areas of Lower Manhattan, slummers used wards and ward boundaries as initial resources in their journeys. Once the smallest political unit in municipal governance in New York and the corrupt realm of Tammany "ward bosses," the ward was by 1857 more of a bureaucratic body than a seat of power. Decades later, as slummers toured the dark alleys of the city, ward administrators participated only in census tallies and the implementation of directives from the city's school board.<sup>58</sup> The boundaries, however, were long established and thus potentially useful in understanding the geography of the area. Indeed, by the nineteenth century the ward boundaries of Lower Manhattan had been in place for almost fifty years, if not longer. The areas of wards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 had been established in 1686 with the Dongan Charter and remained unchanged until the ward disappeared as an administrative unit with the revised city charter of 1938.<sup>59</sup> Though it is unclear how the outline of each ward was determined in 1686, the process may have been partly dependent on landholdings. The Fourth ward, for example, corresponded to the borders of the Rutgers farm, while parts of the Seventh, Tenth, and Thirteenth wards derived from the Delancey farm, which was confiscated from the Loyalist family after the Revolution.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the first six wards were established south of the city's fresh water pond, while the Seventh ward, originally called Montgomerie ward after Governor John Montgomerie, was added in 1730. With the exception of Ward 6, all of those laid out before the Revolution kept

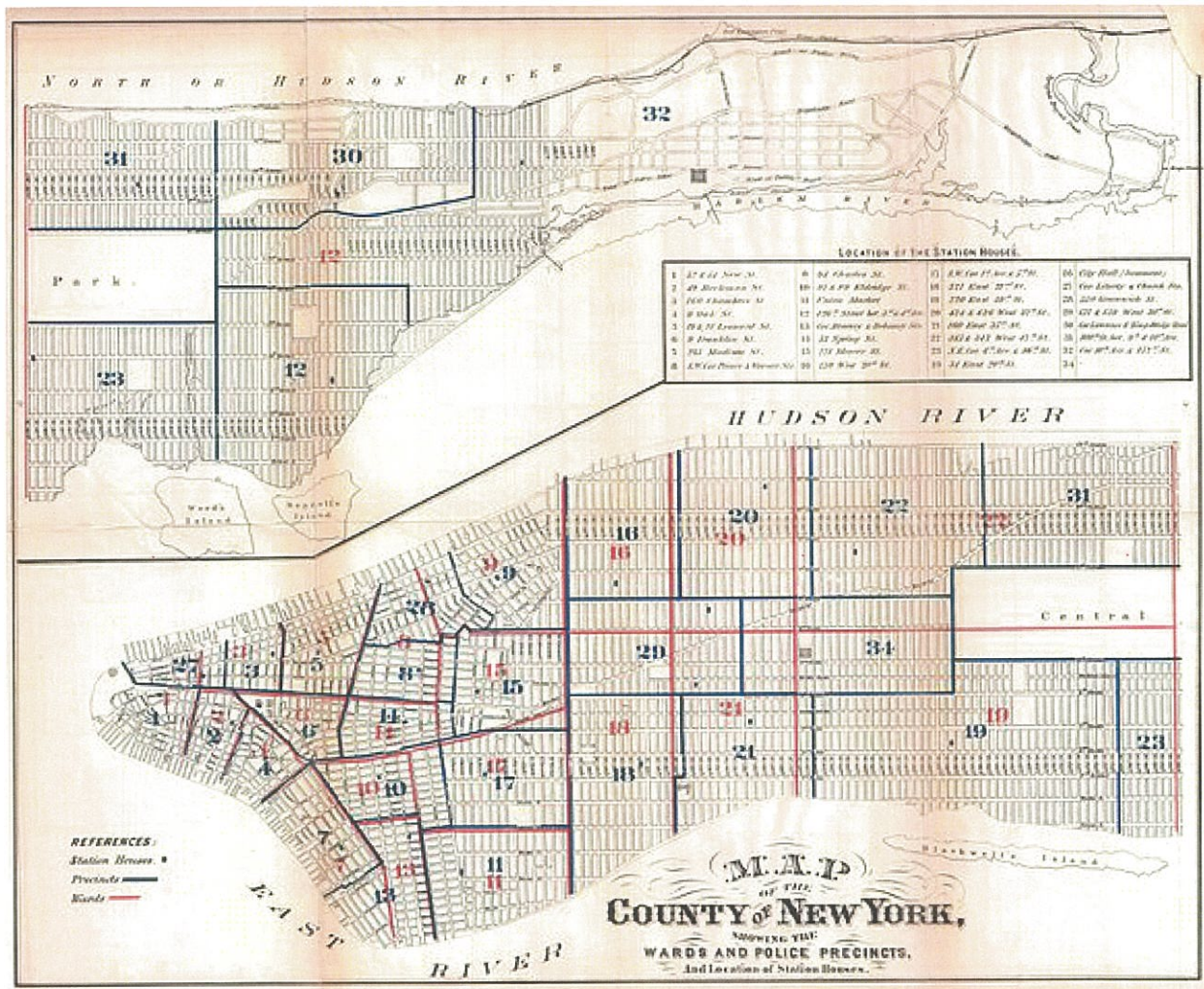


Fig. 2: Ward map of Manhattan, circa 1871. This shows that the police precincts (in red) were drawn mostly within the ward boundaries, particularly in Lower Manhattan. John Hardy, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York*, 1871. (<http://www.geographicus.com/mm5/cartographers/hardy.txt>)

their boundaries for as long as they existed.<sup>61</sup> The rest of the wards were plotted shortly after the Revolution and changed only through subdivision as the city spread northward and the population grew over the nineteenth century. Wards 6, 8, and 10, for example, were subdivided to create Wards 13, 14, and 17.<sup>62</sup>

Because more than half the city's wards existed below Fourteenth street in the areas of densest population, ward boundaries were perhaps more useful in Lower Manhattan than anywhere else. This was conveniently the case for slummers because ward boundaries after 1858 often corresponded to police precincts as well.<sup>63</sup> For those seeking police accompaniment through a neighborhood, the precinct was an excellent source for knowledgeable tour guides. After 1890, sanitation districts were also aligned with or subdivided within old ward boundaries, assisting reformers inclined toward public health in studying clearly demarcated areas.<sup>64</sup> Because sanitation and crime were associated so closely with the characteristics of the slum, however, this municipal "mapping" had the potential to over-determine what one might find in each ward. This was certainly the case for many slummers. Reformer Helen Campbell described the "Fourth, Sixth, Eleventh, Fourteenth, and Seventeenth Wards of New York" as "nests of crime" where fourteen people might be found "in one room...after the usual debauch is ended."<sup>65</sup> Travel writer and New York *Herald* reporter, Thomas Knox, agreed with Campbell, adding that "It is estimated that the Eleventh Precinct of New York city, which is a tenement-house district, contains six percent of the city's population, and the fact that the proportion of arrests in this precinct is nearly double that of any other precinct, is a striking commentary upon the evils resultant upon tenement-house life and its tendency to crime."<sup>66</sup> What neither investigator noted in these wards was "respectable" behavior and activity. Department stores, pharmacies, flower shops, churches, synagogues, and shipbuilding factories were prominent in

the Eleventh ward, for example, though no reformers mentioned it.<sup>67</sup> Despite the existence of legitimate neighborhood institutions and businesses, slummers used ward boundaries to designate and contain areas of disrepute. The wards upon which they focused their study were, in fact, the same in which immigrants had settled for decades: Four, Six, Seven, Ten, Eleven, Thirteen, Fourteen, and Seventeen.

### *Ethnic Spaces*

When not referring to ward boundaries, many tourists and reformers spoke of ethnic “colonies”, “quarters,” and, most often for Jewish New Yorkers, “ghettos.” While ethnicity had long been associated with certain city spaces, particularly in the case of *Kleindeutschland*, the increased diversity of immigrant populations made this kind of mapping of Lower Manhattan more commonplace. In *Our Police Protectors*, an 1885 history of the New York City police department, A.E. Costello described the Seventeenth Precinct as “home of the Bohemian colony” though there were also “many Germans in the district,” while the Tenth Precinct was “largely composed of Teutons” despite “the typical Hebrew quarters -- the Judenstrasse of New York...in the neighborhood of Hester and Essex Streets.”<sup>68</sup> Describing a visit to Chinese immigrants in the same period, travel writer Ernest Ingersoll, writing for the nationally popular Rand McNally guidebook company, relied on a similar geographical indexing: “the [Chinese] colony is very healthy, and gives the police little trouble, apart from opium orgies.”<sup>69</sup> In another part of his guide, Ingersoll emphasized only the ethnic composition of certain areas, suggesting that the “part of the city east of Second av., between Houston and 14th sts., is often called ‘Germany,’ because populated almost exclusively by Germans; while ‘Chinatown’ in Mott st., and ‘Africa’ in the lower part of Thompson st. indicate other races.”<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, a reporter for an 1880

article on Italian immigration in *The Sun*, explained that, “No better place could be selected [for such a study] than that part of New York popularly known as the Italian quarter or ‘New Italy,’” located in the Five Points area. After establishing the reasons for Italian immigration, the reporter went on to describe different “types of Italian colonists” with character sketches of the organ grinder, the fruit vendor, bootblacks, and ragpickers.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps most infamous for his ethnic mapping of the city was Jacob Riis, who devoted an entire chapter of his seminal work, *How the Other Half Lives*, to “Jewtown.”

The ways in which ethnic spaces were described revealed much about the attitudes of those who reported on them. Geographer David Ward suggests that some reformers, whose concerns about immigrants were drawn from a belief that these newcomers were especially prone to bad behavior, used descriptions of the ghetto to make character determinations of those who lived there: “Since it was easier to document the environmental disabilities and segregated residential patterns of the ghetto than to verify the presumed pathological or deviant behavior of its residents, the latter attributes were often inferred as unavoidable consequences of overcrowded housing and social isolation.”<sup>72</sup> This analysis was often related to the theory of “environmentalism” to which many reformers subscribed, which held that criminal and other immoral activity were the natural outgrowth of unhealthy surroundings. Riis himself was, at times, a proponent of the idea: “New York’s wage earners have no other place to live [besides the tenement]...The wonder is that they are not all corrupted, and speedily, by their surroundings.”<sup>73</sup> The cure for criminality among the impoverished classes was therefore environmental improvement, including housing reform, public baths, and more “breathing space.” This approach did have a strong influence on policy and planning in the city in later decades. For most of the nineteenth century, however, it instead fueled a movement to remove

residents -- particularly children -- from their hazardous homes. If the tenement could not be eradicated immediately, the young tenant at least could be saved.<sup>74</sup>

The notion that the environment could poison the slum-dweller often worked in reverse though as well, with reformers intimating that “pathological or deviant behavior” was essential to immigrant residents and, therefore, it was they who were ultimately responsible for the plague of poverty. Helen Campbell adorned her prose with antagonistic comments about the ethnic poor she encountered. On one journey to the slum to find a young girl who was on the verge of falling into dissipation, Campbell met with an “Italian hag” with “piercing, black, snaky eyes” which “shone like beads” and whose countenance was “the very incarnation of ugliness” as she “[struck] an old gray-haired woman full in the face with a bunch of keys.”<sup>75</sup> Jacob Riis made similar remarks about Chinese immigrants in particular, lamenting what he diagnosed as an incompatibility between the Chinese and Christianity: “Ages of senseless idolatry, a mere grub-worship, have left him without the essential qualities for appreciating the gentle teachings of a faith whose motive and unselfish spirit are alike beyond his grasp.”<sup>76</sup> Riis, a devout Christian, set up the Chinese immigrant as unassimilable not only ethnically, but spiritually. Indeed, he later contended that the “Chinese are in no sense a desirable element of the population.”<sup>77</sup> Perhaps more damning were official reports, like one presented to the Congressional Investigation of the Sweating System in 1893, which stated that “the immigration of Jews has made [the sweatshop system] worse, in that they are a dirtier class of people, and their tenement houses are dirtier.”<sup>78</sup>

Of course, reformers were not alone in relying on unfavorable descriptions of the ethnic poor to add flair to accounts of the slum. Guidebook writers and tourists made similar remarks, often to amplify the excitement and exoticism of a slum visit. While generally quite sensitive in



Fig. 3: "Bandit's Roost, 59 ½ Mulberry Street" and "In a Sweat Shop" (both ca. 1890), Jacob A. Riis, Collections of the Museum of the City of New York.

his portrayals of the ethnic poor, travel writer James McCabe did not hesitate to note that the Chinese were “inveterate gamblers, and one of their chief dissipations consists in stupefying themselves by smoking opium.”<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile their food, described by a *New York Times* reporter on a tour of Chinatown, was generally unappetizing: “The fumes can be better imagined than described...the smell of their kitchen was not very pleasant.”<sup>80</sup> Worse than the Chinese were the Italians, who, according to Ernest Ingersoll, did not speak English, only “a rough, guttural Italian.” Moreover, he warned “do not be enticed into exploring” their homes, because if they are angry, “perhaps they will take it out in words -- perhaps a knife might flash out, a cry be heard, and the cat-like murderer get away even though policemen are close at hand, for his countrymen will help him to escape, in order that they may institute the vendetta and become their own avengers.”<sup>81</sup> Less dangerous, but equally troublesome, were “our Hebraic brethren” who sold old clothes and used furniture. According to Ingersoll, “swarthy men and sometimes girls entreat you to enter and buy, not only, but seize your arm and will drag you in, if they can, despite the protests and revilings of the salesman next store.” This, though “amusing objectively,” as he put it, was all in the service of making a dishonest deal.<sup>82</sup>

Even those slummers who celebrated the cosmopolitanism and diversity that immigrants brought to New York were ambivalent about the immigrant character. For them, ethnic spaces were more like outposts of foreign lands, rather than dens of poverty and vice. While they were deeply enthusiastic about the visual spectacle of diversity, often cheering the “hard-handed sons of toil,” at the same time their accounts of ethnic encounter in Lower Manhattan bordered on condescension.<sup>83</sup> Reports ranged from the anthropological to the approbative. On one hand, immigrants were hardworking and refreshingly authentic; on the other, they were simply “picturesque.”<sup>84</sup> Of course, the “picturesque” ethnic was the safe ethnic. By neutralizing

through either insipid or indulgent language the real turmoil wrought by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrant newcomers, cosmopolitan slummers could argue that ethnic slum dwellers were spiritually regenerative or just novel. Thus, journalist and writer E.S. Martin mused that “for those who appreciate the wholesomeness of variety and the value of new sensations and suggestions, the East Side is an amazingly rich field.”<sup>85</sup> And Leftist bohemian journalist Randolph Bourne could assert that “America is transplanted Europe. Its colonies live here inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse.” This, he argued, was the ideal of a modern nation -- a “transnational America” -- one in which ethnic particularities were preserved within distinctive spaces.<sup>86</sup>

While literary scholar Carrie Tirado Bramen rightly argues that “mapping cultural difference onto distinct neighborhoods” in this way made slummers feel that they were experiencing something more authentic in the “ethnic colonies” than they might find elsewhere in the city, she does not fully explore the notion that these “colonies” were also approached as internal, urban, imperial spaces primed for conquest. As imperial Europe envisioned its colonial holdings in the global South and Middle East as places of fascination, horror, perpetual adolescence, social mobility, and danger, as well as sexual and creative opportunity, the slummers of New York viewed their Lower Manhattan slums as similarly bountiful with the promises of savage realism and untainted, primitive wisdom. What they could not find in the refined quarters where they lived, they could project upon – and perhaps even discover – in these ethnic spaces. In his discussion of the early nineteenth-century French novelists Gustave Flaubert and Gerard de Nerval and their relationships to the Orient, cultural theorist Edward Said has observed that aesthetically-minded Western writers and artists often imagined colonial places like Egypt and Malta as places of pilgrimage: they “sought the invigoration provided by the

fabulously antique and the exotic.”<sup>87</sup> Nerval found in Egypt “that maternal ‘center, at once mysterious and accessible’ from which all wisdom derives,” while Flaubert, perhaps less dreamy, looked to the Orient for a “visionary alternative...an exciting spectacle instead of humdrum routine, the perennially mysterious in place of the all too familiar.”<sup>88</sup> New York’s bohemian writers such as Hutchins Hapgood and his editor, Lincoln Steffens, echoed such passion by privileging the ethnic “colonies” of Lower Manhattan as living critiques of the hypocrisies of American bourgeois social codes. Hapgood and Steffens saw the East Side, in particular, as a place to experience a “vigorous, straightforward, and genuine character of...expression.”<sup>89</sup> Hapgood, writing of the “Yiddish east side” in his autobiography, wrote that he “got an impression of willful and vital activity that I never afterwards experienced in a group of people [than in] that whole tumultuous significant mass of human beings, described for the most part by our reserved and aloof gentility as unpleasant.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, while bohemians engaged with the slum in a way that differed tremendously in its idealism from those of other slummers, they still categorized it as essentially different. Indeed, as an enigmatic region set apart both physically and culturally from the rest of New York City, the ethnic spaces of Lower Manhattan comprised an almost *literally* colonial site, which prompted all kinds of fantasies, dependent only on the spectacle the spectator chose to see.

To that end, Steffens, who found his experiences in the (Jewish) “Ghetto” to be not only “picturesque” but “moving,” claimed to be “infatuated with the Ghetto as eastern boys were with the wild west.”<sup>91</sup> So charmed was he by the “East Side Jew” that he attended synagogue and “nailed a mazuzah [sic.] to my office door.” He even insisted that he was at that time “almost a Jew,” though nowhere else in his autobiography does he mention an ongoing commitment to the religion. His spiritual experience was, it seemed, limited to a precise time and space. Like his

friend, Hutchins Hapgood, who mourned the loss of his own East Side a decade later, the neighborhood could not exist for Steffens when it ceased to be a fertile wilderness or frontier dividing respectable civilization from the temptations of the foreign other.

### *Areas of Infamy*

With their high-mindedness and artistic sensibilities, cosmopolitans such as Steffens and Hapgood found inspiration in what they considered to be the authenticity and refreshing lack of refinement they observed in Lower Manhattan. Yet they were well aware of the area's allure for its areas of infamy, such as "Bandit's Roost" and "Ragpickers' Row," and its bawdy entertainment establishments, such as Harry's Hill's and McGlory's Armory Hall, both of which boasted celebrity criminals and opportunities for sexual experimentation.<sup>92</sup> These micro-neighborhoods and locales helped define the geography of Lower Manhattan. While some slummers were repelled -- and tried to repel others -- by these areas of infamy, many found them rich with the promise of danger and delight.

Reformers, of course, took the former stance by emphasizing the treacherous reputations of these places. In her 1892 book, *Darkness and Daylight in New York*, Campbell toured "Slaughter Alley" on the East Side's Roosevelt Street, where she accompanied a doctor to "service the poor of this wretched locality."<sup>93</sup> Later, on Baxter Street, she visited "a cluster of eight houses known as the Beehive," where she found rag-, bone-, and garbage-pickers sorting their bounty.<sup>94</sup> James McCabe described the same nook of Lower Manhattan as "Ragpickers' Row," which he called "the most wretched haunt occupied by human beings in the New World."<sup>95</sup> There, rags would be hung from fire escapes, fences, and clothes-lines to be "left to the rain and sun to cleanse them." These would later be resold or reused. Thirty years before,

Sanitary Inspector Ezra Pulling, suggested that some of the refuse ragpickers collected ended in coffee, sausages, and fertilizer. Others, “saturated with contagion,” were cleansed well enough to find their way into the best clothing stores.<sup>96</sup> Not far from “Ragpickers’ Row” was “Bottle Alley,” so named for another resident who collected and sold old bottles. Again, McCabe found it to be an “abode of misery and wretchedness,” filthy and unfit for human habitation.<sup>97</sup> Also nearby on Pell Street were “Shinbone Alley,” a gangland rendezvous where a row of opium dens could be found, and the “River District” closer to the East River, where one might find a “Fence,” who was “generally the keeper of a pawnshop or junk store in a part of the city inhabited by the poorer classes.”<sup>98</sup> Such distinctive names allowed visitors to navigate the streets by trade -- rags and bottles -- but they also connoted a kind of atavistic space, removed from the more genteel labels one might find further uptown. Combined with the poverty they also illustrated, appellations like “Shinbone Alley” stood as further proof that the slum’s primitiveness was holding back the city-at-large from modernity and progress.

Most notorious of these areas of infamy was the street called “Mulberry Bend,” also known simply as “The Bend,” which received full treatment in Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*. For the most part, Riis’s critique of The Bend was based on how crowded the street and its tributaries were. Residents, mostly Italian, lined the sidewalks with goods such as “frowsy weeds, some sort of salad probably, stale tomatoes and oranges not above suspicion.”<sup>99</sup> They interacted with one another in public just as they might in their own, cramped homes. Bargaining and shouting filled the air. One alley off the street, known as “Bandit’s Roost,” was the location of several small stalls, where people could buy fish or tobacco. In Riis’ estimation, “abuse is the normal condition in ‘The Bend,’ murder its everyday crop.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, death was one of the burgeoning products of the street, with, according to Riis, a rate of almost 70 infant

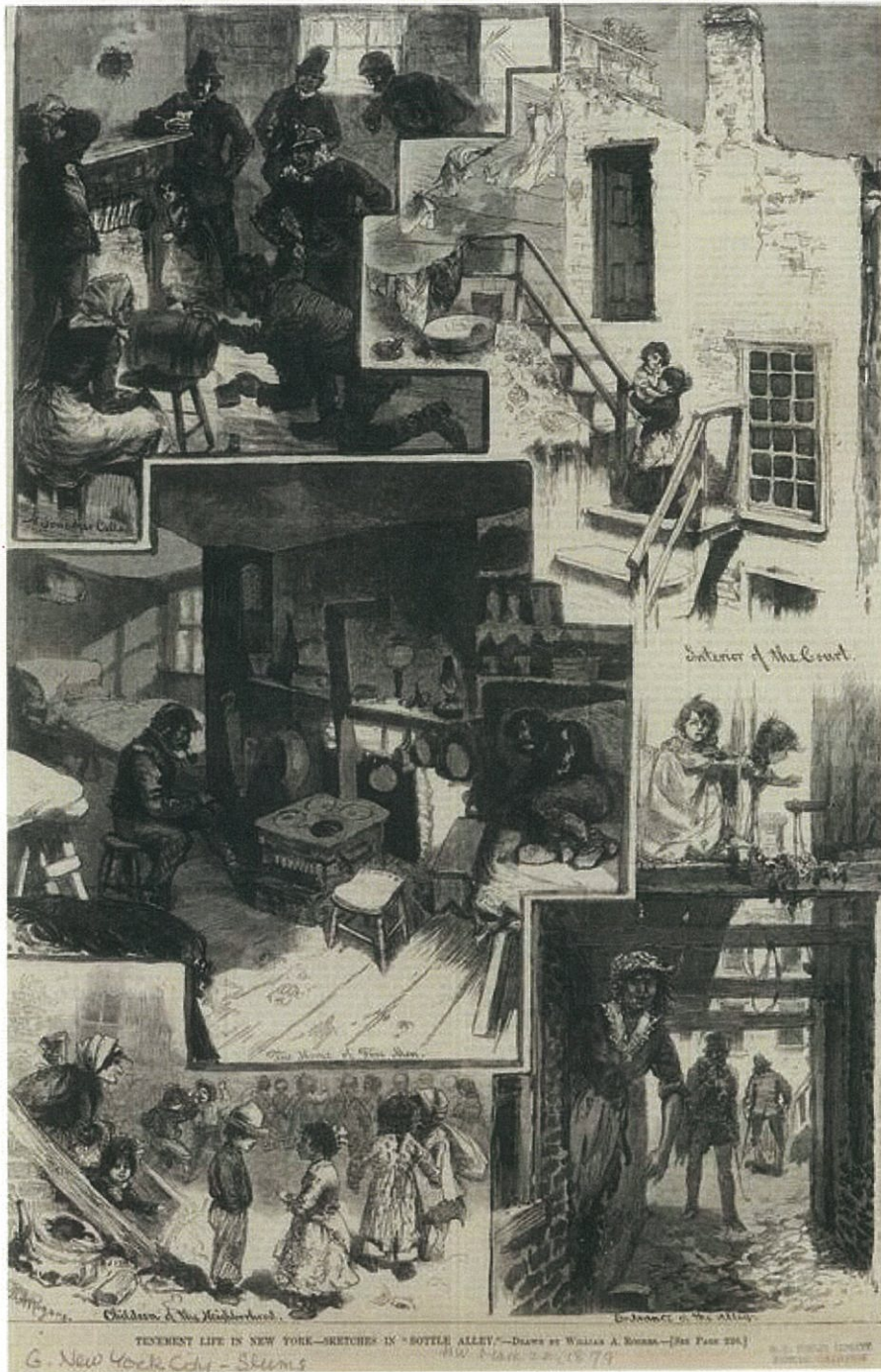


Fig. 4: W.A. Rogers, "Tenement life in New York - sketches in "Bottle Alley,"  
*Harper's weekly: a journal of civilization*, 1879. Mid-Manhattan  
 Library / Picture Collection.

deaths in 1882, compared to a citywide average of about 46.<sup>101</sup> As with the Fourth Ward of the 1860s, tenement apartments in The Bend were overcrowded and poorly furnished. Even with so many housed in this dire way, the streets and alleys around the area were thronging with the homeless. “Never,” wrote Riis, “was change so urgently needed” as in this place.<sup>102</sup>

Surprisingly, guidebook writers did not dissuade excitement-seeking slummers from visiting such areas. Indeed, some made the areas sound especially alluring as long as tourists kept their wits about them. Still, for touristic slummers, infamy was better purchased than freely observed and, for them, dives, pleasure resorts, and beer halls were made most appealing. Billy McGlory’s “Armory Hall,” located at 158 Hester Street, was described by the *National Police Gazette* as “a resort for the lowest of pickpockets, street-women, thugs, and criminals and gangsters of every variety. A place of repulsive degeneracy rather than a gilded den of vice.”<sup>103</sup> More forgiving was an *Evening World* report in which a local “hack driver,” who had patronized the hall (and entered into a fistfight with McGlory), reported one could find there “an early variety show and a dance, and liquors...sold to men and women.”<sup>104</sup> Despite the patron’s tame description, McGlory’s was famous for its transvestite floor show, regular murders, and nudity. One reporter for the *Cincinnati Inquirer* feigned horror at the dance show he witnessed at the Hall in which “The movements of the dancers grew licentious and more and more rapid...There are occasional exhibitions of nature that would put Adam and Eve to shame.”<sup>105</sup> Others reported watching planned and unplanned bare-knuckle fights, sometimes between women. McGlory’s, however, was not the only show in town. Harry Hill’s, a resort located near the corner of Houston and Mulberry, had similar offerings, though packaged in a more “respectable” manner. Hill’s was most reputed for robberies, particularly ones in which prostitutes lured their prey into ambushes, which would leave victims wallet-less and beaten, if not dead.<sup>106</sup> It also offered

plentiful liquor and ribald puppet shows. Even with its criminal and profligate element, it was, as contemporary writer Luc Sante puts it, a “major tourist-trap.”<sup>107</sup>

Interspersed with spaces of poverty and crime, as well as resorts of amusement, were more rarefied attractions, which guidebook writers, reformers, and tourists did not fail to note. Prostitution was available throughout Lower Manhattan, and this was not limited to heterosexual coupling. Houses of prostitution could be found in areas below Canal Street and to the east of the Bowery throughout the period 1870 to 1919. However, over the course of those decades, the density of the Lower Manhattan business moved almost exclusively east of the Bowery, toward the East Side.<sup>108</sup> Paresis Hall on Bowery and and Fifth Street, as well as the Slide at 157 Bleecker Street, were considered “fairy resorts” in the 1890s and catered both to men seeking homosexual encounter and patrons simply fascinated by gender-play. Male waiters at both clubs might wear a dash of rouge or perform in a falsetto voice; it is not clear if women experimented in this way as well.<sup>109</sup> For the more politically inclined, Ernest Ingersoll pointed out where one could “take a glass of beer with the bright-witted and gay-hearted Socialists;” and for frugal gourmands, he directed his readers to a corner of Second Avenue where one could purchase “a large cup of strong coffee, three lumps of sugar, a portion of whipped cream, and a glass of water” for five cents.<sup>110</sup> The abundance of clubs, restaurants, and cafes -- and even of fruit stands and pawn-shops -- testified to the commercial flavor Lower Manhattan was beginning to supply to those who were interested in consuming while observing. As with any tourist destination, Lower Manhattan was rife with residents who knew their audience. Chuck Connors, known as the “Mayor of Chinatown,” was well-known for taking uptowners to visit fake opium dens. While Connors led groups through the neighborhood as early as the 1870s, a *New York Times*

article noted that almost forty years later "every sightseer that comes to New York" was taking a slumming tour of Chinatown.<sup>111</sup>

Such descriptions of areas of infamy contributed to a geography of Lower Manhattan that combined social and political contagion with opportunities to explore exoticism -- and what some might have termed "deviance" -- within the city. This kind of mapping supported previous evidence that danger lurked in the streets and blocks of these problematic wards, but it also suggested that those who visited the area were ambivalent about how evil it truly was. What they did not question was the basic alienness, grunge, and primitivism of its cramped spaces. Contributing to this sense of density and difference was the architecture of the area itself.

### *Tenement Districts*

Dominating the geography of the Lower Manhattan slum, perhaps more than its ethnic composition and questionable activities, were its narrow corridors of tenement housing. The Tenement House Act of 1867 defined these structures as:

Any house, building, or portion thereof, which is rented, leased, let or hired out to be occupied or is occupied, as the home or residence of more than three families living independently of one another and doing their own cooking upon the premises, or by more than two families upon a floor, so living and cooking and having a common right in the halls, stairways, yards, water-closets, or privies, or some of them.<sup>112</sup>

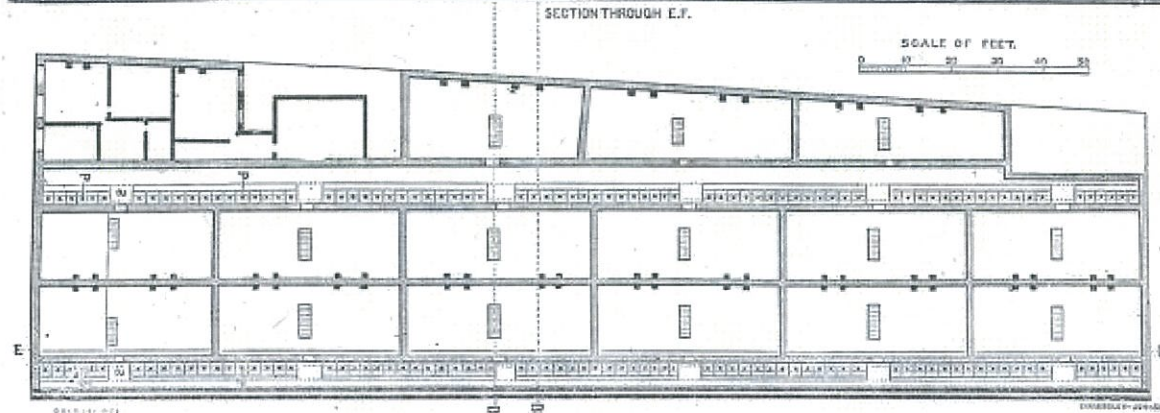
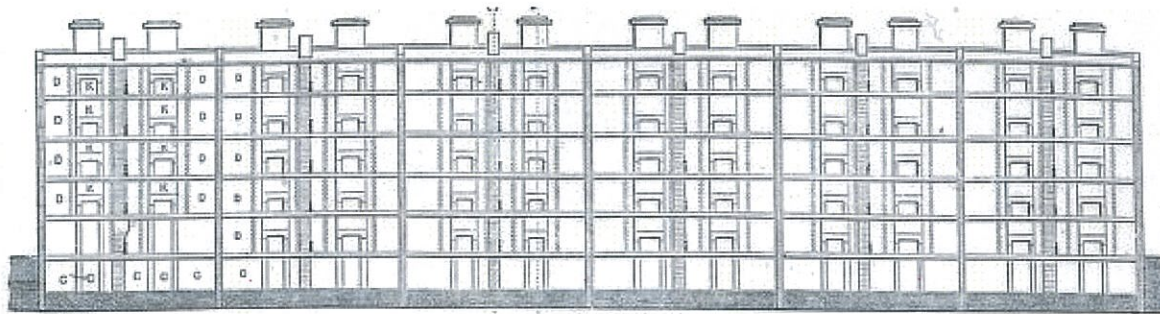
Not long after the definition entered the law books, however, the appearance of apartment houses further uptown with amenities such as running water, multi-windowed rooms, mansard roofs and indoor toilets challenged the literal meaning of the word "tenement." By the 1880s, the term "French flats" began to replace "tenement" in areas of the city where, as historian Elizabeth

Cromley put it, “building quality [was] based on some combination of neighborhood, cost, architect, building sizes, plumbing arrangements, numbers of units, interior space, and intended class of occupants.”<sup>113</sup> The Tenement House Committee, a group appointed by the New York State Assembly to study the buildings, admitted that the definition was applied at the discretion of inspectors and that, by 1890, at least nine thousand of the 39,000 actual tenements in the city were determined to be “high class flats.” Thus, tenements were increasingly associated with poverty and, likewise, slums were often identified by the number and quality of tenements they contained.

According to an 1894 report of the Tenement House Committee, there were four types of tenements in the city at that time, not including the more costly apartment buildings. One was the “tenementized” house, a single-family home, usually built in the early part of the nineteenth century that had been converted into apartments for multiple families. These usually consisted of one apartment per floor and, though older and perhaps more decrepit than their more modern counterparts, offered some relief from the more crowded conditions of other multiple-family dwellings. The second type had two apartments per floor, each of which was separated into two unventilated rooms, and a shared hallway separating one apartment from the other. Typically, the buildings were six stories in height. The entrances to these apartments were located on the side of the buildings in a narrow, alleyway, while businesses of various kinds fronted the tenements on the street.<sup>114</sup> One infamous example of this type was Gotham Court, located at 36-38 Cherry Street and built as workers’ housing in 1850. Because of its barracks-style construction, subsequent overcrowding, and neglected upkeep, Gotham Court quickly fell into disrepair and was notorious as one of the most shocking examples of slum-living in New York. In his *The Battle with the Slum*, Riis described its “stenches” that “must needs poison the

tenants all the way up to the fifth story” and referred to an 1870 Board of Health report that called it “a nuisance which, from its very magnitude, is assumed to be unremovable and irremediable.” Built for 140 families, it housed as many as 240 by 1879 and, according to Riis, “tenants died there like flies in all seasons.”<sup>115</sup>

Outrageous though Gotham Court was – enough that it was demolished in 1895 -- the third type of tenement offered opportunity for further overcrowding, using the same overall design, but adding yet another apartment per floor in which to pack tenants. This tenement category, known as the “double-decker,” literally doubled the design of Gotham Court by providing four apartments per floor, two in the front and two in the back. In an improvement to the Gotham Court blueprint, however, entrance to these tenements was usually in the front of the building and was framed by stores on the ground floor and in the basement. While access to sunlight and ventilation was poor in every case, the arrangement of the double-decker tenement toward the street instead of an alley slightly increased the chances that some air would drift into the apartments within. The idea that additional windows in the apartments, no matter their location, could only improve the condition of tenement dwellers led to the fourth type of tenement: the “dumb-bell.” Designed by James E. Ware for an 1879 competition organized by the construction journal, *Plumber and Sanitary Engineer*, the dumb-bell arrangement allowed for the placement of airshafts in the center of each tenement building. Windows would open onto the airshafts, presumably allowing for greater access to fresh air. However, when two tenements of this design stood side by side – like two actual dumb-bells connected at the top and the bottom – the narrow airshafts of each were combined and thus enclosed. The effect was to create either a chute for trash disposal or a perfect flue for fire and smoke – or both.<sup>116</sup> While the dumb-bell design was most popular between 1879 and 1901, by 1892, 56% of buildings categorized as



"GOTHAM COURT,"—LONGITUDINAL ELEVATION AND CELLAR-PLAN.

CC The Cellar.      DD The Bedrooms.      KK Living-rooms.      PP Privies.      SS Grating over Privies.

Fig. 5: Blueprint of Gotham Court, Longitudinal elevation and cellar plan. University of Michigan.

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/ummu2ic/x-ls>

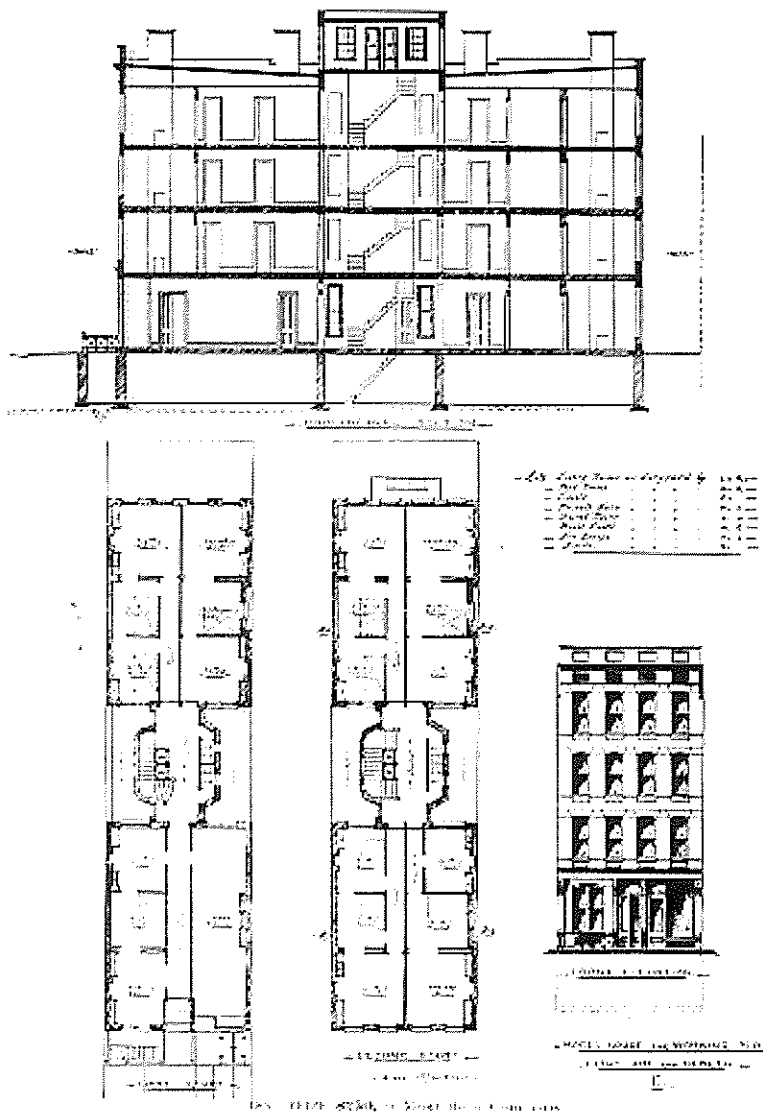


Figure 2.1. James E. Ware. The winning entry to the tenement house competition of 1878 sponsored by *Pittsber and Sanitary Engineer*

Fig. 6: Dumb-bell tenement blueprint and images. Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*. New York: Columbia University, 1990.

tenements had been built before 1881. Many may have been dumb-bells, but the majority were likely of the less “improved” kind.

Legislation -- spottily enforced -- was put in place by the city’s Board of Health and Buildings Department in 1867, 1879, 1887, and 1901 to regulate new construction and require the provision of basic amenities in tenement housing. Nearly all of the legislation, from limiting the number of tenants per water-closet to fireproofing the stairwells of buildings to requiring interior windows to allow for airflow into dark rooms and hallways, was meant to reduce the incidence of tragedy and disease in the tenement districts. As usual, this concern was not an altogether altruistic one. One editorialist writing in 1870 and anxious for the health of the city, put it bluntly when he wrote, “We need not wonder that more than ‘seventy-five percent.’ of the worst diseases of the City spring from tenement-houses. Here robbery and murder lurk; here impurity is born and bred; in these dark dens, thieves and burglars and prostitutes are educated, and from them come the swarms of criminal children which infest the City.”<sup>117</sup> His sentiments were echoed again in 1901 after three more regulatory attempts had been made: “The tenement districts of New York are places in which thousands of people are living in the smallest space in which it is possible for human beings to exist...They are centres of disease, poverty, vice, and crime, where it is a marvel, not that some children grown up to be thieves, drunkards, and prostitutes, but that so many should ever grow up to be decent and self-respecting.”<sup>118</sup>

While tenements were stacked up and down Manhattan Island and beyond, public discourse was centered on Lower Manhattan, particularly the area later called the Lower East Side. Indeed, when reformers wished to refer to the most wretched of tenements, they unflinchingly pointed to the same blocks they had mapped as ethnic colonies and quarters, or as locations of spectacular vice. Riis described Mulberry Bend in 1897 as a “crooked three-acre lot

built over with rotten structures,” while a report from the United States Industrial Commission alleged that, “In tenement districts [in New York] the unsophisticated Italian or the quiet, inoffensive Hebrew is thrown in contact with the degenerate remnants of former immigrant populations, who bring every influence to bear to rob, persecute, and corrupt the newcomers.”<sup>119</sup> The Tenement House Commission similarly found that the “evils resultant upon tenement-house life” were most clearly exhibited through examples of locations on the Lower East Side. To illustrate the potential impact of overcrowding on airborne disease, the Commissioners described a block between Essex, Hester, Norfolk, and Division as so “solidly covered with buildings” in both front and rear that “little more than one-fifth of an acre is left for the entire breathing space of more than half its population” of an estimated 2,302 people. That remaining air space, the Commissioners noted, was clogged with noxious fumes from garbage and other refuse, food for sale on the street, and wet laundry hung up to dry above the “accumulation of organic matter.”<sup>120</sup> Such density was also the cause of fires, the Commissioners warned in a supplement to their 1894 report entitled, “Reports on Three Typical Tenement-House Fires.” Each Lower East Side conflagration -- one at 12 Suffolk Street, another at 38 Goerck Street, and another at Madison Street -- provided an example of how dangerous air shafts could be and how poorly maintained fire escapes were. The abundant examples of dangerous tenements in that neighborhood helped support the notion that the area was not only a tenement district, of which there were many, but the premier one. This was further supported by the landmark 1903 text, *The Tenement House Problem*, edited by reformers Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, which not only opened with an image of a crowded Lower East Side street, but continually returned to the neighborhood for the most unspeakable examples of substandard housing. Included in the volume were a “Tuberculosis Map,” which located incidents of the

disease only on the Lower East Side (though many cases existed outside the neighborhood) and a discussion -- emphasizing location -- of what the difference between a tenement and a respectable apartment house might be.<sup>121</sup> “What regulations for lighting, ventilation, fire protection, and sanitation should be required by law for the protection of the dweller in an East Side tenement, which should not equally be required for those who live in a West Side apartment?” asked the editors.<sup>122</sup>

Reformers’ focus on Lower Manhattan in reference to the tenement menace was not without a firm basis in fact. As early as 1864, 48% of the tenements in Manhattan existed in the Lower East Side wards and 50% of the population lived there as well.<sup>123</sup> The densest population in the city lived in wards eleven and seventeen, which were below 14th street, above Rivington Street, and to the east of Bowery.<sup>124</sup> Thirty years later, the number of tenements decreased, while the population increased. By the 1890s and into the early twentieth century, the area comprising the Lower East Side contained an estimated 25% of the tenements in the city and 31% of the total population of tenement dwellers.<sup>125</sup> With its wards comprising approximately 1200 acres or 5% of Manhattan’s total area, the intense concentration of tenements and tenement residents there was astounding. Indeed, the most concentrated population in the 1890s lived in the tenth ward, from Rivington to Division Streets, Norfolk Street to Bowery, where an average of 57 people lived in each tenement.<sup>126</sup> It was often claimed by Riis and others that the ward had a higher density per acre than any other place in the world.<sup>127</sup>

Surprisingly, though, neither the ubiquity of the tenements themselves nor the architectural peculiarities of particular buildings were prominent features of slumming narratives, though some mention did exist. Perhaps this is because the tenements were so prevalent that they served only as a backdrop to slummers more interested in their inhabitants.

Still, novelist and well-born New Yorker Henry James, both repelled and intrigued by the Jewish residents of Lower Manhattan, wrote of the “the evolved fire-proof staircase” in a Lower East Side tenement he visited with a friend. It was “a thing of scientific surfaces, impenetrable to the microbe, and above all plated, against side friction, with white marble of a goodly grain. The white marble was surely the New Jerusalem note, and we followed that note, up and down the district.”<sup>128</sup> For James, the tenement was much finer than he had expected, yet he approached it as one would a hieroglyph, treating each detail as if it were an ancient riddle ready to divulge the truth about the building’s Jewish residents. His description of the fire-escapes on Rutgers Street revealed a similarly unsettling wonderment: “The very name of architecture perishes, for the fire-escapes look like abashed afterthoughts, staircases and communications forgotten in the construction; but the inhabitants lead, like the squirrels and monkeys, all the merrier life.”<sup>129</sup>

Slummers to Lower Manhattan more often conflated tenement spaces with the people and activities under observation. Environment, for them, became an extension of the residents, either a picturesque setting for otherworldly characters or a damning example of the supposed correlation between filth and foreign habits. Relying on the same sort of zoological reference James made, though in a far less highbrow medium, “An Old Rounder,” reporting for the sporting newspaper the *National Police Gazette* in 1880, described a lodging house landlady as if she were an outgrowth of her surroundings. She was “the most picturesquely bestial woman in the business. As she sat just inside the door of the sleeping room -- it was not in the cellar but gave upon the rough cobblestones of a filthy court in the rear of a tenement -- with the sickly rays of a red lamp fastened at the window streaming upon her, I thought of some huge, bloated spider, surcharged with blood to bursting, and possessing the most ravenous of maws.”<sup>130</sup> A guidebook writer describing the area in 1888 made similar claims about the relationship between

decrepit buildings and crooked behavior: "While the visitor is on South Street let him penetrate into the off-streets, where he will find himself in the heart of the tenement region, deeply honeycombed with misery and corruption....if wretchedness of human habitations is to be found anywhere, it is surely to be found here." <sup>131</sup>

Tenements, therefore, came to be included in descriptions of the emerging Lower East Side both as evidence of the area's distress and as part of a scenic backdrop to support the perceived otherness, and often depravity, of its residents. Rarely did the description of an Italian, Jewish, Chinese, or Bohemian immigrant fail to include mention of tenements, or the crime and disease that was attributed either to the building or the tenant. While neither tenements, nor crime, nor ethnic enclaves, nor disease, nor vice were specific to the Lower East Side, increasingly, public conversation of any of these topics made reference to the area. What began as a project to suppress the city's problematic spaces for fear of "[disruption] of the public peace," as Ezra Pulling put it in the mid-nineteenth century, evolved into a combination of observation, amusement, horror, and persuasion for reforming and touring slummers. The fluctuating motives of the slummers who toured Lower Manhattan produced rhetorical tropes that never quite disappeared from the way public discourse continued to frame the area. Was it a problem to be solved? Was it a sinister underworld? Was it a playground where rules were meant to be broken and secrets were expected to be kept? Or was it a true and necessary mirror revealing the cost of urban, modern life to those who benefitted from it? No matter the answer or who was asking, Lower Manhattan – and soon the Lower East Side – was clearly an alien space, neither wholly separate from, nor merged into, the greater city.

### ***Conclusion***

Eventually, the pathways slummers traversed and established resulted in the definition of a neighborhood. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term "Lower East Side" came into wide usage and referred to a set of boundaries that captured diversity, disease, tenements, crime, reform, and pleasure all in a single bundle. Scholar Moses Rischin has suggested that "lower East Side" first appeared in the *Tenement House Problem* in 1903, and that its primary geographical reference point was the Jewish portion of the area.<sup>132</sup> Searches of the terms "lower East Side" and "Lower East Side" among newspapers, books, and journals, however, uncover acknowledgement of this distinct neighborhood as early as 1888, though the phrases appear more widely in the 1890s.<sup>133</sup> Even so, the boundaries that defined it were in flux in the turbulent years that ended one century and began another. The southern border of the Lower East Side continued to hover around Catherine and Cherry Streets and its eastern border was always the East River, but which streets constituted its northern and western edges were still up for negotiation. In 1895, the *New York Times* could comfortably speak of different ethnic "quarters" as being part of a single Lower East Side neighborhood: the "dividing line of the Chinese and Italian quarters of Mott Street," the paper noted, was the home of one young woman who represented the typical "code of honor among Italians of the lower east side."<sup>134</sup> Even when the term "Little Italy" became a popular appellation for the area around Mulberry Street after 1900, the Lower East Side was considered its umbrella neighborhood.<sup>135</sup> Some investigators broadened the expanse of the Lower East Side even further as one 1912 report on gangland activity did: opening the narrative at a saloon in Chinatown, the report moved on to another bar in "Little Naples," moved back to Chinatown, on to Mulberry Bend, later to Chrystie and Grand Streets, and ended on Great Jones Street. According to the investigator, all were haunts of the "east side gangs" and all demonstrated the menacing behavior that now characterized "the

Bowery, the lower east side." More common were allusions to a slightly smaller Lower East Side that encompassed blocks as far away from one another as Baxter Street and Rutgers Street - - about a mile in between -- or Baxter Street and Lewis Street, a distance of about two miles. No matter its specific boundaries, the space was evidently large and heterogeneous in population, still categorized by ethnicity and infamous locales, tenements and wards. Yet even while newspaper reporters, guidebook writers, and tourists might disagree on what constituted the end of modern New York City and the start of the alien Lower East Side, the boundaries of the neighborhood were becoming less and less indeterminate to a new generation of social reformers. By 1908, with the momentous unveiling of an exhibit by the reform group, the Committee on Congestion of Population, the tools of social science would make clear that the Lower East Side was not only a precisely identifiable space, but a containable one.

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<sup>1</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, "Expression and the East Side." *New York Globe*, incomplete date, 1913 (clipping), Folder 713, Box 26, Series III, Hapgood Family Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University (New Haven, Conn.).

<sup>2</sup> In the period he worked for the *Commercial Advertiser* and wrote *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, Hapgood was living in Greenwich Village. One of his Village addresses was 64 Fifth Avenue, while another was the Brevoort Hotel just a few doors south. Folders 347 and 750, Box 11, Hapgood Family Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University (New Haven, Conn.).

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, 1931; reprint Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 313.

<sup>4</sup> Steffens, 318

<sup>5</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939), 138-46.

<sup>6</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 270.

<sup>7</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, "The Fall of the Bowery" (clipping), Folder 714, Box 26, Series III, Hapgood Family Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University (New Haven, Conn.).

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<sup>8</sup> Alfred Henry Lewis, *The Apaches of New York* (New York: Dillingham, 1912), 15.

<sup>9</sup> James Ford, *Slums and Housing with Special Reference to New York City, History, Conditions, Policy* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1936), 312.

<sup>10</sup> It may also be worth noting that Hapgood no longer lived in New York City, but had relocated with his young family to Dobbs Ferry, New York in 1910. See Ellen Kaye Trimberger, *Intimate Warriors: Portrait of a Modern Marriage, 1899-1944* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). O'Neill did live in a flop house on the Lower East Side waterfront briefly in 1911.

<sup>12</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, "Expression and the East Side." *New York Globe*.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 293-4.

<sup>14</sup> See Kenneth Scherzer, *The Unbounded Community: Neighborhood Life and Social Structure in New York City, 1830-1875* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and, more recently, Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, and Graham White, *Playing the Numbers: Gambling in Harlem Between the Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.)

<sup>15</sup> Examples of this kind of community history include Caroline Ware's classic, *Greenwich Village, 1920-1930* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935; reprinted Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jesus de la Teja, *San Antonio de B Xar: A Community on New Spain's Northern Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); and Gregg Andrews, *City of Dust: A Cement Company Town in the Land of Tom Sawyer* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1996). More recent examples that do consider the contingent and contested meaning of place include Laurie Mercier, *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana's Smelter City* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001) and Cathy Stanton's *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006). Again, however, these studies are occupied almost wholly with the histories of industrial labor in specific communities without fully examining other forces at play. These latter texts reveal the movement of local and community history projects almost exclusively to the realm of public history.

<sup>16</sup> One of the more compelling articles to address this gap is Charles W.J. Withers' "Place and the 'Spatial' Turn in Geography and History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 70, Number 4, October 2009: 637-658. A few historical studies that have made place and space central to their analysis and have directly explained the methodologies they used to do so include Janice Reiff, ed., *Chicago Business and Industry: From Fur Trade to E-Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Particularly useful in this kind of analysis has been post-colonial literature, particularly work that examines the role of narration in nation-formation. For more on this, see Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1989).

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<sup>18</sup> I begin with the 1880s for several reasons, most notably because the practice of slumming – or at least the named phenomenon of it -- did not appear in New York before that decade. For more on this, see Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.) The 1880s also marks the introduction of women in social reform activities, many of whom play a large part in describing the contours of the Lower East Side. Finally, the rising influx of new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, the majority of whom who stayed in New York and settled in Lower Manhattan, began to take hold in 1881. Unsurprisingly, the first mention of slumming in the *New York Times* appears in 1883. *Statistical Review of Immigration, 1820-1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 4; “Slumming in This Town: A Fashionable London Mania Reaches New-York,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1884.

<sup>19</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>20</sup> “New-York and Other Cities,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1881.

<sup>21</sup> “Saunterings,” *Town Topics*, September 11, 1890.

<sup>22</sup> “The Character of Immigrants,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1887.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics Series, 2009), 186. See also Warren Sloat, *A Battle for The Soul of New York: Tammany Hall, Police Corruption, Vice, and Reverend Charles Parkhurst's Crusade against Them, 1892-1895* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992); and Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 81-85.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press), 726.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 727.

<sup>27</sup> Blackmar, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Blackmar, 200.

<sup>29</sup> Blackmar, 179, 208-9.

<sup>30</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.)

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Scherzer points out that, in truth, the total population of Germans in Kleindeutschland in the 1850s was actually less than half the entire German population of New York City. The association between ethnicity and neighborhood, then, was based more on the existence of German institutions in Kleindeutschland than on population density. Scherzer, *The Unbounded Community*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> See Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Plume, 2002) and Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-1880* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “POP Culture: 1870” and “POP Culture: 1890,” Washington, D.C., 2013. Accessed at:

[http://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/fast\\_facts/1870\\_fast\\_facts.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1870_fast_facts.html) and [http://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/fast\\_facts/1890\\_fast\\_facts.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1890_fast_facts.html)

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<sup>34</sup> Ira Rosenwaik., *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85. Concentrations of ethnic groups by ward were not available in census reporting until 1890, according to Rosenwaik.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 55.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Samuel F.B. Morse, *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* (New York: The American and Foreign Christian Union, 1852.)

<sup>39</sup> Wyckoff, W. *Scribner's* magazine, quoted in M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1986), 17.

<sup>40</sup> Boyer, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Koven, Ch. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> By using the phrase "ethnically neutral," I skirt the issue of "whiteness" for which there is a vast and complex literature. However, the fact that the ethnicity of slummers went unmentioned suggests that it was also unworthy of note -- that is, they were presumably "white." Historian Chad Heap, on the other hand, is more explicit, arguing that slummers were *decidedly* "white" and that it was as much their neutralized ethnicity as their class that allowed them to "consciously reinforce their sense of social and moral superiority over the residents of the districts that they visited" through slumming. In most contexts "white" could not consistently be applied to the Jews, Italians, Chinese, or Irish who resided in the neighborhoods known as the slums in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, I argue that slumming was about a transgression of *spaces* and that slummers understood the *space* of the slum to be just as ethnically Other and poor as the people. The two -- space and people -- were so intertwined that even today, it is difficult to describe the area now known as the Lower East Side without mention of the ethnic groups that live there, as will be discussed in later chapters. For more on whiteness, see: Ian Haney-Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Noel Igantiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American History*, 89:1 (2002), 154-73.

<sup>45</sup> For more on slumming, see Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*; Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*; Robert Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 2009); Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.)

<sup>46</sup> Helen Campbell, *The Problem of the Poor: A Record of Quiet Work in Unquiet Places* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1882), ix.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> James D. McCabe, Jr., *New York by Gaslight* (1882; reprint New York: Greenwich House, 1984), 30.

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- <sup>49</sup> Augustine E. Costello, *Our Police Protectors* (1885; reprinted Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1972), 319.
- <sup>50</sup> "Slumming in New York's Chinatown," *Munsey's Magazine* (1909) in Frank Oppel *Tales of Gaslight New York* (New York: Book Sales, Inc., 2008), 229-244.
- <sup>51</sup> "The Governor's Wife: Nell Nelson Visits the Executive Mansion's Mistress," *The World, Saturday Evening*, January 9, 1892.
- <sup>52</sup> "'Unfashionable 'Slumming': What the Efforts of Some Devoted Women have Accomplished," *New York Times*, April 30, 1893.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*, 21.
- <sup>54</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes: For General Circulation* (New York: John W. Lovell Company, 1883), 109.
- <sup>55</sup> Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, Publishers, 1872), 134-5. For more on poverty and poverty relief in the mid-nineteenth century, see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc. 1986.)
- <sup>56</sup> Ezra R. Pulling, "Report of the Fourth Sanitary Inspection District." From *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens' Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City*, Second Edition (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 43-65.
- <sup>57</sup> Daniel Czitrom argues that this concern over the impoverished masses grew directly from the Draft Riots of July 1863. See Daniel Czitrom and Bonnie Yochelson, *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (New York: New Press, 2007).
- <sup>58</sup> James F. Richardson, "Wards," in ed. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 1237.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1236.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1237; Blackmar, 102-103.
- <sup>61</sup> Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, January 31, 1766-December 23, 1773, 447.
- <sup>62</sup> Edward T. O'Donnell, "Growth of the Ward System, 1683-1895," in ed. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 1236.
- <sup>63</sup> A.E. Costello, *Our Police Protectors* (New York: Published by the Author, 1885; reprinted Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1972), 148. The Act creating the Metropolitan Police Force was passed in 1857, which led to the creation of a bureaucratic and administrative division of the city. Also note that the current boundaries of the Lower East Side as they are represented by Community Board 3 correspond almost exactly to the 19th c. Essex Police Court District as well.
- <sup>64</sup> New York (State) Legislature, Assembly. Report of the Tenement House Committee As Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894. New York: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1895: 261.
- <sup>65</sup> Helen Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight: Or, Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Publishing Company, 1895), 212. Hereafter, this will be referred to as DD.
- <sup>66</sup> Campbell, DD, 480-1.
- <sup>67</sup> *Illustrated New York: The Metropolis of To-Day* (New York: International Publishing Company, 1888), 118-218.
- <sup>68</sup> Costello, 324-5, 335.
- <sup>69</sup> Ernest Ingersoll, *Week in New York* (New York: Rand McNally & Co ,1891), 208.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

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<sup>71</sup> *The sun* (New York, NY), August 22, 1880. Articles like this prefigure the “street types” genre of urban literature and photography that became fashionable in the 1890s with books like Sigmund Krausz’ *Street Types of Great American Cities* (1896) and the work of the Byron photography company.

<sup>72</sup> David Ward, *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840-1925: Changing Conceptions of the Slum and Ghetto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 259.

<sup>73</sup> Riis, 24.

<sup>74</sup> For more on “environmentalism” of this kind, see Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 175-294; and Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.)

<sup>75</sup> Campbell, DD, 195-203.

<sup>76</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890; reprinted New York: Vintage, 2010), 90. Hereafter, the text will be referred to as “HTOHL.”

<sup>77</sup> Riis, HTOHL, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in David Ward, *Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840-1925: Changing Conceptions of the Slum and Ghetto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 84.

<sup>79</sup> McCabe, 590.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought Thee Hither? The Chinese in New York, 1800-1950* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh-Dickinson University Press, 1997), 36.

<sup>81</sup> Ingersoll, 205.

<sup>82</sup> Ingersoll, 204.

<sup>83</sup> *Illustrated New-York*, 71.

<sup>84</sup> Scholars such as Bramen and Catherine Cocks characterize these slum visits as a means to inoculate tourists from the imagined dangers of the poor and ethnic immigrant. “Intra-urban walking tours,” as Bramen labels slumming practices, were meant to associate urban change and growing diversity with the benefits of modernity, while Catherine Cocks, categorizing slumming under the umbrella term “urban tourism,” views it as an opportunity for tourists to regard “city dwellers as colorful elements in a great spectacles for the enjoyment of the visitor.” Carrie Tirado Bramen, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Cocks, 189.

<sup>85</sup> *Harper’s* (1898), from *Tales of Gaslight New York*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (July 1916), 86-97.

<sup>87</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 180.

<sup>88</sup> Gerard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, 628, quoted in Said, 182; Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 271, quoted in Said, 185.

<sup>89</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1910), 16. Sociologist Christopher Mele suggests, “bohemian fascination with the ghetto must be considered another example of the objectification of immigrant life and community that suited the ideological and cultural goals and purposes of those living outside the Lower East Side.” Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*, 75.

<sup>90</sup> Hapgood, *A Victorian in the Modern World*, 145.

<sup>91</sup> Steffens, 244.

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- <sup>92</sup> Hapgood's prurient interests intermingled with his more idealistic ones. In his wife Neith Boyce's first novel, *The Bond*, a thinly-veiled examination of their bohemian marriage, the character Teresa (Boyce's alter-ego) describes a trip to the Bowery with Basil (Hapgood's alter-ego): "Basil took them next to a saloon where he expected to find an acquaintance of his, an ex-prize fighter...The saloon was crowded and noisy...Then [they] went to a 'chop suey' at a Chinese restaurant.." Neith Boyce, "Selections from *The Bond*" in Ellen Kaye Trimmerger, *Intimate Warriors: Portrait of a Modern Marriage, 1899-1944*, 63. Hapgood and Boyce also experimented with an open marriage, though Hapgood took more advantage of the arrangement than did Boyce. See also Christine Stansell, *American Moderns*, 290-294.
- <sup>93</sup> Campbell, DD, 89.
- <sup>94</sup> Campbell, DD, 404-406.
- <sup>95</sup> McCabe, 584.
- <sup>96</sup> Pulling, "Report of the Fourth Sanitary Inspection District," 60.
- <sup>97</sup> McCabe, 588.
- <sup>98</sup> Campbell, DD, 251; McCabe 516.
- <sup>99</sup> Riis, HTOHL, 61.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>103</sup> Edward Van Every, *Sins of New York: As "Exposed" by the Police Gazette* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1930), 215.
- <sup>104</sup> *The Evening World*, December 22, 1887.
- <sup>105</sup> Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 190.
- <sup>106</sup> McCabe, 614-15.
- <sup>107</sup> Sante, 110.
- <sup>108</sup> Gilfoyle, 199-202.
- <sup>109</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 36-37.
- <sup>110</sup> Ingersoll, 215-16.
- <sup>111</sup> *New York Times*, June 9, 1912.
- <sup>112</sup> Lawrence Veiller and Robert DeForest, eds., *The Tenement House Problem* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1903), 94-99.
- <sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartment* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 72-3.
- <sup>114</sup> Plunz, 13-15; Anthony Jackson, *A Place Called Home: A History of Low-Cost Housing in Manhattan* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 6-19.
- <sup>115</sup> Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6; Riis, HTOHL, 25.
- <sup>116</sup> Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 28-32.
- <sup>117</sup> *New York Times*, June 28, 1870.
- <sup>118</sup> Veiller and DeForest, *The Tenement House Problem*, 10.
- <sup>119</sup> Jacob Riis, *The Battle with The Slum* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1902), 39-40; United States Industrial Commission, *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), xlvii.

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<sup>120</sup> New York (State) Legislature, Assembly. *Report of the Tenement House Committee As Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894*. (New York: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1895), 18.

<sup>121</sup> Veiller and DeForest, *The Tenement House Problem*, 12.

<sup>122</sup> Veiller and DeForest, *The Tenement House Problem*, 37.

<sup>123</sup> New York (State) Legislature, Assembly, *Report of the Tenement House Committee As Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894* (New York: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1895), 349.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> New York (State) Legislature, Assembly, *Report of the Tenement House Committee As Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894* (New York: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1895), 273.

<sup>126</sup> New York (State) Legislature, Assembly, *Report of the Tenement House Committee As Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894* (New York: J.B. Lyon, State Printer, 1895), 267-269.

<sup>127</sup> Riis, HTOHL, 300.

<sup>128</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1907), 131.

<sup>129</sup> Henry James, 130.

<sup>130</sup> "Midnight Pictures: A Series of Illustrated Sketches of New York's Gas-Lit Life In a Five Cent Lodging House: The Bloated Spider and the Drunken Flies -- Mr. and Mrs. Welch -- Sarah, the Unknown," *National Police Gazette*, January 17, 1880.

<sup>131</sup> *Illustrated New York*, 72.

<sup>132</sup> Moses Rischin, "Toward the Onomastics of the Great New York Ghetto: How the Lower East Side Got Its Name," in Beth S. Wenger, Jeffrey Shandler, and Hasia R. Diner, eds. *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>133</sup> Borrowing from Donna Gabaccia's methodology in "Inventing Little Italy," (citation below) I searched for each term in various on-line databases. These included the Proquest Historical *New York Times* database, the Making of America, Bartleby.org, and loc.gov.

<sup>134</sup> "Maudlin Sentiment in Parallel: Maria Barberi, Murderess, Gets Sympathy of a Certain Kind Just as Did Chiara Chiguarralli," *New York Times*, April 28, 1895.

<sup>135</sup> See Donna Gabaccia, "Inventing Little Italy," *The Journal of Progressivism and the Gilded Age*, Volume 6, Issue 1, January 2007: 7-41.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Congestion”

One summer night on Cherry Street on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a young Jewish woman, newly arrived in the United States, climbed to the rooftop of the tenement in which she lived to listen to her Irish neighbors sing. “I sat down in the shadows near one of the chimneys,” Rose Cohen remembered, “and watched the stars and the dancing and listened to the song ‘My Beautiful Irish Maid.’ After this I went up every evening.” Rose worked with her father twelve hours a day doing piece-work for the thriving garment industry, which kept many of her neighbors employed as well. She lived in what she called “a dingy place where the sun never came in.” But when she sat on the rooftop or later watched children skip rope in the street outside her home or, still later, borrowed books from the soda water stand keeper, Rose was part of a community. Life was not easy for her and her family, but as time passed, she grew to think of the Lower East Side as her true home. While visiting the countryside for a month one summer through the support of a local settlement house, she even longed for Cherry Street: “I could not shut it out. I saw the children on the hot and none-too-clean sidewalks, the fire escapes littered with bedclothes, overheated sickly infants, tired out women.” And when she returned to the tenements, “I felt strangely glad to be home and share the good and the bad with my people.”<sup>1</sup>

This was not an uncommon tale of life in the city’s tenement districts. Poverty dominated these spaces, but in the interstices between tumbledown tenements and teeming streets, friendships were built, children went to school, rivalries were made, and conversations blossomed. Indeed, describing his first encounter with the East Side, Abraham Cahan’s fictional

immigrant, David Levinsky, was amazed by “the swing and step of the pedestrians, the voices and manner of the street peddlers, and a hundred and one other things [that] seemed to testify to far more self-confidence and energy, to larger ambitions and wider scopes, than did the appearance of the crowds in my birthplace.”<sup>2</sup>

The Lower East Side, while undeniably burdened by the shackles of poverty, was at the start of the twentieth century a neighborhood alive with movement and activity. One popular photograph of Mulberry Street in 1900, distributed by the Detroit Publishing Company, shows women shopping at an array of vegetable carts lining the sidewalks; children playing in the street; wagons parked to make deliveries; and groups of men of all ages either sitting out on the sidewalk, loading carts, or posing proudly for the camera. One well-dressed man in a vest and shirtsleeves stands on a fire escape, gazing toward the camera. The image shows dozens of people occupied in vital activity, busy with the chores of the day.<sup>3</sup> Several blocks away on Hester and Essex, the scene was quite similar as captured in a postcard photographed by the well-known New York photography studio, Brown Brothers. This image is more candid and almost no one looks directly at the camera. In addition to the vegetables and other wares being sold from pushcarts in the street, there are also storefronts and people selling items on the sidewalks. Pedestrians include men in bowler hats and at least one woman in a high-fashion coat, which, from a distance appears to be fur.<sup>4</sup> Such images conveyed an atmosphere of excitement and enterprise.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the descriptions slummers had shared of Lower Manhattan, which depended on grief and peril, dark alleys and gaudy amusements, there existed another view of the Lower East Side. This view did not deny poverty, nor run counter to the reality of overcrowded rooms and decaying tenements. Neither did it produce a romantic idea of a neighborhood that could and would overcome its obvious, heavily documented shortcomings.



Fig. 7: "Mulberry Street, New York City," Detroit Publishing Company, circa 1900. Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.  
(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994000092/PP/>)



Fig. 8: "New York. Essex- & Hester Streets," Brown Brothers, circa 1900. Mid-Manhattan Library / Picture Collection.

Rather it was a narrative that acknowledged the functionality and resilience of the Lower East Side despite its afflictions. It was a human story that allowed for contradiction. It could produce the simultaneous sentiments of a Michael Gold who wrote of the “shouting of peddlers like an idiot asylum, the East Side danger and traffic rumble and pain,” as well as “my East Side,” “my Chrystie Street,” and the fact that his mother, who never moved from the Lower East Side after arriving there from Rumania, “considered it her village now.”<sup>6</sup> This Lower East Side was a living place that produced conflicting attitudes that ranged from sentimentality and attachment to exasperation and trauma.

But for those who encountered the “Congestion Exhibit,” a monumental 1908 public exhibition of the latest research into poverty in New York City, neither the nuance of emotion associated with the Lower East Side nor the substance of a resident’s “insider” perspective was available. There were life-size models of tenement apartments -- one by day, which exposed its use as a sweatshop, and one by night, which showed the same apartment converted into a home -- but there were no people. There were also “photographs of modern conditions” that depicted the East Side streets, apartments, and residents as components of a neighborhood in crisis. Such images revealed, as reformer John Martin put it, “many-sided evils.”<sup>7</sup> They did not, however, explain how so many people survived from day to day or how their Lower East Side neighborhood helped buoy them even as it offered up various poverty-related torments.

What the exhibit aimed to do instead was “assail” its visitors with “a varied array of maps, diagrams, charts, statistics, models, photographs, and pictures” -- a barrage of evidence -- that would prove without a doubt that the core problem of poverty was overcrowding, and that the elimination of this “congestion” would be the anodyne of most urban social ills.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, its organizers hoped “to depict the methods legislative and other which should be adopted to

remedy such congestion,” namely the creation of a comprehensive city plan that would effectively remove residents from concentrated areas of the city. The Lower East Side, the location of the worst congestion in the “civilized world,” according to the exhibit’s organizers, was, of course, the primary target.<sup>9</sup> It played a synecdochic role, representing not only itself, but standing in for all slums in New York, if not nationwide. Borrowing from the tropes of earlier reform discourse about Lower Manhattan, which depended on the conflation of poverty with ethnicity and residents with the areas they inhabited, however, the organizers also firmly affixed a social geography of acceptable and alien spaces onto the map of New York, while affirming that the problems of poverty could be located and dispersed, then eliminated.<sup>10</sup> In other words, in this new formulation of the urban frontier, reformers presented both poverty and the spaces that bred it as conquerable.

With the Congestion Exhibit as its focus, this chapter will explore the ways in which a discourse shaped by the emerging fields of social science helped to further define the Lower East Side as an identifiable, bounded, pathological, and alien space. While few historians have explored the exhibit with any depth, those who have done so tend to emphasize only its place as a potential, but rejected, pathway in the genealogy of city planning in the United States.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on congestion and poverty as the most legitimate reasons for producing a city plan, the organizers of the Congestion Exhibit, as historian Susan Wirka has suggested, placed social justice above the primarily aesthetic and economic incentives that drove planning for most of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, planning historians such as Alexander von Hoffman and Eugenie L. Birch, who acknowledge the Congestion Exhibit as a forgotten moment in the history of city planning, argue that its marginal status is related mostly to the excessively idealistic and, at times, “caustic” personalities who were involved in it.<sup>13</sup> None of these treatments explore either

the language of social science in supporting the ideas promoted at the exhibit, nor the key role the Lower East Side played as both a catalyst and target for the discourse it produced. In overlooking the importance of the Lower East Side in this formulation, these historians also neglect the neighborhood's response to the campaign for congestion relief. Under-documented though they were, the reactions of Lower East Siders to the exhibit, in fact, reveal more ambivalence than enthusiasm. In at least one case, the reaction was downright hostile.

For those who arrived on the Lower East Side from elsewhere to spend a brief sojourn or reside and work within the area's well-appointed settlement houses, the neighborhood produced a similar set of attitudes toward both its own meaning and the meaning of poverty itself. The relatively small network of social workers, philanthropists, and social scientists who spearheaded the exhibit, most of whom had experienced the Lower East Side from this "outsider" perspective, shared such attitudes.<sup>14</sup> They believed that the tools of social science could help eradicate poverty by proving how it worked, where it was located, and how it could be eliminated through rationally-derived and just means. While in other contexts many of the reformers who organized the Congestion Exhibit would promote the preservation of neighborhood ties in the slums and honor the diverse cultural practices of immigrant communities, as Wirka and other historians argue, in this context they chose to present data that incriminated immigrants for their part in sustaining urban poverty. Such attitudes helped engender a demolition mentality toward the Lower East Side that resulted decades later in the clearance of acres of still-salvageable neighborhood spaces. Thus, even if the Congestion Exhibit has seemed peripheral in the grand narrative of how American city planning developed, its impact on the Lower East Side is undeniable.

## Kindred Spirits

The Congestion Exhibit was the work of the Committee on Congestion of Population founded in early 1907 by some of the city's most prominent reformers. The apocryphal story of the committee's origin was that Florence Kelley, Secretary of the National Consumers' League, one day struck upon congestion as the cause of poverty and then immediately organized a group to address it: "In assenting to the belief that people who are poor must be crowded, why did we not see years ago that people who are crowded must remain poor?" she asked.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps more likely was the story Chairperson Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, founder and head of Greenwich House, a social settlement located on the Lower West Side, shared in her opening address at the exhibit: "a small group of persons connected with the Consumers' League expressed their conviction that back of all the evils of city life lay the dominant evil of congestion of population...[so]...a committee was formed."<sup>16</sup> Committee members included Kelley; Simkhovitch; Lillian D. Wald, head of the Henry Street Settlement and Home Nursing Service; Reverend Gaylord S. White of Union Theological Seminary and the Union Settlement; and Dr. Herman C. Bumpus, Director of the American Museum of Natural History. In February of 1907, Simkhovitch hired Benjamin C. Marsh to serve as the Committee's secretary. Later, other leaders of New York's reform community joined the group, including Mary Dreier of the Women's Trade Union League, Professors Henry R. Seager and Edwin R.A. Seligman, political economists at Columbia University, and W. Frank Persons, Assistant Secretary of the Charity Organization Society. A final advisory committee also contributed to the event and this included such luminaries as Dr. Felix Adler of the Society for Ethical Culture, Charles Loring Brace, Jr. of the Children's Aid Society, Lawrence Veiller of the Charity Organization Society's Tenement House Committee, and Jacob Riis.<sup>17</sup>

The goal of the exhibit was to awaken the public to the details of overcrowding through the presentation of broadsides, maps, photographs, graphs, and models, all of which relied upon the dire statistics that demonstrated just how abysmal poverty in New York really was. Lest the public leave the event convinced of the hopelessness of the problem, however, the committee also provided photographs and explanations of how European cities had successfully addressed just such issues. The expectation was that examples of triumph over poverty elsewhere would ignite the public and policymakers alike in applying those models to the New York context.<sup>18</sup>

That the members of the Committee on Congestion of Population would take on such an enormous project of study and, at the same time, produce potential solutions to the entrenched poverty problem in New York's slums might have seemed daunting if it were not for the group's collective personal, educational, and professional pedigree. Indeed, they viewed themselves as particularly suited for mounting a large-scale exhibit of this kind precisely because, as they saw it, they were the city's experts on slums. Not only were they leaders in their own organizations, most of which were headquartered or focused on the slums of Lower Manhattan; nor were they simply active participants in the settlement house movement, which had gained influence in the previous decades. Nor were they just continuing traditions of social activism that were developed in their own families, as was the case in particular for Mary Simkhovitch and Florence Kelley, both of whose parents were anti-slavery agitators. All were also affiliated, either as former students or as instructors, with the nation's burgeoning social science departments, where it was believed objective evidence could be collected and effective solutions produced for stubborn social dilemmas. Finally, as rising leaders in a network of Progressive thinkers and policy-makers across the country, the Committee could draw from both the ranks of the reform movement and from the power of Progressivism's ideological strength. While they

were bolstered by shared political and intellectual convictions among themselves and believed that no one could speak more fluently about congestion than they could, the Committee also benefitted from the fact that they were part of a broader Progressive movement to promote social justice through scientific and rationally-derived means.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth emphasizing, however, that they were a rather rarefied group who found in each other kindred spirits.<sup>20</sup> The members of the Committee on Congestion came from backgrounds of relative privilege, which afforded them the opportunity to seek higher education and pursue careers in an uncertain and incipient reform movement. The trajectories they followed to arrive at this moment were quite similar. Simkhovitch had come to New York to study at Columbia, where she finished graduate coursework in Political Science after a year at Radcliffe and two years on a fellowship from the Women's Educational and Industrial Union at the University of Berlin.<sup>21</sup> Her first job after school was as a resident at College Settlement and she later founded her own settlement, Greenwich House in 1902. Florence Kelley started a social science club while earning her undergraduate degree at Cornell and later studied economics at the University of Zurich and law at Northwestern University.<sup>22</sup> While at Northwestern, she lived at Hull House, a settlement on Chicago's west side and later moved to New York to live at Henry Street Settlement, where she made her home for the next twenty-seven years.<sup>23</sup> Henry Seager and Edwin Seligman were economists at Columbia, where they were early faculty members in the university's new School of Political Science.<sup>24</sup> Both were known for their political presence beyond the university as well, with Seligman being the subject of a 1902 *South Atlantic Quarterly* article entitled "The College Professor in the Public Service." Both taught and influenced Mary Simkhovitch when she studied in their department. Benjamin Marsh, the secretary of the Committee, earned his undergraduate degree at Grinnell College in

Iowa and then studied economics at the University of Pennsylvania. His education, as well as his upbringing among Congregationalist missionaries in Bulgaria, inspired him to become an advocate for the single-tax theories of political economist, Henry George. Later, Marsh applied his ideological interests to his work as secretary of the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty.<sup>25</sup> After relocating to New York, his first encounter with the members of the Committee on Congestion was during his brief stay at Greenwich House. Finally, although neither Lillian Wald nor Mary Dreier completed college degrees, both came from wealthy households in which education was encouraged and an interest in social issues was developed. While neither had the classroom experience of their peers, they still used social investigation as the bulwark of their work. In fact, Wald became one of the vice presidents of the National Institute of Social Sciences in 1912 and received its “gold medal” the previous year for her investigative projects at Henry Street Settlement.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, at different points in their careers, most of the members of the Committee on Congestion either taught or lectured in New York’s major schools of social science. Having access to and enthusiasm for higher education, particularly for the social sciences, was for all of them central to their world-view.

So was New York City. The committee was unusual for being formed in New York and not Chicago, from which many of the more cutting-edge ideas about city reform were emerging. There, the first sociology department in the nation began at the University of Chicago and social activists such as Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House, the first and most well-known social settlement in the United States at the time.<sup>27</sup> Chicago was also the site of percolating labor unrest and creative city-building, which gave it a reputation for dynamism and modernity.<sup>28</sup> New York, on the other hand, while it had very much the same elements, had them in such excess that no single social issue or strategy emerged to give the city a unique reform

character. Still, those who were interested in what today one might call “social justice work” had several educational options from which to choose. For university training, one could study, as Simkhovitch did, at Columbia, which opened its School of Political Science in 1880. Also prominent was New York University, which offered graduate coursework in political science, political economy, sociology, and constitutional law by 1886. The College of the City of New York, later called the City College of New York, had similar offerings and was the only college which was established to serve an ethnically, religiously, and economically diverse public.<sup>29</sup> Other academic programs such as those at the New School for Social Research, Columbia’s New York School of Philanthropy, and the Rand School for Social Science would splinter from these larger programs early in the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> Outside the university’s walls, those who wished to be involved in social reform could find dilapidated urban housing, several of the most crowded blocks of land in the world, dozens upon dozens of charitable organizations, and social settlements like the Neighborhood Guild (later called University Settlement) and College Settlement, both located on the city’s Lower East Side. In this mix, young idealists saw opportunities to make an impact. As Mary Simkhovitch put it, “at Columbia a sort of mental precipitation took place...[but]...the city’s problems, and especially the life and fortunes of the great influx of Europeans to America, far outweighed in challenge and attraction the call to academic life.”<sup>31</sup> Educated and steeped in New York, then, those who would form the Committee on Congestion had a vision of reform that owed much to the singular social environment of the city in which they studied and worked.

The vision was drawn in great part from an even more specific social environment than New York as a whole, and that was the bustling slum of the Lower East Side. Even their first encounters with the East Side were formative for these reformers. After a walk “through Hester

and Division streets...to the end of Ludlow; past odorous fish-stands, for the streets were a market-place, unregulated, unsupervised, unclean,” nurse Lillian Wald remarked, “All the maladjustments of our social and economic relations seemed epitomized in this brief journey.”<sup>32</sup> Remembering her time at College Settlement, Simkhovitch mused, “Life in the East Side at that time was far more picturesque than now,” but concluded, “The East Side is a reminder of our social failure -- but also of potencies only half-suspected. Once life on the East Side has been experienced, one can never say good-by. The East Side is always rising, like a genie in Arabian tales, to inquire, to confront.”<sup>33</sup> Also convinced that the East Side was a symbol of “social failure,” Benjamin Marsh, later arguing for a radical reclamation of private property for the implementation of a comprehensive city plan, argued that it was necessary to “dig the Lower East Side ‘up by its roots.’”<sup>34</sup> The sentiments of these core members of the Committee on Congestion were echoed even more dramatically by some of its advisors, particularly Lawrence Veiller and Felix Adler, who had helped form the Charity Organization Society’s Tenement House Committee. In that committee’s 1903 book *The Tenement House Problem*, the East Side was held up as the ultimate case of decrepit housing and raging poverty. Its image of a scale model of a single tenement block in New York, one located between Chrystie and Forsythe on the Lower East Side, illustrated the density of tenement construction city-wide. This model, displayed at the Tenement House Exhibition of 1900, a precursor to the Congestion Exhibit, was meant to show in vibrant detail how difficult it would be to gain access to light and air in such housing. Indeed, continuing the synecdochic use of the Lower East Side to stand in for all slums, Veiller noted that “the block thus shown was selected merely as characteristic of the conditions throughout the city of New York, and [since] nearly every block is similar, one begins to realize the extent of the problem.”<sup>35</sup> Time and again, those who formed the

Congestion Committee would return to the Lower East Side to provide fodder for their arguments. So ubiquitous was the area as an example for social reform that one 1908 article in the journal *Charities and the Commons* began, "I must preface this by saying I am not talking of the lower East Side."<sup>36</sup>

Both Kelley and Simkhovitch lived for a time in Lower East Side settlement houses, thus defying the admonition of their reform predecessors such as Helen Campbell who warned of the "haunts of vice and crime" to be found there. However, the interpretations they gleaned from their personal experiences in the area and that they displayed at the Congestion Exhibit were filtered through a language of social science, rather than the sort of descriptive, first-hand reportage that dominated earlier narratives. That is, while Kelley and Simkhovitch immersed themselves in East Side life and even marveled in other writings at "the intelligence and ability and charm of our neighbors," when it came to a program of defeating poverty, the people about whom they spoke disappeared in a litany of statistics and questionnaires. Unlike the reformers of an earlier generation, these new activists did not replicate the sensational language -- often bordering on caricature -- of earlier reformers, but their new language of social science elided the nuance of human experience just as effectively. Moreover, the kinds of assumptions that drove earlier reformers continued to haunt the work of this new group. Ethnicity was uttered in the same breath as poverty, and attributed to both were city spaces that were deemed so alien, so diseased as to be worthy of total destruction. Thus, when the Committee on Congestion would later speak of the removal of East Side residents to the countryside and small towns across America, they were not only referring to population density, but to the density of ethnic groups as well.

## The Language of Social Science

Reformers like Simkhovitch and Kelley, Wald and Marsh, believed that scientific methods could be employed to correctly diagnose and solve social problems, and that through their proper presentation, government itself would intervene. In other words, rather than garnering the support of a middle-class public through pleas for mercy or warnings of danger as a previous generation of reformers hoped to do, reformers at the start of the twentieth century believed that scientific expertise and the government application of good public policy would dismantle the slum. While “misery was in evidence,” Edward T. Devine of the Charity Organization Society would explain, those educated in scientific inquiry believed “its causes were...discoverable and removable,” and that “the hardships and injustices under which the poor suffered were to be measured, analyzed, and dealt with.”<sup>37</sup>

Two methods were of particular importance to those using the language of social science for reform: the social survey and mapping. These methods most often worked in tandem, with the latter illustrating the former; thus, in mapping social data, poverty was spatialized, making it not only locatable, but seemingly extractable. The social survey had its origins specifically in the study of poverty, the ur-text being Charles Booth’s *Inquiry into the Life and Labor of the People of London* (also known as, *Life and Labor of the People*), published first in two volumes in 1889, and then in seventeen volumes in 1903. Booth’s study recruited volunteer investigators, many of whom were affiliated with London’s social settlement, Toynbee Hall, to research the workplaces, homes, and religious lives of the city’s working people.<sup>38</sup> The volunteers often accompanied police officers on their regular rounds to gain access to the subjects they wished to study. Once identified, subjects, including workers, factory owners, and labor and religious leaders, were interviewed using a standardized set of questions. Later, interviews were compiled

and analyzed to reveal what was considered to be a scientifically accurate overview of the general experience of the working class in London.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the data, Booth's most stunning contribution were his "Poverty Maps of London," which demonstrated in vivid color the geographical locations of categories such as "the vicious semi-criminal," the "mixed, some comfortable, others poor," and the "well to do."<sup>40</sup> Booth's work prompted the organizers of Chicago's Hull House, including Florence Kelley, to conduct a similar study of the surrounding neighborhoods of their settlement. *Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Study of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago*, published in 1895, offered maps modeled directly on those of Booth and measured the nationality of subjects, wage rates, and dwelling type.<sup>41</sup> Explanatory essays on the sweating system, child labor, and specific ethnic groups were also included in the report. Moreover, as Agnes Sinclair Holbrook, a Hull House resident explained, much of the data was collected as part of a U.S. Department of Labor investigation into the slums of U.S. cities, a project for which Florence Kelley was one of the main contributors.<sup>42</sup> Data collection, then, was done not wholly by residents of Hull House or volunteers, but also by federal investigators, charged with the mission of recording information on tenements, number of residents per room per apartment, tenants' cleaning methods, citizenship status, national origin, health, and type of schooling, among other attributes. Vast, comprehensive social surveys like these also took place in Pittsburgh (*The Pittsburgh Survey*, 1909-1914) and Philadelphia (W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899.) The aim in all cases was to mobilize political support for new approaches to poverty alleviation.<sup>43</sup> The results were not always so dramatic.

While New York did not have the privilege of being studied in so comprehensive a manner, it was the subject of dozens of smaller-scale social surveys. There were those that

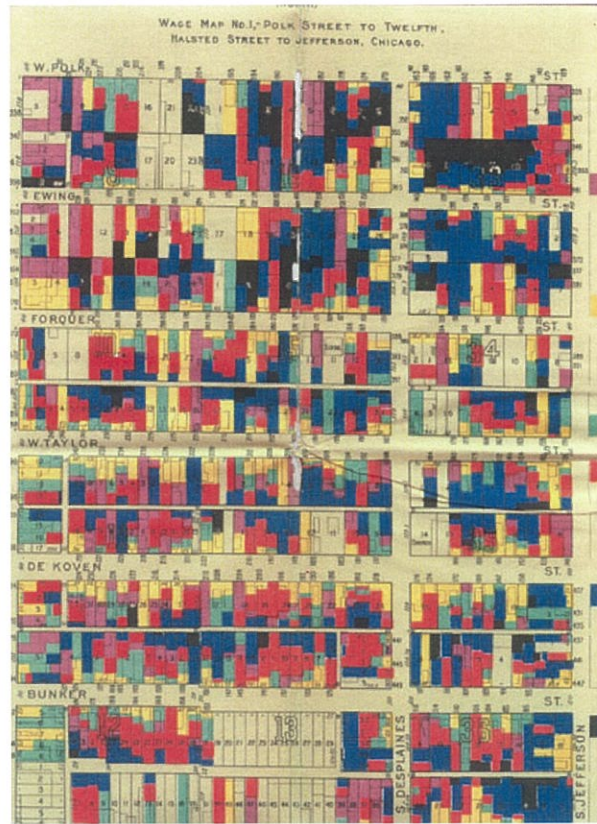


Fig. 9: Example of a color-coded map from Hull-House Maps and Papers (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/INCRP/Hull-House/hullrd.html>)

measured the physical characteristics of the city's schoolchildren, as one 1907 study did.<sup>44</sup> There were others that reported in minute detail "the sociology of a New York City block."<sup>45</sup> A glance at the list of theses and dissertations produced in Columbia's own Department of Social Science revealed topics as varied as the "Descriptive Sociology of Manhattanville, New York" and "Industry and a Community; a study of organization in Greenwich village."<sup>46</sup> New York was under constant scrutiny and was what Samuel McCune Lindsay called a "teeming Sociological Laboratory."<sup>47</sup> Faith in the ability of social science to reveal true knowledge about how the city might be improved was equally abundant.

Maps, which appeared with more frequency in social science just before the turn of the century, did not always depend on social surveys for data.<sup>48</sup> Often, the census itself provided the figures needed to communicate a problem spatially. Prior to the Congestion Exhibit, New Yorkers had encountered two influential sets of maps, which had a profound impact on how poverty was spatialized in the city. The first, produced by sociologist Kate Holladay Claghorn for the United States Industrial Commission Report of 1901-1902, was entitled "The Foreign Immigrant in New York City."<sup>49</sup> This report would be cited by social reformers and sociologists for years to come as a data source on topics as varied as immigrant community formation, strategies for the distribution of immigrants away from big cities, and, of course, immigration and low-wage industrial work.<sup>50</sup> The series included four different maps, one of which was printed in color, to locate the densities and ethnic heritage of seven different groups: those born of Hungarian, Italian, Russian/Polish, Bohemian, Irish, German, or Native mothers. The first four groups -- Hungarian, Italian, Russian/Polish, and Bohemian -- appeared on one multi-colored map, while the last three were examined each on its own, black-and-white map. The maps focused mostly on Manhattan, though Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island), where

the city's almshouses, charity hospitals, and asylums for the mentally ill were relegated, was also included. Density was measured with data collected in every ward and sanitary district of the city during the 1890 census. Sanitary districts existed within the bounds of wards, however, thus the figures collected continued a tradition of associating disease and uncleanness, which the sanitary districts managed, with density. When the attribute of ethnicity was added to this layer, the message that ethnicity -- or, more precisely, status as a second-generation immigrant -- was an essential factor in these other measures was implied.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this conclusion was in the Tenth Ward, which showed that the highest concentration of Russians and Poles made their homes in its Sanitary District "A," and that it also had the highest population density. According to its categories of measurement, the area encompassed more than 301 Russians and Poles and 21-50 Italians per acre. African Americans, Chinese, Northern Europeans, and other groups may have been housed in the Tenth Ward, but Claghorn's maps did not record their presence in any part of the city, let alone the Tenth Ward. One of the other maps did display the densities of "Native Whites Born of Native Parents" throughout Manhattan, but the 1890 census was not specific about who counted as "white."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, this population lived all over the city, including the areas designated as Russian/Polish, Hungarian, Bohemian, and Italian on the Lower East Side. Thus, the analysis of the Tenth Ward suggested that density was intertwined with the presence of Russians, Poles, and Italians, rather than any other factor disassociated from ethnicity. The final two maps, which measured the German and Irish populations separately, showed a marked presence of both groups in Lower East Side wards, though not nearly as concentrated as the other ethnic categories. To add to the ethnically-based bias of the maps, Claghorn claimed that the Irish were the *only* ethnic group represented on Blackwell's Island. Such an assertion,

dubious though it was, was supportable chiefly because of the flexibility of racial and ethnic categorization, as well as the potential of population *density* measurements (as opposed to individual tallies) to skew results.<sup>52</sup>

The second set of maps was produced by the Tenement House Commission for the Tenement House Exhibition of 1900, which was displayed at the Sherry Building at 404 Fifth Avenue for four months, and garnered attention from both the social work community and the press.<sup>53</sup> The Exhibition's maps – core elements of its housing reform objective -- were divided into two series, colloquially known as the "poverty maps" and the "disease maps." These maps mimicked in their detail the fire insurance maps first produced in the 1850s. Like those documents, the "poverty" and "disease" maps displayed each building -- both residential and commercial -- on each block of the city. Street numbers, building heights, building shapes, and land coverage were all precisely recorded. Most importantly, populations per block based on the 1890 census and the annotation of various diseases and forms of relief transformed each map into a bright constellation of dots and squares. The "poverty maps," for example, indicated the number of families per building that had applied for relief either through the Charity Organization Society (COS), the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), or the United Hebrew Charities (UHC.) Each dot, whether black for the COS or AICP or purple for the UHC, represented five families. The further east the block, the more the dots clustered together, particularly for those receiving assistance from the UHC. One tenement at 443 East Thirteenth Street, between First avenue and Avenue A showed fifteen black dots, equaling 105 relief requests.<sup>54</sup>

What the "poverty maps" also demonstrated was the existence of what it termed "agencies of betterment" in the areas. These included philanthropic agencies, churches and

missions, schools, hospitals and dispensaries, and police stations, but overlooked more ethnically based associations like mutual aid societies, storefront synagogues, and social clubs.<sup>55</sup> Each of the sanctioned agencies was highlighted by a different color and each was represented more than once on the Lower East Side.<sup>56</sup> In all, about one-quarter to one-third of the homes identified on the map contained families seeking relief. While it is impossible to know if the calculation is an accurate indicator of how many families *needed* relief, it does show that there was some diversity of wealth and income in the neighborhood and that the majority of residents existed off the relief rolls.

The "disease maps" provide similar conclusions. These showed incidents of scarlet fever (purple dots), tuberculosis (black dots), typhoid (light blue dots), and diphtheria (dark blue dots) based on Records of the Board of Health in the mid-1890s. The worst location for all disease was the block between Market and Catharine, Monroe and Cherry streets, and this was supported by its nickname the "Lung Block." Writing of tuberculosis, Veiller and DeForest, the editors of the *Tenement House Problem* and two of the organizers of the Tenement House Exhibition, noted that, "While these dots did not cover the buildings to the same extent as they were covered in the 'poverty' maps, it was appalling to note the extent of this disease; nearly every tenement house had one dot on it, and many had three and four; there were some houses that contained as many as twelve."<sup>57</sup> What the authors did not reveal was that they had not mapped the entire city, leaving out wide swaths of land in the center and upper reaches of Manhattan. Their evidence could have the effect of skewing public concerns about disease toward areas on the outskirts of the city, especially the Lower East Side.<sup>58</sup> Tuberculosis was the second leading cause of death at a rate of 259 per 100,000 for all New Yorkers between 1900 and 1904. Scarlet fever, typhoid, and diphtheria together accounted for the cause of death of 100 per 100,000 in the same period.<sup>59</sup>

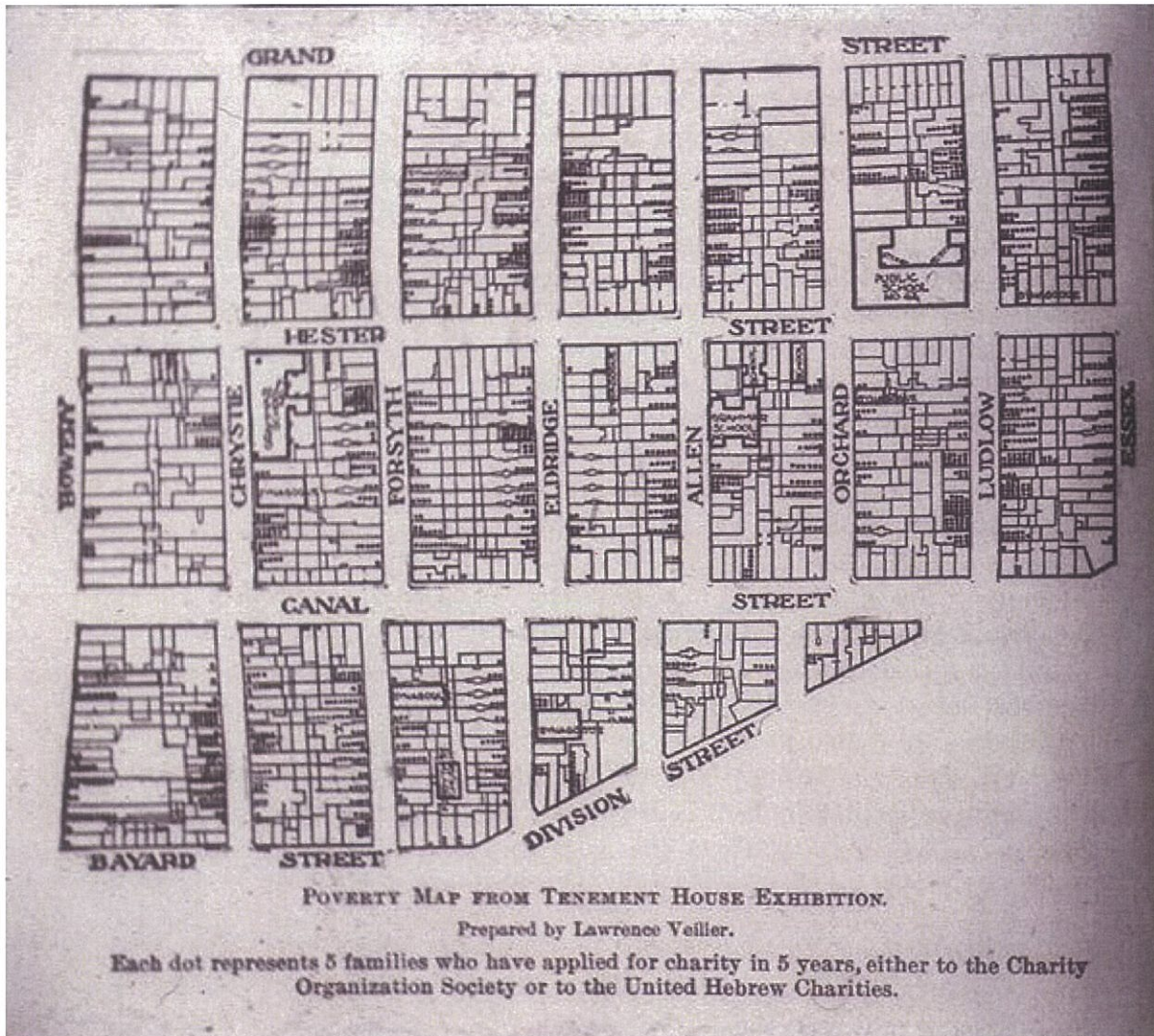


Fig. 10: Reproduction of a section of the "Poverty Map" from the Tenement House Exhibition. Reprinted from Veiller and DeForest, *The Tenement House Problem* (1903)

This is not to suggest that these diseases were not virulent, frightening, and deadly, but rather that they were either more widespread or more unusual than the Tenement House Exhibition suggested. As with all maps, the data displayed was construed to send specific messages. Clearly, the Tenement House Commission wished to draw attention to tenement districts as cauldrons of poverty and disease.

By the time the Committee on Congestion of Population began to organize its own exhibit, the social survey and mapping projects that preceded it had produced a toolkit for how information ought to be collected and marketed to the public. The data collected for the exhibit came from a variety of sources and was displayed in different contexts. Indeed, some of the "poverty maps" from the Tenement House Exhibition were on display at the Congestion Exhibit. Taken together, however, they made one, distinctive statement: "Congestion is spreading" and the eye of the storm was the Lower East Side.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Exhibit**

The "Congestion Exhibit" opened at the American Museum of Natural History on March 9, 1908 and lasted through March 21. A month later, it moved to the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, where it was on display for another thirteen days. In her address at the exhibit's opening, Mary Simkhovitch boasted: "Our exhibition makes this claim alone: that of being the first public effort on the part of a group of united associations to present the problem and to suggest the next steps necessary in the prevention of congestion."<sup>61</sup> Such a large and trailblazing event deserved an equally large audience, and it attracted one. The *New York Times* estimated that in only a single day -- March 15 -- four-thousand visitors had toured the exhibit, with 1,500 of them arriving within the first hour-and-a-half.<sup>62</sup> *Charities and the Commons*, the

weekly journal for social reform and philanthropy, declared the exhibit a resounding "success" and reported that the organizers had received several requests to bring the exhibit across the country: "Even the London papers are, as reported by cable, giving it editorial attention."<sup>63</sup>

Those who attended the event encountered thirty-eight different displays, interpreting congestion, its causes, and its solutions from a range of perspectives. The program for the exhibit explained that, while the purpose of the exhibit was to be "suggestive not exhaustive," it was important to give "special attention...to the evil conditions, a thorough investigation of which is imperative as a basis for wise legislation." Thus, the data on view were specifically intended to capture the deleterious effects of congestion and would not communicate any ambivalence about its causes. Questions the organizers posed to help guide visitors included: "Why do people leave the country and small cities?...Why do they move into New York?...Why do they live on a block with 3,500 neighbors?"<sup>64</sup> The various displays within the exhibit were intended to give a many-sided, but unified answer to such queries. Ultimately, density was represented as a pathology of the urban environment -- sometimes made more difficult by the presumed pathologies of certain residents -- and that, through various means, the solution was to adopt a comprehensive city plan that would scatter the population away from the city's center.

Overwhelmingly, the displays used the language of social science to make the point that congestion and ethnicity were inseparable, and that they both could be located in specific places, particularly the Lower East Side. Among those that focused almost solely on the theme was the display organized by the Federation of Churches and Christian Organizations. With maps and statistics, the Federation shared its research on nine topics, among them "The Causes of New York's Growth," "Special Congestion Areas of Greater New York," and "The Lower East Side." The Federation had spent the previous years compiling data on the geography of ethnicity in

New York, asserting the imperialist language of slummers that, "New York is not, truly speaking, an American, but a foreign city."<sup>65</sup> The Federation, only about a decade old by the time it presented at the exhibit, had also claimed the measurement of New York's changing ethnicity as a part of its *raison d'etre*. In a 1905 issue of its journal, *Federation*, in which the reason for forming a coalition was explored, the editors explained: "why federate? ...because the problem of the foreigner now rests more heavily, proportionally, upon New York than upon any other American city."<sup>66</sup> Foreign missions, the journal argued, were less necessary when foreigners appeared in one's back yard. Indeed, when a large proportion of immigrants adhered to Jewish and Catholic religious practices, rather than the Protestant ones advocated by the Federation, the need was even more critical. More attention to New York's own spiritual health, therefore, was required.<sup>67</sup>

In its display, the Federation showed that most of the increase in population had occurred in wards "inhabited in the main by Russians, Italians, and other peoples whose incoming immigration is high." Similarly, the ward that had gained most in density was also the one with the largest group of Austro-Hungarians. Because Austro-Hungarian immigration had seen increases in previous years, this growing density -- however temporary or otherwise explained -- was attributed to the immigrant influx. More directly, the Federation argued that the densest blocks on the city's East Side were between fifty-two and sixty percent "alien." It was assumed that one attribute explained the other. That is, immigration explained congestion, and congestion was a product of immigrants.<sup>68</sup> The solution, as Dr. Walter Laidlaw of the Federation offered in his address at the exhibit, was "segregated settlements in the other boroughs [of New York] of Italians, Russians, and other nationalities whose immigration is high." This, he argued, was "likely to relieve the congestion of the lower East Side."<sup>69</sup> The issues of segregation and

foreclosure upon potential miscegenation aside, Laidlaw and the Federation of Churches and Christian Organizations were apparently not averse to outright removal of immigrants. Not addressed, however, was how congestion would actually be solved by the ghettoization of these groups in another part of the city. Presumably, their numbers would still be high and the space available to them would grow to be equally restricted.<sup>70</sup>

Like the Federation, the Association of Neighborhood Workers was also eager to locate the problem of poverty in a specific area, once again the Lower East Side. To drive home the point that congestion was most pernicious there, a life-size model of a tenement apartment showed what a congested home in the neighborhood looked like. "An exact model of a room, with actual bed, table and chairs brought from the East Side," explained John Martin, "showed father, mother and five children of different ages, from the tot of two or three to the grown-up youth, all busy by day [in an apartment sweatshop], all huddled in a space twelve by twelve feet. Next door the same seven were shown sleeping in the same chamber, father, mother, and baby in one bed, one child on table top, another on chairs, the rest on mattresses thrown on the floor."<sup>71</sup> The verisimilitude, the Association of Neighborhood Workers believed, would communicate the feel of cramped quarters and help visitors better imagine the conditions they were attempting to eliminate.

Alone, the display sympathetically demonstrated the living conditions of many slum residents. Coupled with the exhibit directly across the hall, which was presented by the Italian government and read by at least one major reviewer as a partner to the life-size tenement models, however, the message was more oblique. In that exhibit, Antonio Stella, a government representative, shared statistics showing that the "Italian Quarters" were the most overcrowded in the city, typically sheltering four adults per apartment. The main culprits, Stella noted in an

echo of his country's own prejudices, were not Northern Italians, who demonstrated "a sense of personal dignity in their housing conditions," but rather Southern Italian immigrants, who "without exception live in the most dirty and abominable manner one can imagine." This was the population, Stella argued, that required immediate regulation.<sup>72</sup> *Charities and the Commons* reviewer, John Martin, was moved by this argument. Read alongside the tenement apartment display of the Association of Neighborhood Workers, he admitted that the "life-like" tenement apartment might have been "charged with exaggeration" had it not been for the statistics of the Italian government nearby.

Also conflating tenement congestion with the ethnicity, rather than basic poverty, of tenement residents was a *New York Times* article on the exhibit entitled "The East Side Sees Itself." Reporting on the visit of several tenement residents, the author mused, "It was interesting to watch large groups of Italians, men and women, who had come to see how they, the 'other half,' lived." In fact, in a remarkably uncanny moment, "one girl recognized herself in one of the photographs which are being used to show how dwellers in the lower east side are huddled together at work in sweatshops." She exclaimed, "That's me, but I did not know we looked like that."<sup>73</sup> Such a quaint depiction revealed not only the assumptions about the ethnic source of congestion and poverty asserted by the exhibitors and their intended publics, but also the rhetorical exclusion of the very slum-dwellers being captured in the exhibit's materials. Reduced to graphical displays and photographs that treated them as didactic elements, rather than individuals, these new Americans surely shared the ambivalence of the young girl who recognized herself in the photograph. Not realizing that she "looked like that" in the photographic display, she may have wondered what else the outside world saw that she did not.

When ethnicity was not the focal point of the exhibit's displays, the spatial qualities of poverty and their particular articulation on the Lower East Side was also a common trope in the exhibit. The Metropolitan Parks Association, for example, produced a map reminiscent of those from the Tenement House Exhibition, upon which small markers were affixed to represent individual urban dwellers. Crowded in the lower, right-hand corner -- the site of the Lower East Side -- was a jumbled mass of these markers, denoting its incomparable congestion. In large stretches of upper Manhattan, on the other hand, markers seemed to appear only sporadically, "scattered thin as flowers in meadows." The Charity Organization Society and National Consumers' League also provided maps, the former showing a "Disease Map," which located tuberculosis cases, and the latter showing a "map of the most congested district in the world," the Lower East Side, including the location of sweatshops and of contagious diseases. The Charity Organization Society's display was far more comprehensive than simply its map and included models of tenement houses, dolls to demonstrate tuberculosis treatment of the joints, and panels explaining how tuberculosis might be eliminated through educational means. The National Consumers' League, too, shared photographs of workplaces and statements describing the kind of work being done. In other words, neither organization reduced its entire argument to a spatial one or to the Lower East Side. Still, such maps helped buttress the presumed relationship between poverty, illness, tenements, and their residents.

Meanwhile, there was another intriguing argument simmering under the exhibit's more powerful message about the "alien" causes of congestion, and this involved escalating land values. While it did not receive serious attention from the public, the suggestion that overcrowding might be as attributable to speculative real estate transactions as to atavistic residents suggests that the exhibit's organizers were not as myopic about the causes of poverty

as the majority of the displays suggested. At the entrance of the exhibit, for example, there appeared two cubes, one very small and one quite large, that were meant to visually capture the inflation of land value from the moment of Manhattan's purchase by the Dutch to the present. The smaller cube represented \$25; the larger, \$2,712,261,571. Propping up these values, the presentation made clear, were the exorbitant rents, overcrowded apartments, and narrow tenements that allowed for maximum income on small plots of land. Emblazoned across the larger cube was the question: "Who created this increase? Who owns this increase?" Florence Kelley, who, though she was a member of the Committee on Congestion of Population, spoke at the exhibit's conference in her capacity as General Secretary of the National Consumers' League, offered an answer:

We have this growing, revolting evil of sweated work because for some inscrutable reason we are willing to go on from decade to decade, leaving the landowner master of the situation while we wind about the unhappy tenement-dweller ever more red-tape. The tenement-house owner, too, we bind with new and more restrictions. And every year, both tenant and houseowner pay to the ground landlord a larger share of the earnings of the community.<sup>74</sup>

No part of the exhibit made Kelley's point better than one overflowing wall of graphs and placards labeled with the question, "Who Owns Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens?"<sup>75</sup> Here, almost 265 acres of land in Manhattan assessed at a value of \$147,778,500 was traced to only eight distinct landholders. Most prominent among these was the Astor family, which owned \$69,538,700 of the value alone.<sup>76</sup> This, it must be noted, was assessed *exclusive* of the buildings on the land. Rarely were these families the direct landlords of the buildings that occupied their property, but the profits they earned from tenements was undeniable. The Astors, for example, owned large parcels of the area comprising the Lower East Side.<sup>77</sup> Thus, in these somewhat peripheral displays, certain members of the Committee on Congestion of Population questioned

whether congestion could be eliminated simply by a land-based redistribution of wealth, which would point the finger not at the poor, but at the rich for cultivating congestion. This idea – even though it would be sustained by Secretary Benjamin Marsh in the coming years – did not win many supporters.<sup>78</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, the solutions the Committee on Congestion of Population offered for the elimination of poverty were derived instead from the contentions that poverty could be measured and identified spatially and that the population that caused congestion – namely immigrants -- required removal and relocation.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, the solution all of the exhibitors agreed upon was a comprehensive city plan. Some exhibitors provided blueprints, diagrams, and charts for improved transit; others displayed the town planning schemes of foreign cities such as Berlin and domestic ones such as Los Angeles, the first American city to introduce a zoning ordinance, to inspire change at home. German cities especially were held up as models for how New York could reform itself. Marsh, who would publish the results of his own tour of German cities under the title *Introduction to City Planning* in 1909, argued that the kind of zoning implemented in cities such as Frankfurt-am-Main would help place factories, residential, and commercial areas in proper proportion. This kind of zoning would also ensure that the heights of buildings would allow for adequate light and air to flow between city spaces. The result of applying such techniques to congested areas such as the Lower East Side, of course, would be the demolition of buildings, greater distances between workplace and home, and the relocation of residents. If the answer to congestion was decongestion, and if immigrants were intimately connected to and perhaps responsible for congestion, then the removal of the “foreign” and “alien” element from the city center was not only justified, but perhaps beneficial to the city’s greater needs. Even Marsh, who tended to view planning as an economic rather than a racial

issue, reasoned that, “Foreign cities have adopted city planning as a means of preventing race deterioration.”<sup>80</sup> For Americans whose own racial anxieties were tested by the recent waves of immigration, such arguments surely hit a nerve.

By all accounts, the Congestion Exhibit was received with energy and enthusiasm. Within a year, the Committee on Congestion of Population had partnered with the Municipal Art Society to organize a New York-based City Planning Exhibition that would further expand upon the benefits of a comprehensive city plan. Within two years, New York's mayor William Jay Gaynor had appointed a Commission on Congestion of Population that included Benjamin Marsh as its expert on issues of congestion and Frank J. Goodnow, a leading thinker on administrative and municipal law and a professor at Columbia University. This committee was to make recommendations for immediate and long-term policies that would culminate in the production of a city plan. That same year -- 1910 -- the Committee on Congestion of Population spearheaded the first National Conference on City Planning and the Congestion Problem in Washington, D.C., in collaboration with some of the nation's most prominent planners. Mushrooming from a small, but influential group of New York-based social reformers through the whole of Progressive political and social circles, then, the Congestion Exhibit and the committee that organized it should have been embraced as the crucible from which modern American city planning theory derived. This was not to be the case.

### **An Uneasy Victory**

It is difficult to follow the story of the Committee on Congestion of Population without rapidly assuming a declension narrative. After its triumph with the Congestion Exhibit, the Committee met with one defeat after another -- all masquerading as new victories -- until,

finally, the Committee dissolved altogether, its advocates scattering to different and new ventures with better prospects. The core committee members never fully abandoned the idea of congestion or planning, nor the perspectives they developed during their involvement with the Congestion Exhibit, but the ways in which they approached the topics changed.<sup>81</sup>

The beginning of the end came with development of the first National Conference on City Planning and the Congestion Problem, held at the Masonic Lodge in Washington, D.C. in May of 1909. In a classic alliance of opposites, Marsh, the land tax enthusiast, worked with Henry Morgenthau, the real estate developer and chief financier of the Committee on Congestion of Population, to organize the conference. Together, they were able to attract some of the leading lights in planning theory to contribute to the event, most importantly Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who they hoped would lend his support to the aims of the Committee. Olmsted, whose father ushered landscape architecture to such prominence with the design of Manhattan's Central Park in the mid-nineteenth century, had himself gained celebrity for his contribution to the McMillan Plan, the updated redesign of Washington, D.C. That plan, one of the premier examples of the "City Beautiful" vision of urban planning, organized Washington's space around new parklands, monuments and monumental buildings, a playground system, slum clearance, and an expanded "ceremonial core."<sup>82</sup> The idea was to provide the city with a thorough blueprint that would result in an organized, orderly, and aesthetically virtuous use of city spaces. Like Daniel Burnham, who worked with Olmsted on the McMillan plan and produced his own 1909 "Plan of Chicago," Olmsted believed that, as Burnham put it, the struggles of other cities teach us "that the way to true greatness and continued prosperity' depends on keeping the city convenient, healthful, beautiful, and orderly."<sup>83</sup> This viewpoint and Olmsted's well-regarded experience would only give strength, Marsh and Morgenthau supposed, to the argument that city

planning would result in poverty relief. The consequence of this supposition, however, was actually quite different.

Olmsted, like other advocates of the City Beautiful, was not especially concerned with poverty. The well-planned city, he believed, would, by virtue of its logic, improve the living conditions of the poor; direct attention to poverty was unnecessary.<sup>84</sup> What a conference on city planning needed instead was a broad coalition of city builders -- architects, engineers, civic associations -- to contribute their varied expertise to the field. Moreover, the establishment of a "field" -- that is, the professionalization of city planning as a technical, scientific process -- was also necessary. In essence, Olmsted believed the Committee on Congestion of Population had misdiagnosed the reasons for calling a conference at all. He said as much in a letter to John Glenn, director of the Russell Sage Foundation, which years before had funded the Pittsburgh Survey, was now funding the conference, and, years later, would fund the Regional Plan Association in New York. Olmsted worried "of the influence which the first conference [on city planning], hastily gotten up by the Committee on Congestion of Population in New York, would have." Later, he admitted, "I went into it only in hopes of modifying its influence."<sup>85</sup>

Marsh and Morgenthau did not expect the pushback -- and, ultimately, rejection -- they received at the conference. After what amounted to an inconsequential two days during which Marsh presented the Committee's version of tax reform and population redistribution, Olmsted took the reins of the conference.<sup>86</sup> His first move was to launch a new committee to organize the next conference; his next was to ensure that he included in this committee representatives of professional societies who shared his own vision of city planning. From that point on, the Committee on Congestion of Population was increasingly marginalized. At the second conference in Rochester, New York in May of 1910, Marsh merely attended the proceedings,

while Olmsted delivered the inaugural address. When an executive committee was formed to organize the next conference, Marsh was blocked from any leadership role. Finally, at a June meeting of the executive committee, all of the attendees, except for Mary Simkhovitch who was included on the committee, voted to strike the word "congestion" from the title of the conference. Simkhovitch, of course, objected, but to no avail.<sup>87</sup> The Committee on Congestion of Population would no longer influence the trajectory of urban planning in any decision-making capacity.

The next challenge for the Committee on Congestion of Population was its involvement in the work of the New York City Commission on Congestion of Population, appointed by Mayor Gaynor on May 17, 1910 as an official response to the Congestion Exhibit.<sup>88</sup> Since this new pursuit happened concurrently with the failures at the National Conference on City Planning, the Committee had high hopes for the potential of this government-appointed body. Moreover, with its fading influence on the national stage and Marsh's personal crusade for land taxation, the Committee's strongest financial backer, Henry Morgenthau, withdrew his support for its work, even ejecting the Committee from the offices he had rented for them.<sup>89</sup> All of the committee's eggs, as it were, crowded into the city commission's basket.

Like many city commissions, however, the real agenda for this one was uncertain. One reason for the uncertainty was the commission's composition. Of the nineteen members of the group, ten were aldermen and six were in the real estate industry. None of these were experts on congestion, nor had any been involved with the Congestion Exhibit. The last three spots were taken up by Marsh, Frank Goodnow, and the Manhattan Borough President, Jacob Cantor -- the only members who might have claimed previous knowledge of the issue. The *New-York Tribune* found this troubling, declaring that the commission "leaves something to be desired in

the way of expert knowledge and freedom from political bias."<sup>90</sup> Another reason for skepticism was apparent indecisiveness on the part of the government. On the one hand, both city and state government had clearly taken an interest in better coordinating municipal services to alleviate the problem of the slums. Governor Charles E. Hughes had addressed the exhibit at the Museum of Natural History and at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. The city's Commissioner of Health Dr. Thomas Darlington, the Commissioner of Immigration in New York Robert Watchorn, and a member of the state Bureau of Labor also participated in the proceedings.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, the Congestion Exhibit had already produced reams of evidence to suggest that congestion was a deadly, though treatable, municipal illness. Why appoint an investigative commission, particularly one made up of politicians and businessmen, when the evidence was already there? The New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) reiterated this complaint, noting that "the history of every such commission in the past is the production of many schemes, beautiful to look at and admirable in themselves were they possible of execution, but the actual result of the work of these previous commissions has been almost nil."<sup>92</sup>

The commission, as it turned out, fulfilled this wary prophecy. Many of its findings, published in its final report of February 28, 1911, simply restated what had been presented at the Congestion Exhibit. The Lower East Side still contained the densest population in the city and, as housing expert Lawrence Veiller who was interviewed by the commission explained, it was also "the most densely populated spot in the habitable globe."<sup>93</sup> Nearly eight percent of the entire city's population lived in wards Ten, Eleven, and Seventeen, all of which were located on the Lower East Side.<sup>94</sup> Ethnic groups and immigrants continued to dominate examples of congestion. "It is well known," testified Dr. William Guilfooy of the Board of Health, for example, "that the Italians, Austro-Hungarians and Hebrews are among the most congested

people in the city."<sup>95</sup> In fact, in 1905, there were 155,828 Russians living below Fourteenth Street, 62% of whom lived on blocks with densities of over 750 people per acre. 34% percent of Chinese New Yorkers living on the blurry western edges of the Lower East Side, resided on blocks with the same high density, as did 25% of Italians.<sup>96</sup> Significant to the statistic collectors was also the minimal increase of native-born New Yorkers in these areas: there was only a four percent increase of native-born residents below Fourteenth Street, compared to a twenty percent increase for foreign-born residents.<sup>97</sup> Such data further supported the notion that congestion was a product of immigrants. Unsanitary tenements and the reasons for poverty were also discussed in detail. Edward T. Devine of the Charity Organization Society explained that the top three reasons for poverty were unemployment, overcrowding, and widowhood, while the United Hebrew Charities found that sickness, unemployment, and insufficient earnings accounted for poverty among its own relief recipients.<sup>98</sup> Concluding the report's research section was a summary of how various foreign cities had approached the question of planning. None of this was particularly new.

Meanwhile, the Commission's proposed solutions -- seemingly sculpted exclusively by Marsh -- were actually radical. Acknowledging that "centralization has been the principle of New York's development," the report concluded that "intense congestion has been perfectly natural" because "private interest has been permitted to control the development not only of Manhattan but of the other Boroughs rather than the public welfare."<sup>99</sup> The remedy for this was a city plan and tax reform, both enforceable by municipal government. Taxation on unimproved land, for example, would help to add incentive to the construction of new homes, countering the tendency of developers to hold on to land until it satisfactorily appreciated in value.<sup>100</sup> A city plan along the lines of the zoning ordinances in place in German cities was also proposed as a

function of the extant duties of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment.<sup>101</sup> While this proposal would not come to fruition as a result of the Commission's report, zoning powers were awarded to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment by 1916.<sup>102</sup>

As it was, the report was received with responses ranging from neutrality to outrage. The loudest critics were those who found the land tax to be an attack on capital accumulation. The biggest supporters thought the recommendations of the commission were sound, but would require such a large-scale transformation of the city's economy that they bordered on the fantastic. Within a few months, the Commission's campaign to enact its recommendations came to a stand-still and the Board of Aldermen officially refused to fund any of their proposals. As historian Harvey Kantor succinctly put it, the work of the city commission "went the way of many city reports, to obscurity in a file cabinet."<sup>103</sup> The failure of Marsh and his allies (such as they were) to garner support for their slate of congestion solutions marked the loss of the best chance for the Committee on Congestion of Population to affect real policy change. With the goal of the Committee's Congestion Exhibit being the enactment of legislation, the breakdown of the city's mayoral commission came as a huge, and fatal, blow.<sup>104</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In garnering enough attention to draw crowds in the thousands, merit daily newspaper coverage, and ignite any political activity at all, the Congestion Exhibit was an undeniable success. That its intense work resulted in little, if any, direct policy change was a disappointment to its organizers and supporters, but its promotion of the issues of population density and city planning would reverberate for years to come. While perhaps a comfort to the Committee and the exhibitors who collaborated with it, these reverberations would also sustain

both the ethnic and racial biases of planning in general and the casting of the Lower East Side as a troubled city space made more “alien” by its immigrant residents. No matter the supposedly “color blind” and objective tools of social science, nor the very convincing analysis of overcrowding and the tragedies of poverty, planning and reform discourses were compromised by their fixation on the ethnicity of urban populations. So, too, did they suffer from an inability to reconcile the functional elements of neighborhood life with the pathological consequences of chronic poverty. Without attempting to offer this more holistic perspective, especially in their exclusion of “insider” testimonials from residents, the organizers of the exhibit not only placed social science above lived experience, but also failed to garner support from those they were trying to help.<sup>105</sup>

It was not long after the show at the Museum of Natural History, in fact, that one vocal critic, Reverend Father James B. Curry of the Church of St. James on Cherry Hill, became an overnight sensation. Curry was an opponent of settlement houses for a variety of reasons and had already made enemies in the social reform community. Like other religious leaders and residents on the Lower East Side, Curry was convinced that the settlement houses, like the church missions that had also popped up in the neighborhood, were more interested in Protestant proselytizing and imperious Americanization projects than in helping Lower East Siders contend with social ills.<sup>106</sup> He was joined in this opinion by Albert Lucas, Secretary of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of the United States and Canada, as well as many in the national Catholic community.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Rose Cohen, whose reminiscences of life on Cherry Street were published in 1918, recalled being approached by missionaries in her neighborhood, as well as during a brief stay in a hospital when she was encouraged to seek medical treatment by Lillian

Wald and Mary Brewster at Henry Street Settlement.<sup>108</sup> While the settlement was a staunchly secular institution, Cohen's experience proved that its associates were not always so neutral.

Curry's latest critique was less about this issue, than it was about the ways in which the Lower East Side was portrayed by settlement workers and reformers. In a cutting article published on April 13, 1908, Curry's Sunday sermon was recorded word for word:

The general impression held by the public of the east side is woefully wrong, and is all due to the incorrect statements made by these proselytizing settlement workers. And right here I want to object strenuously to the use of the term 'slums' in characterizing this section. I also object to other characterizations and methods employed to exploit this section. When they come here for photographs for their misleading articles they select the most poverty stricken child and the lowest types of individuals to pose as the normal citizens of our section, and picture the most dilapidated houses as our typical homes....The residents of our section have suffered and still suffer by this and as a result of it.<sup>109</sup>

The article set off a barrage of responses from reformers, denying Curry's assessment of settlement work and defending the intentions of reform. Even Jacob Riis, who raised Curry's particular ire, joined the melee. The sermon, however, made enough sense that one unnamed settlement worker could understand Curry's discontent. Noting that the catalyst for his remarks was surely the popularity of the Congestion Exhibit, she explained, "Different settlements joined with other organizations in making that exhibit, which of course labeled the regions concerned as slums. This is contrary to the method of settlement work in general which aims to create pride in the neighborhood. Some might consider that the effect of joining with other organizations was to mark the Congestion Exhibit as exploiting the slums."<sup>110</sup> Another editorialist, otherwise disagreeing with Curry, admitted that "there may be some foundation" in the contention that the settlements "misrepresent the truth" in their publications, though he qualified this by saying such distortion was all in the service of raising donations to continue

good work.<sup>111</sup> David Blaustein, former director of the Educational Alliance, a Jewish settlement on the Lower East Side, tread even more softly on the issue of misrepresentation, but agreed that some may have existed: "Father Curry's charges as a rule are not justifiable, but they contain a grain of truth inasmuch as there are some persons that pose as settlement workers in order to make capital out of it. It is utterly wrong to condemn the entire system because it has flaws."<sup>112</sup>

None of those who responded to Curry denied that the neighborhood might have been misrepresented in reform discourse. Neither did they suggest revisiting how neighborhoods like the Lower East Side were portrayed. At no point did leaders within the Committee on Congestion of Population respond publicly to Curry's accusations. But the critique resonated. By 1911 with the disintegration of the Committee on Congestion of Population, Simkhovitch and Wald turned their attention to their new project, the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, which placed "neighborhood pride," rather than social science, at the center of its mission.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, looking back to her involvement in the origins of city planning, Simkhovitch wrote, "The activities settlements conduct are wholly secondary, no matter how useful or fascinating, to their primary purpose of energizing their neighborhoods to develop a common consciousness of need and a common effort to meet those needs."<sup>114</sup> Whether Simkhovitch and her colleagues had intentionally chosen to redirect their energies toward more "soft" projects like community-building, encouraging intercultural understanding, and art-making in response to Curry's diatribe is impossible to know. That their faith in the power of social science to bring about the change they desired had come up short, however, was evident.

Burying ambivalence about immigrants and ethnic "others" within the language of social science in the Congestion Exhibit helped to endorse the longstanding notion that ethnic spaces

were naturally afflicted with poverty and its attendant evils. While the Committee's work did not directly result in policy and legislation – such as zoning ordinances and slum clearance – as it had hoped, the conflation of ethnicity with poverty and doomed city spaces and the demolition mentality it fostered lingered. Indeed, by 1940, when the newly formed City Planning Commission produced its first map of “blighted substandard residential districts,” a total of 900 acres of the Lower East Side -- still the emblematic slum – were slated for clearance and reconstruction. Such plans would come as little surprise to those who had condemned the area decades earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 89-90, 305. It is not clear whether Cohen had left the Lower East Side when she wrote her memoirs around 1918. Thomas Dublin, who wrote the introduction to the 1995 Cornell University Press edition of the book intimates that she may have attempted suicide in 1922 at which time she lived on Decatur Avenue in Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn. Cohen died at the age of 40 in 1925, possibly as the result of a successful suicide attempt.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2002), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Detroit Publishing Co., “Mulberry Street, New York City.”  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/det.4a31829/>

<sup>4</sup> Brown Brothers, “New York. Essex & Hester Streets, 190-.”  
<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?837003>

<sup>5</sup> For more images of the Lower East Side that capture this lively and more complicated atmosphere, see Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2006) and Virginia Mecklenburg, Robert W. Snyder, and Rebecca Zurier, eds., *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York, 1897-1917* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1996), 46, 123, 148.

<sup>7</sup> John Martin, Director of the Public Education Association, was himself a member of the General Committee organizing the Congestion Exhibit. His review of the exhibit in *Charities and the Commons* journal is one of the few remaining descriptions of the what the exhibit

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showed. It is also the only article to include images of the exhibit, most of which are of very poor quality and do not evoke the visual language of the exhibit. For this reason, I have relied heavily on Martin's account to tell this story, but offer no images of the exhibit itself.

<sup>8</sup> John Martin, "The Exhibit of Congestion Interpreted," *Charities and the Commons, A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance*, Volume XX, April 4, 1908: 27.

<sup>9</sup> New York City Commission on Congestion of Population, *The True Story of the Worst Congestion in Any Civilized City* (New York: New York Commission on Congestion of Population, 1910), 4. The "most congested block in the civilized world" was located between Catherine, Hamilton, Market, and Monroe Streets.

<sup>10</sup> Committee on Congestion of Population, *Exhibit of Congestion of Population in New York, Program*, 1908, unpaginated, Collection of Materials Relating to the Congestion Exhibit, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, New York Public Library. Hereafter, this will be referred to as "Program."

<sup>11</sup> The exception to this is Daniel Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings*, which acknowledges the role of the Committee on Congestion of Population in providing background for public housing planning and for helping to move along zoning legislation. Wirka erroneously suggests that the zoning ordinance was a direct result of the Committee's work. Rather, as Stanislaw Makielski and others explain, zoning made headway only when the Fifth Avenue Committee, a group of merchants with stores on Fifth Avenue, lobbied for it. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 181-7; Stanislaw Makielski, Jr, *The Politics of Zoning: The New York Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 11-17.

<sup>12</sup> Wirka calls the Congestion Exhibit an example of the "City Social," a programmatic approach sponsored by settlement workers like Simkhovitch, Wald, and Kelley to alleviate "the social and economic injustices underlying urban problems." Susan Marie Wirka, "The City Social Movement: Progressive Women Reformers and Early Social Planning" in *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*, eds. Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>13</sup> Conspicuous among these are a series of essays written for the American Planning Association's hundredth anniversary celebration of the first National Conference on City Planning and Population Congestion. The Committee, through Marsh, is cast in these essays a group of firebrands and radicals whose dogged pursuit of social reform blurred their vision when it came to planning. See, in particular, Stuart Meck and Rebecca Retzlaff, "A Familiar Ring: A Retrospective on the First National Conference on City Planning (1909);" Alexander von Hoffman, "Housing and Planning: A Century of Social Reform and Local Power;" Eugenie L. Birch and Christopher Silver, "One Hundred Years of City Planning's Enduring and Evolving Connections;" and Peterson, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 75, No. 2, Spring 2009. Harvey Kantor, the only historian to document with any depth the career of Benjamin Marsh, has also argued that his particular zeal for taxing the wealthy was the death-knell of the Committee. Harvey Kantor, "Benjamin C. Marsh and the Fight over Population Congestion," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Volume 40, Issue 6, 1974: 422-429.

<sup>14</sup> Whether or not settlement workers, who in many cases lived many years in the neighborhoods they studied, were, in fact, "outsiders" is a matter of debate among historians. As Judith Trolander, Ruth Crocker, and Allen Davis point out, residents' attitudes toward the settlements and their workers varied considerably over the years. Here, I refer to the settlement workers as "outsiders" primarily because they had come to the neighborhood from other places, their class

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status differed greatly from that of the surrounding neighborhood, and the settlement houses they occupied were still new institutions.

<sup>15</sup> Kantor, 422.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, 33.

<sup>17</sup> New York Congestion Committee, *Program*.

<sup>18</sup> This kind of transatlantic exchange of ideas was not uncommon during the Progressive era. For more on how American notions of social reform were influenced by European models, see Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*.

<sup>19</sup> For more on Progressivism as a larger movement, see Allen Davis, *Spearheads of Reform: Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Paul M. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," in *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1982: 113-132; and Michael McGeer, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.) For more on Progressivism and women's role in the movement, see Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Katherine Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Robin Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Though among Progressives nationwide, they were not unique in their backgrounds of privilege and access to education, among most women of their era, they were still quite rare. For more on women during the Gilded Age, when these leaders came of age, see Elisabeth Israels Perry, "Men Are from the Gilded Age, Women Are from the Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 1:1 (Jan., 2002): 25-48

<sup>21</sup> Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, *Neighborhood: My Story of Greenwich House* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1938), 47.

<sup>22</sup> John Louis Recchiutti, *Civic Engagement: Social Science and Progressive-Era Reform in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 4; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>23</sup> Wirka, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Rechiutti, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Kantor, 422.

<sup>26</sup> Rechiutti, 83.

<sup>27</sup> See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: MacMillan, 1910); Christopher Lasch, ed., *The Social Thought of Jane Addams* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1982); Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Craig Monk, *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.)

<sup>28</sup> Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); and Donald Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.)

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<sup>29</sup> Willis Rudy, *The College of the City of New York: A History, 1847-1947* (New York: Arno Press, 1977.)

<sup>30</sup> Rechiutti, 24-5.

<sup>31</sup> Simkhovitch, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Lillian Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1915), 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Simkhovitch, 60,78.

<sup>34</sup> Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>35</sup> Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, eds., *The Tenement House Problem* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1903), 113.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph E. Lee, "Play and Congestion," *Charities and the Commons, A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance*, Volume XX, April 4, 1908: 43.

<sup>37</sup> Edward T. Devine, *When Social Work Was Young* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Harold W. Pfautz, ed. *Charles Booth on the City: Physical Pattern and Social Structure: Selected Writings* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Rosemary O'Day and David Englander, *Mr. Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People of London Reconsidered* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993.)

<sup>39</sup> O'Day's and Englander's study is particularly useful in understanding how the interviews were organized, how interviewers were trained, and what information was edited out of the final reports.

<sup>40</sup> For high-quality images of the maps, as well as of the casebooks, the London School of Economics has produced a stellar on-line archive, located at <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/>. It is important to note, as well, that while Booth was less interested in the national origins of his subjects, religion did play a part in the inquiry. The Jewish working class, which accounted for the second largest "ethnic" population after the Irish in London, for example, was represented in most volumes, particularly in the seven dedicated to religion. See David Englander, "Booth's Jews: The Presentation of Jews and Judaism in 'Life and Labour of the People in London,'" *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer, 1989): 551-571.

<sup>41</sup> Jane Addams, et al., *Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, Together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing Out of Social Conditions* (Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1895; reprint. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>43</sup> On the history of the social survey with reference to all of those mentioned above, see Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Jean M. Converse, *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence, 1890-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.)

<sup>44</sup> New York Committee on Physical Welfare of School Children, "Physical Welfare of School Children: An Examination of the Home Conditions of 1,400 New York School Children Found by School Physicians to Have Physical Defects," *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 10, No, 78 (June 1907): 271-316.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Jesse Jones, *The Sociology of a New York City Block* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1904.)

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<sup>46</sup> “Third List of Doctoral Dissertations in Political Economy in Progress in American Universities and Colleges, January 1, 1906,” *Publications of the American Economic Association*, 3rd Series, Vol. 7, No. 3, Supplement, Hand Book of the American Economic Association, 1906 (Aug., 1906), pp. 43-48. The latter of these was written by Paul Kellogg, later the editor of the social welfare journal, *Survey*, and husband of Helen Hall, who would succeed Lillian Wald as head of Henry Street Settlement. (See Ch. 4 for more on Hall.)

<sup>47</sup> Samuel McCune Lindsay, “New York as a Sociological Laboratory,” in National Conference on Universities and Public Service, *The College and the City, A series of addresses delivered at the National Conference on Universities and Public Service [pursuant to a call] call issued by Mayor John Purroy Mitchell of New York City*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Public health maps had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, as evidenced by the 1864 *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens' Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City*. Similarly, Dr. John Snow's maps of the cholera epidemic in 1845 London proved crucial to the discovery of cholera transmission. According to John Pickles, however, it was really the Booth maps that inaugurated the use of detailed mapping for the purposes of advancing social welfare. The Sanborn fire insurance maps of the 1880s, too, helped provide intricate representations of urban space for various uses. In general, as Pickles puts it, “Mapping and statistics made citizens visible in particular ways, rendering them subject to public administration.” John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-Coded World* (London: Routledge, 2004), 131.

<sup>49</sup> Kate Holladay Claghorn, “The Foreign Immigrant in New York City,” in *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901.) Claghorn was trained at Bryn Mawr College and Yale University, where she earned her Ph.D. After working for the census, she became the Registrar for the New York City Tenement House Commission, producing data on immigration and housing there until 1912. She also authored several books and essays on immigration reform, including the 1912 essay, “The Protection and Distribution of Immigrants,” which argued for the “redirection” of new immigrants to the nation’s hinterlands. See “Miss Kate Claghorn, Housing Authority,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1938 and *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, Volume 2, July 1, 1912.

<sup>50</sup> See Grace Abbott, *The Immigrant and the Community* (New York: The Century Co., 1917); John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1920), 224; Mary Simkhovitch, *The City Worker's World in America* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917.) The latter was part of the “American Social Progress Series” edited by Samuel McCune Lindsay of Columbia University to uncover “the results of the newer social thought and recent scientific investigations of the facts of American social life and institutions.” Regular coverage of the preparations for this report, including interviews with prominent locals, as well as some of the report’s eventual findings appeared in the *New York Times* in the period 1900-1902.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6-11; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.)

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<sup>52</sup> Kate Holladay Claghorn, Maps to accompany "The Foreign Immigrant in New York City" a United States Industrial Commission Report, vol. 15, 1901-2. The ways in which maps such as Claghorn's can mislead viewers through aggregation, categorization, and color-coding are explained in-depth in Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 139-173.

<sup>53</sup> Roy Lubove, "Lawrence Veiller and the Tenement House Commission of 1900," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Mar., 1961), 668-670. After closing in New York in March of 1900, the Exhibition traveled to cities across the United States, making a final international stop at the Paris Exposition.

<sup>54</sup> Tenement House Commission, "Poverty Maps" and "Disease Maps," 1900, New-York Historical Society. The maps are partially reprinted in Veiller and DeForest, *The Tenement House Problem*, as well.

<sup>55</sup> Historians Daniel Soyer and Xinyang Wong have written richly about the role of mutual aid societies in strengthening immigrant communities in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. See Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Xinyang Wong, *Surviving the City: The Chinese Immigrant Experience in New York City* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Immigrant mutual aid societies, trade union headquarters, and other ethnic organizations that may have aided neighborhood residents were not identified on the map, perhaps because in most cases they didn't have entire buildings associated with them.

<sup>57</sup> DeForest and Veiller, 114-5.

<sup>58</sup> For more on the relationship between race and public health policy, see Samuel Roberts, *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.)

<sup>59</sup> Godias J. Drolet and Anthony M. Lowell, "A Half Century's Progress Against Tuberculosis in New York City, 1900-1950" (New York: New York Tuberculosis and Health Association, 1952), iii.

<sup>60</sup> New York Committee on Congestion, *Program*.

<sup>61</sup> Simkhovitch quoted in Martin, 33.

<sup>62</sup> *New York Times*, March 15, 1908.

<sup>63</sup> *Charities and the Commons*, April 4, 1908: 5.

<sup>64</sup> New York Committee on Congestion, *Program*. These questions suggest, of course, that the organizers of the exhibit were just as curious about migrants to the city as immigrants. Yet the overall tone of the exhibit suggested otherwise.

<sup>65</sup> *Federation*, Volume 4, No. 1, 1905: vii.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> This was stated explicitly in a 1906 Federation article on "Manhattan's Populous and Densest Blocks." Author Harold M. Finley wrote: "The rule: *The greater density the greater the percentage alien* is an easy deduction from a study of our 51 populous and dense blocks." (*Federation*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1906: 10.)

<sup>69</sup> Martin, 34. Interestingly, Laidlaw would be credited around this time for influencing the U.S. Census Bureau to create "census tract" units for better measurement of public health issues. Laidlaw's population studies of New York City provide some of the core data on its population

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characteristics, as well. See Nancy Krieger, "A Century of Census Tracts: Health and the Body Politic (1906-2006)," *Journal of Urban Health* (May 2006) 83 (3): 355-361.

<sup>70</sup> That congestion could occur in segregated ethnic neighborhoods outside Lower Manhattan was borne out by the Federation's own analysis of figures from the Tenement House Commission Report of 1902-3. This showed that parts of East Harlem, known as "Little Italy," were just as dense as the Lower East Side. While the Federation believed this proved the connection between congestion and ethnicity, it could just as well prove, among other conclusions, that low-wages led to overcrowding and that immigrants were trapped in a low-wage cycle. (*Federation*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1906: 9.)

<sup>71</sup> Martin, 28.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>73</sup> *New York Times*, March 16, 1908.

<sup>74</sup> Florence Kelley, "Congestion and Sweated Labor," *A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance*, Volume XX, April 4, 1908: 50.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30. According to Charles Edward Russell in his 1908 essay "The Tenements of Trinity Church," Trinity Church still owned property estimated to be worth between \$39 and \$100 million at the turn of the twentieth century. Most of this was located on the Lower West Side of the city, including Greenwich Village. Charles Edward Russell, "The Tenements of Trinity Church," *Everybody's*, 1908. Reprinted in Arthur and Lila Weinberg, eds. *The Muckrakers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 311-318.

<sup>77</sup> *New York Times*, October 16, 1911. This article lists all of the Astor family landholdings.

<sup>78</sup> This line of reasoning did, however, resonate with one *New York Times* reader who had followed the newspaper's daily reports on the exhibit. Henry Law of Mt. Vernon, NY suggested that the exhibit should be followed up not with maps of the congested poor, but rather maps of the "menace of congested wealth." *New York Times*, March 29, 1908.

<sup>79</sup> Shoring up the position of Dr. Laidlaw of the Federation of Churches, as well as that of the Children's Aid Society which long had supported a policy of removal and relocation of tenement-dwellers, was the Industrial Removal Committee of the Jewish Agricultural and Aid Society. This organization, funded by the German-Jewish Baron de Hirsch fund, worked to move new Jewish immigrants from New York to small towns and farms that had been identified as accepting of the immigrants. These included places like Appleton, Wisconsin; Salt Lake City, Utah; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Dubuque, Iowa. In all, the Committee claimed to have "removed" 30,000 people in a six year span between 1901 and 1907. (New York Congestion Committee, "Collection of material relating to the congestion exhibit of 1908") For more on the Baron de Hirsch fund and relocation, see Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants Across America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin C. Marsh, *Introduction to City Planning: Democracy's Challenge to the American City* (New York: Committee on Congestion of Population, 1909), 9. Marsh went on to explain that congestion caused physical deficiencies in the population that could be measured particularly in readiness for military service. The arrival of immigrants in American cities, he suggested, lowered the overall health of the nation because immigrants generally arrived with poor physical constitutions.

<sup>81</sup> Simkhovitch and Wald, together with Jane Addams in Chicago and Robert Woods in Boston, founded the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers in 1911; Veiller and

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DeForest founded the National Housing Association in 1910; and Benjamin Marsh went on to become a war correspondent in the Balkans before returning the U.S. to become what he called "the people's lobbyist" for various social reforms.

<sup>82</sup> Jon A. Peterson, "The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 75, No. 2, Spring 2009: 124.

<sup>83</sup> Carl Smith, *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>84</sup> For an analysis of why poverty relief was not directly included in City Beautiful plans, see Margaret Garb, "Race, Housing, and Burnham's Plan: Why is there no Housing in the 1909 Plan of Chicago?," *Journal of Planning History*, 2011 10: 99.

<sup>85</sup> Peterson, "The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States," 127.

<sup>86</sup> United States Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, *City Planning, Hearing Before the Committee on the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910.)

<sup>87</sup> Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 251.

<sup>88</sup> The timeline should be noted here. The defeat in the executive committee meeting of the National Conference on City Planning occurred on June 2, 1910. The New York City Commission on Congestion of Population was appointed two weeks earlier. One can only assume that the Committee on Congestion of Population had high hopes for both battlefronts, making their ultimate losses all the more painful.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin C. Marsh, *Lobbyist for the People: A Record of Fifty Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1953), 29.

<sup>90</sup> *New-York Tribune*, May 13, 1910.

<sup>91</sup> New York Committee on Congestion, *Program*.

<sup>92</sup> Board, 1910b, quoted in Kantor, 425.

<sup>93</sup> New York City Commission on Congestion of Population, *Report* (New York: New York City Commission on Congestion of Population, 1911), 5.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. To this, he added evidence of mortality from the "Lung Block" on Madison street, calling it "Jewish Block, No. 4."

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-8.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>102</sup> See Stanislaw Makielski, Jr, *The Politics of Zoning: The New York Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) for an excellent overview of the birth of zoning in New York.

<sup>103</sup> Kantor, 424-5.

<sup>104</sup> See Mary Simkhovitch, "Report of Committee on Congestion of Population," Eleventh New York State Conference of Charities and Correction Proceedings (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, State Printers, 1911), 114-121. This gives an overview of the Committee's high hopes for the National City Planning Conference and for the Mayor's Commission.

<sup>105</sup> One might argue that soliciting "insider" testimonials is an ahistorical demand from a reform community that was not likely to use this kind of evidence to make its case. This would not be

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accurate, however. Veiller's and DeForest's *The Tenement House Problem* (1903) includes testimonials from tenement residents. Similarly, Seebohm Rowntree, who led the first study of York, England in 1899 and published his results under the title *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* in 1901, relied on personal interviews with his working class subjects rather than the mediations of middle-class social workers. The latter information appears in Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar, *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective*.

<sup>106</sup> Reverend James B. Curry, "Settlement Work," in *The first American Catholic missionary congress, held under the auspices of the Catholic church extension society of the United States of America* (Chicago: J.S. Hylan and Company, 1909), 155-165.

<sup>107</sup> "Jews Support Father Curry, His Attack in Settlement Workers Justified, Says Lucas," *New York Times*, September 15, 1908. Historians Margaret M. McGuinness, Ruth Crocker, Yaakov Ariel, and Shirley J. Yee note that Curry's opinion was not uncommon either among other religious leaders or the Lower East Side community. See Margaret M. McGuinness, *Neighbors and Missionaries: A History of the Sisters of Our Lady of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 28-29; Yaakov Ariel, "The Evangelist at Our Door: The American Jewish Response to Christian Missionaries, 1880-1920," *American Jewish Archives*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1996); Ruth Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and Shirley J. Yee, *An Immigrant Neighborhood: Interethnic and Interracial Encounters in New York Before 1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), pp. 138-171.

<sup>108</sup> Yee, 165-66.

<sup>109</sup> *New York Times*, April 13, 1908.

<sup>110</sup> *New York Times*, April 14, 1908.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *New York Sun*, April 16, 1908.

<sup>113</sup> For more on the settlement house ideology apart from its more scientific work, see Lillian Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt, 1915); Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910); and Minna Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.) See also footnote 18 on Progressivism. The National Federation of Settlements (NFS), founded in 1911, referred to the neighborhood as a building block of democracy and, therefore, viewed "neighborhood pride" in terms of sustaining community ties, improving community institutions, helping neighbors, and providing opportunities to promote good citizenship. As settlement leader Robert A. Woods, one of the founders of the NSF, explained, "The neighborhood is the vital public arena to the majority of men, to nearly all women and to all children; in which every one of them is a citizen, and many of them, even among the children, are statesmen – as projecting and pushing through plans for its total welfare." Robert A. Woods, "The Neighborhood in Social Reconstruction," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (March, 1914): 579.

<sup>114</sup> Mary Simkhovitch, "Neighborhood and Nation," National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, New York, 1944. Quoted in Wirka, 60. Wirka's essay represents one of a set of pieces from the mid-1990s that attempted to write women back into the early stages of planning history. In most cases, these texts argue that women represented a more small-scale, neighborhood-based planning -- called "City Social" -- that the male-dominated establishment did not embrace. Wirka's specific argument in relation to the Congestion Exhibit rests on material Simkhovitch wrote many years after the CCP dissolved and the American Institute of

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Planners formed, however. I would argue that the "City Social" was not one of Simkhovitch' goals in the CCP and that, however powerful her claims on neighborhood were later, she joined with the CCP in downplaying neighborhood cohesiveness in favor of poverty statistics in these early years of city planning.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Clearing the Slum”

Between 1931 and 1939, the years during which he served as the Secretary of the East Side Chamber of Commerce representing the business interests of the Lower East Side, housing advocate Joseph Platzker took regular strolls through the streets where he worked. In a regular column in the Chamber’s monthly periodical, the *East Side Chamber News*, Platzker would share his observations of street and commercial life. Around Tompkins Square in January of 1931, for example, he noted that several “bohemians” who had been priced out of Greenwich Village found cheaper lodgings in remodeled rear houses renting for between \$16 and \$27 per month. Five months later, Platzker walked an estimated 29 ½ miles through the 85 thoroughfares of the Lower East Side from Catherine to Fourteenth Street, Bowery and Third Avenue to the river, hoping to count each and every shop in the neighborhood. He concluded after this epic journey that 12,764 stores existed on the Lower East Side and that 14% of them were vacant. While this latter figure was relatively high as the new Depression settled in, he found it to be of only mild concern: with just under 10,000 active merchants, the collaboration of the East Side Chamber of Commerce (ESCC) with the Regional Plan Association (RPA) through its own Lower East Side Planning Association, and an ongoing faith that higher income New Yorkers would “discover” the Lower East Side and transform it with their dollars and genteel character, Platzker heartily believe that the neighborhood was on the precipice of momentous change.<sup>1</sup> As one pre-Depression issue of the *East Side Chamber News* declared, newcomers to the neighborhood were already “gradually converting the East Side of alien congestion into the American community

that tallies with the general metropolitan standard. It will soon be truly said: Exit, East Side: Enter Greater New York.”<sup>2</sup>

Platzker and the ESCC were not alone in peering across the tenement- and vacant-lot-strewn landscapes of the Lower East Side in the early 1930s to imagine a reunion of the Lower East Side with the rest of the city. The RPA had begun considering the area for redevelopment as early as 1921 when the organization was first formed. Tenant groups, aided and often comprised of members of the radical left, also saw the Lower East Side as a potential site for new experiments in modern social housing. Social reformers such as Lillian Wald, who still served as head of Henry Street Settlement, also lodged her support for investment in new construction in the neighborhood. Soon, even city government, which had been slow-moving decades before with the New York City Commission on Congestion of Population, began to engage in its own attempts to construct a new, less problematic, Lower East Side. Those who had long encouraged a clean slate approach to the area through demolition and reconstruction were finally edging toward the culmination of a dream.

For each group, redevelopment of the Lower East Side was expected to achieve a different ideological end. For planners working on behalf of the RPA, it meant the spatial integration of the alien Lower East Side into the city center, placing it in proper relationship as a residential feeder district to the financial engines of Wall Street. In a similar vein, the ESCC and Lower East Side Planning Association envisioned redevelopment as a realization of this broader goal, but with the added advantage of retaining the neighborhood’s rising middle-class and attracting new investment. Rather than reinventing the Lower East Side completely, however, the ESCC and Lower East Side Planning Association hoped modernization of the space would be done on behalf of the neighborhood’s most attractive commercial and residential inhabitants and

like-minded potential newcomers. In other words, for these organizations, the new Lower East Side would be a middle-class one, rescued from association with its poverty-inflected past. In contrast, the radical tenant organizations, which also lobbied for redevelopment and modernization of the Lower East Side, hoped to preserve the area for its working class residents and improve their dire living conditions. Horrified, as so many generations of reformers, planners, and residents had been, by the deteriorating housing and lack of amenities such as steam heat and adequate sanitation that working class and poor Lower East Siders endured, radical tenant organizations demanded federal, state, and municipal investment in publicly funded housing to replace the tenements of yesteryear. Modern, efficient, and sanitary housing, the argument went, would not only improve the physical environment of the poor and working class; it would also cultivate active citizenship, which heretofore suffered in the morass of narrow, rotting, and abandoned neighborhood spaces. Social reformers tended to support this theory, though they were not immune to the idea of enticing the gentry into the neighborhood – or training its working class in genteel habits – when possible as well.

Although driven by different ambitions and agendas, however, the ultimate physical result for groups ranging from local business owners to housing-focused members of the Popular Front was to conquer the frontier of the alien Lower East Side -- the ultimate slum -- and recreate it in an image that satisfied each group's distinct vision for the modern American city. While many Lower East Siders themselves affiliated with the ESCC, the City-Wide Tenants Council, and various other organizations involved in the project to redevelop the Lower East Side, there is no evidence that any of these locals hoped to work toward the goal of actually displacing *themselves* from the area. Indeed, attachments to the Lower East Side neighborhood in spite of its many failings abounded even among those who wished to redevelop it. So, too, did examples

of residents who never publicly agitated for change and still hoped to remain in the neighborhood. Yet eventual displacement and population turnover were, in fact, the ultimate outcome for many. Thus, while a new blend of both “outsiders” in the form of professional planners and political leaders and “insiders” in the form of tenant organizations, the local chamber of commerce, and neighborhood leaders collaborated to replace the alien Lower East Side with a modern utopia of their own, they took little account of the individual and familial networks, as well as place attachments, that existed below the surface of the neighborhood’s built environment. By pledging excessive fealty to the technologies of large-scale urban planning as a means for conquering the apparent atavisms of the Lower East Side and paying little heed to the organic networks that supported the life of the neighborhood, planning groups failed to bring about any of the lasting progress they sought. Like the scientifically-minded social reformers who preceded these Depression-era technocrats, the result of their efforts was not relief from the poverty that plagued the Lower East Side, but rather a rekindling of it. Similarly for tenant organizations and the reformers who agreed with them, the crusade for low-income housing rarely resulted in securing residents’ rights to decent homes where they already lived, but rather fueled the exodus – either chosen or forced – of long-time Lower East Siders from their neighborhood.

This chapter examines the specific plans and visions of each of these groups and compares them to the on-the-ground experiences of residents. Through a shared language that emphasized the area’s terminal obsolescence, the RPA, the ESCC through the Lower East Side Planning Association, the City-Wide Tenants Council, the newly-formed City Planning Commission, and New York City Housing Authority laid the groundwork for a revived Lower East Side that would embrace rational, scientific solutions to the spatial problems of

poverty. With modern and sanitary housing, green spaces, and broader boulevards, these groups hoped to fashion a neighborhood that would rise from the urban wilderness and rejoin the rest of the city as an integral component of its functioning landscape. Central to this idea was not just a reinvention of the area's built environment, but of its alien residents as well. Various referred to as "backwards" or "foreign," or in one case even "maladjusted defectives," the residents of the Lower East Side were as much a part of reforming the neighborhood as its physical spaces were. Yet not every Lower East Sider saw the benefit of these new plans. For many, in fact, a modernized neighborhood meant a sanitized one, depleted of its social and economic structures, as well as its most essential component: its people.<sup>3</sup>

### **White Collars**

With a one million dollar investment from the Russell Sage Foundation, which had financed the Pittsburgh Survey, the Congestion Exhibit, and the first National Conference on City Planning, as well as funding from the Rockefeller and Pratt families, the RPA was organized in 1921 by bank president and 1916 Zoning Ordinance Commission alum, Charles Dyer Norton. Unsettled by the limited reach of zoning in effecting massive regional development, Norton pulled together an array of planners and business leaders to provide a blueprint for the next several decades of New York City's expansion.<sup>4</sup> His staff included former colleagues from the Zoning Commission such as George B. Ford, who had contributed a chapter on the "Technical Phases of City Planning" to Benjamin Marsh's 1909 *Introduction to City Planning* (see Chapter 2); Lawson Purdy, former director of the Charity Organization Society; and engineer, Harold M. Lewis. Planners Lawrence M. Orton and Harland Bartholomew, who would later work with the Lower East Side Planning Association, also participated.<sup>5</sup> Rounding

out the RPA were board members George McAneny, former mayor of New York, railroad magnates Dwight Morrow and Frederic Delano, and philanthropist and former Tenement House Commissioner, Robert DeForest, among others.

Decentralization – or decongestion, as it was also described -- of industry and redistribution of population through the construction of extensive transportation routes, such as railroads, tunnels, and highways, was the RPA's priority. It expected that the kind of congestion in Manhattan identified by the Committee on Congestion of Population decades before would also decrease organically as working families moved to the new, distant industrial zones. Such notions, in fact, reflected the suggestions made at the Congestion Exhibit by organizations such as the Federation of Churches or the Committee on Congestion of Population itself, both of which had argued for the relocation of workers and factories to less expensive, undeveloped land. Indeed, Volume I of the RPA's ten-volume plan published in 1929, which envisioned regional change through 1969, argued that industry was already moving to the outskirts of the metropolitan area due to lower land costs and that the population loss in working-class areas of Manhattan might be attributable to the movement of manufacturing jobs. Volume II of the study suggested that more efficient and well-placed transportation, ranging from highways to subways, would invigorate the move of industry out of the city's center and into regions that had yet to be planned or over-speculated.<sup>6</sup> Such routes would only assist a healthy process of relocation already underway. McAneny made the point even more explicit in a July 7, 1929 *New York Times* editorial, explaining that, "We can pay ample attention to natural beauty, to recreational facilities, and to finding for workers attractive homes not too far from their jobs. We can do all these things and still give industry ample space for growth" –if only industry and industrial workers such as those who inhabited the Lower East Side moved out of Manhattan. Ostensibly

for the benefit of the entire metropolitan region, then, removal of manufacturing to the furthest reaches of the region would allow for the best use of space at the least cost -- a conclusion the more prescient of manufacturers, McAneny argued, had already settled upon.<sup>7</sup>

To further illustrate its vision and demonstrate how beneficial this kind of reorganization would be, the RPA published a regional map, showing what proper development would look like if viewed abstractly as a series of economic zones. While other maps plotting out highways and parks, rapid transit lines and hiking trails were available in the report, this kind of zone-based mapping was relatively new for the 1920s, since zoning and regional planning were still in their infancy. Similarly, because the plan was intended to serve the region for the next thirty-six years and could not rely on time-limited data, maps required some flexibility, allowing for broad strokes more often than minute detail. Thus, even though it was supported by reams of the same kind of social science research that provided evidence for earlier planning attempts such as the zoning ordinance and tenement house legislation, the Regional Plan of New York required maps that took into account a more expansive vision.

At the same time, however, such maps left little doubt about the basic objectives of the plan, as the diagram of three concentric zones shows. An outer ring in which workers would be able to live in beautifully planned, spacious surroundings, close to the factories that employed them was located twenty miles from the city's center, radiating from Manhattan's City Hall. The innermost ring, or "metropolitan loop," would extend fourteen miles from the center and would be organized around a "FIRE economy," one built upon the finance, insurance, and real estate sectors. The map made clear that, unlike the reformers who had hoped to eliminate slums and congestion by moving industry out of Manhattan, the RPA put its emphasis not simply on decongestion of population, but on reorganization of the economy. Essentially, the RPA's plan

was to deindustrialize Manhattan and replace factories with white collar, service-based industries. Following logically from this vision, the inner circle would need to provide housing and amenities for a class of New Yorkers employed in white collar sectors. Sections of the city that did not already offer these comforts were eyed for clearance and rebuilding. In other words, as historian Robert Fishman put it, “The plan thus envisioned the gentrification of Manhattan and the deindustrialization of the region as a single coordinated project.”<sup>8</sup>

With its proximity to the city’s center and its long-accepted reputation as a misused and alien space in the city, the Lower East Side was in the cross-hairs of the RPA almost from the start. At a May 1922 meeting of the Sage Foundation committee that would later appoint the RPA, Lillian Wald of the Lower East Side’s Henry Street Settlement was invited to speak on behalf of a regional plan. She spoke of the need for such a plan to “make impossible the further growth of segregated, ugly quarters for racial groups or economic classes.” She argued that “decent homes” and “wholesome recreation” and “proximity to employment” were the desires of all, especially the low-income parents with whom she worked. Adding poignancy to this plea, she shared the story of a young girl who frequented Henry Street Settlement and was enamored of the sight of the Woolworth Building in the distance: she “saw the beautiful building in the sunset light and, all unconsciously comparing that shining vision with the ugly, overcrowded, unclean, garbage-decorated houses about her, and obviously awed by the sight, exclaimed ‘Does God live there?’”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Wald implied, a regional plan had the potential to rid New York of such heartbreaking stories of congestion and poverty.

Yet the *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* of 1929 was not particularly committed to rewarding slum residents such as Wald’s young acolyte with “decent homes” and other boons of modern planning *in their own neighborhoods*. While the plan did not include a

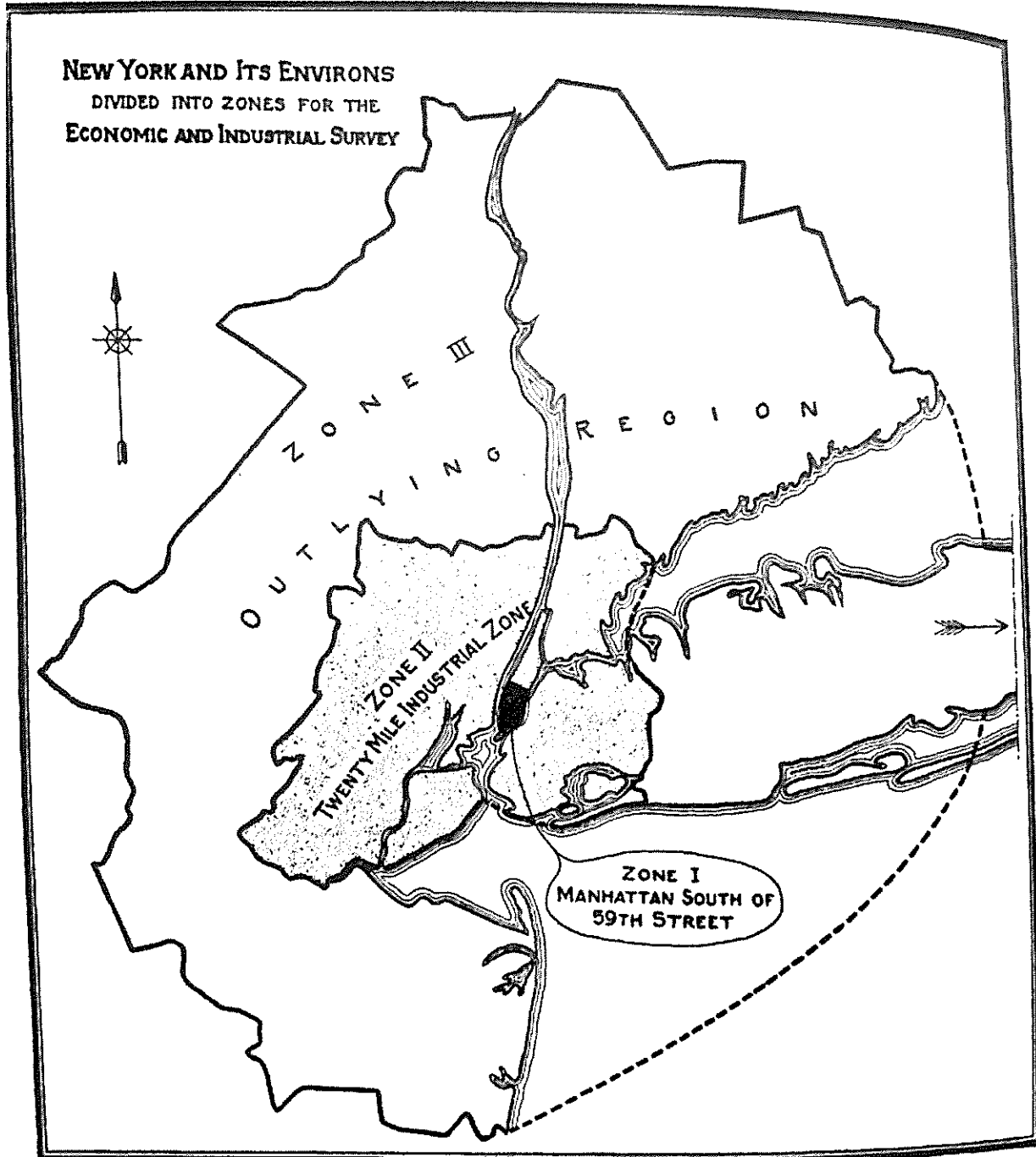


Fig. 11: The Regional Plan Association's economic zones.  
 Reprinted from the Regional Survey, Vol. 1, "Major Economic  
 Factors" in Robert Fishman, p. 108.

detailed guide for the removal of low-income and working class slum dwellers to the outer ring of the region, it did offer a precise vision of what the Lower East Side was to become. The neighborhood was to “attract new residents” and be made ready -- presumably through clearance -- for “remapping and reconstruction.”<sup>10</sup> While lip service was paid to the provision of low-cost housing and even to unidentified “industries [that] would naturally tend to remain in this district,” the emphasis in the plan was for “high class residences” and the kinds of amenities that would be associated with them.<sup>11</sup> To support this newly designed neighborhood, the RPA proposed an East River Boulevard marching from Grand to Fourteenth Streets that would make the waterfront available to residents for leisure activity and redefine its industrial character as a working waterfront. Where seven blocks of tenement housing stood below Houston and between Chrystie and Forsyth Streets, the RPA proposed not the low-income housing that was slated to replace the demolished homes, but a “sunken roadway in Second Avenue extended south to the Manhattan Bridge and Civic Center by a parkway.” This parkway would serve as the tail-end of a “speedway” originating at the Harlem River and stretching along Second Avenue.<sup>12</sup> Such ideas expressed well the words of the RPA’s chief economist, Robert Haig, who, frustrated, pointed out that “Some of the poorest people live in conveniently located slums on high-priced land...Such a situation outrages one’s sense of order. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to rearrange things to put things where they belong.”<sup>13</sup> With the proximity of the Lower East Side to the Lower Manhattan business district, miles of waterfront, and slum housing, it was only right, the RPA believed, to tear down what was there and build anew – or at least provide a high-speed expressway that would whiz past its unsightly scenery.<sup>14</sup>

The RPA, though commanding in its role in reorganizing New York and its surrounding area, was not alone in promoting the image of a Lower East Side made attractive for new

residents. Indeed, the RPA had relied on the ESCC and its close cousin, the Lower East Side Planning Association (they shared membership), to provide ground surveys and detailed studies proving that the area required redevelopment. The January 1931 issue of the *East Side Chamber News*, in fact, praised the RPA for its “spirit of cooperation” in working with the ESCC to “support...proposals for the re-creation of the lower East Side as an attractive residential district,” while the RPA cited the ESCC in its own materials<sup>15</sup>

As the mouthpiece for Lower East Side business interests, including bankers, builders, manufacturers, and some landholders, the goal of the ESCC was the transformation of the Lower East Side from stagnating slum to modern village. As early as 1928, Joseph Platzker argued that the residents of the Lower East Side currently paying a low price of \$5 per room per month “would pay an increased rental from 50 to 125 per cent if apartments could be obtained for them in the section with baths, steam heat and sunlight.”<sup>16</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average New Yorker paid \$32 per month for apartments with four or fewer rooms in 1930, meaning the rent per room would range from \$8 to \$16 per room depending on its size.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Platzker was estimating that a substantial number of Lower East Siders were willing to pay average or better prices for their housing. Moreover, anyone who would argue that more housing in the \$4 to \$5 dollar per room per month range was necessary was mistaken: “The east side vigorously resents the stamp of charity so many individuals are trying to place upon it,” he argued. Indeed, “the people of the east side, considering their numbers and their aggregate earning power, have more money in the savings banks of the section than those of any similar group in other parts of New York.”<sup>18</sup> In Platzker’s opinion, a renovated Lower East Side might be populated by the people who already lived there, if only the shabby tenements could be replaced by newer buildings. Citing an increase in housing inquiries from locals at his office and

the upcoming displacement of hundreds of families with the widening of Houston Street and the addition of new subway stations, Platzker was confident that builders would make a profit off rental apartments ranging in price from \$15 to \$20 per room per month. The construction of more middle-class developments like the Ageloff Towers on Avenue A between Third and Fourth Street, as well as the promised construction of a sixteen-story apartment building on Second Avenue and Tenth Street, were also evidence, Platzker would argue, that Lower East Siders wanted better housing for higher-income tenants, either newcomers or old-timers. When the Ageloff Towers finally opened, the *East Side Chamber News* reported in September 1928, “10,000 East Siders” attended the unveiling ceremony, while the streets were bedecked with streamers and flags.<sup>19</sup>

Others would make a similar argument, emphasizing a desire not for newcomers, but for the stabilization of upwardly mobile, long-time Lower East Siders. In some ways this approach had the dual purpose of upgrading the Lower East Side’s reputation, while also preserving community ties that developed across lines of class, religion, and ethnicity. Edward A Lahm of the Citizens Savings Bank, who would also serve on the board of the Lower East Side Planning Association, commented in 1928 that builders needed to work to “bring back to the East Side those who have moved away because of the poor, dilapidated, and antiquated houses for better ones elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup> Housing advocate Loula Lasker, an associate editor of the social welfare journal, *The Survey*, proclaimed in 1931 that the Lower East Side “must no longer lose its people who prosper.” Already, she noted, “Thousands of residents have left the district. Thousands will follow them. Once they achieve financial responsibility, East Siders are no longer willing to put up with intolerable conditions.” While Lasker was not opposed to “an influx of a population much higher in the economic scale” on the Lower East Side, she hoped, like Lahm, that the

area's "regeneration" would be just as strengthened by its own middle-class residents.<sup>21</sup> Neither, of course, paid particular attention to the Lower East Side's majority population – its poor.

Yet Lasker's assertion in mid-1931 – three years after Lahm's and nearly two years after the Wall Street crash – was oddly dissonant with the times. During the winter of 1930-31, for example, all private charitable resources in the city were exhausted by the rising need for relief.<sup>22</sup> A neighborhood survey conducted by Henry Street Settlement that winter revealed that 25 percent of all families studied contained no employed members and another 30 percent depended on only two or three days of work per week.<sup>23</sup> While other social reformers, like Lillian Wald at Henry Street would bemoan that "it was almost unbelievable, the misery of the jobless masses" that year, Lasker's optimistic tone seemed to deny that a Depression was underway.<sup>24</sup>

Platzker and the rest of the ESCC shared this increasingly mistaken confidence, still believing much would be gained by encouraging more white-collar growth on the Lower East Side. In the July 1931 issue of the *East Side Chamber News* – the same month Lasker published her article in the *The Survey* -- Platzker argued that "The development of a good part of this section as a real walk-to-work district for employees in the financial district and the civic center should be the slogan of local business men."<sup>25</sup> Six months later in January 1932, Daniel J. Brogan, Chairman of the ESCC's Zoning Committee, made a similar argument: to relieve the neighborhood of its dark alleys, lack of open space, and deterioration, "it will be necessary practically to rebuild the entire area" to make way for the "utilitarian points of view" represented by proximity to the waterfront, City Hall, and transportation.<sup>26</sup>

The position of the ESCC was further bolstered by reports from the Lower East Side Planning Association, which were regularly presented by the Association's chair, Orrin C. Lester, in the ESCC newsletter. Vice President of Bowery Savings Bank Lester, along with

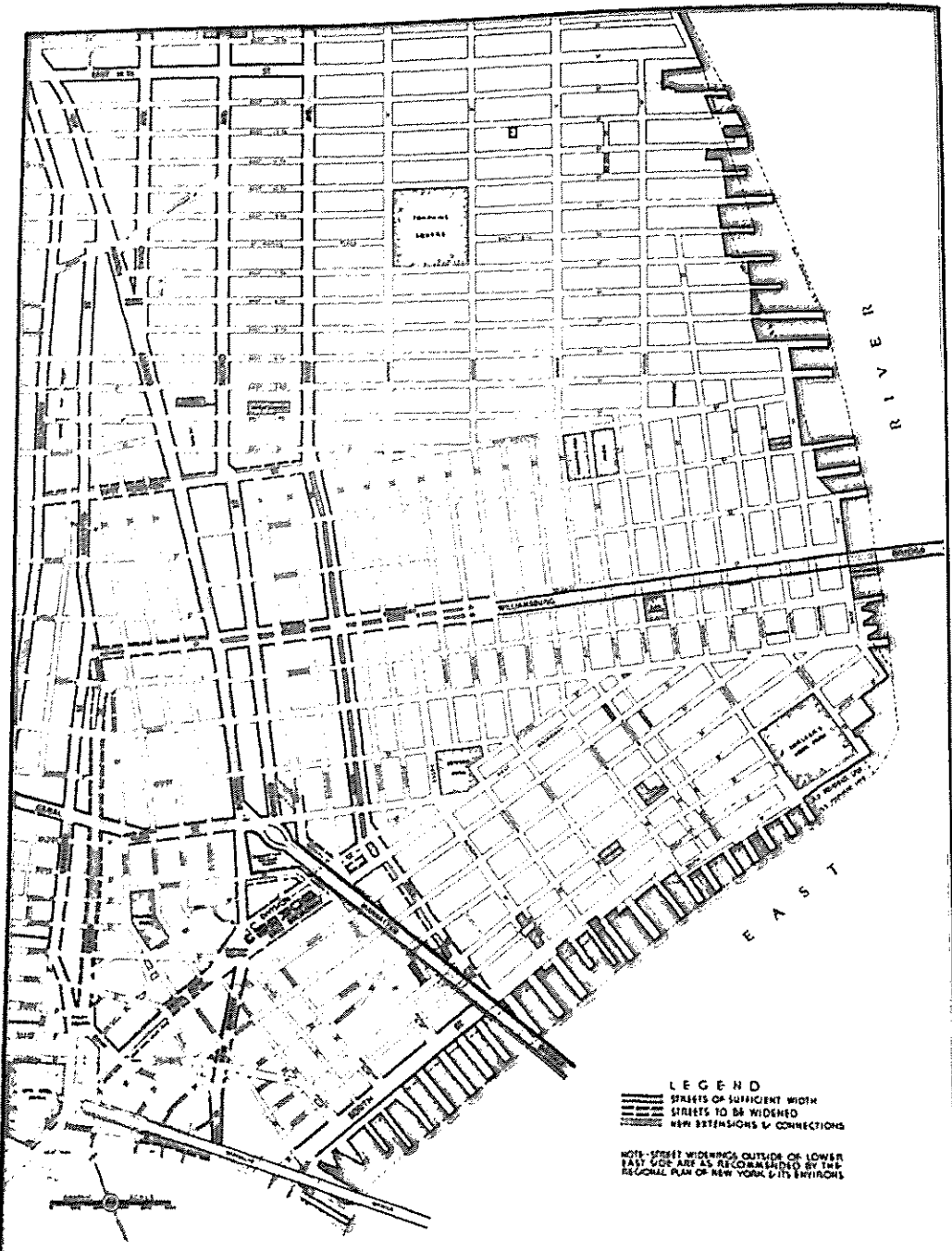
leaders of the other neighborhood banks including Emigrant Savings, Dry Dock, Citizens, and Metropolitan Savings, as well as members of other commercial groups and Henry Street Settlement director, Lillian Wald, created the Lower East Side Planning Association to consult from a local point of view on the grander plans of organizations such as the RPA. Just as the RPA had done, the Lower East Side Planning Association pushed an agenda for the Lower East Side that required complete reconstruction of the area. “It is obvious to anyone familiar with the Lower East Side,” wrote Lester, “that this section must undergo a complete change....The task of rebuilding the Lower East Side should be undertaken as if it were a new development.”<sup>27</sup> For its 1932 report on “Major Traffic Thoroughfares and Transit Plans,” the Association hired noted planner Harland Bartholomew and his company to produce a workable city plan for the area. Bartholomew had recently consulted on the Regional Plan of New York and was noted for co-authoring the Plan for the Los Angeles Region in 1930. According to historian Joseph Heathcott, Bartholomew was also influenced greatly by Benjamin Marsh and “regarded the end result of his endeavors not solely or even primarily in terms of beauty but in terms of efficiency, rationality, and practicality in service of a transcendent common good.”<sup>28</sup> The value of planning the comparatively small Lower East Side for a city and regional planning technocrat like Bartholomew was to integrate it into a larger “corporate body” that would join the interests of the neighborhood with the city at-large.<sup>29</sup> Like the ESCC and social reformers before it, Bartholomew’s goal was to reclaim the alien space of the Lower East Side as a central component of the city as a whole.

Providing data for Bartholomew were Platzker’s own studies of the neighborhood for the ESCC, as well as a special report on traffic patterns from the New York-based architectural firm Holden, McLaughlin, and Associates, also commissioned by the ESCC. So “community-based”

and thorough were the data purported to be that Bartholomew even credited the Boy Scouts who met at the Educational Alliance settlement house for providing him with accurate traffic counts on the Lower East Side's streets.<sup>30</sup>

Bartholomew concurred that the Lower East Side was alluringly located and that its geography was sorely underutilized. "It is located on a prominence which juts out into the East River and is east of and away from the major commercial and business districts extending along the axis of Manhattan Island," he explained. This protected pocket of land, separated but not disconnected from commerce "[is] convenient to all centers either by walking or surface transit facilities, obviating the use of subways." Moreover, the area, while too large to "be absorbed entirely by high-income groups" – a notion he felt worthy of consideration – was also too economically diverse to plan for only one type of housing. As he put it, "there appears to be no basic social or other reason for attempting to accommodate any particular income group of the population."<sup>31</sup> What the Lower East Side needed, then, was a plan akin to the one used to construct Tudor City, a limited-dividend project for white-collar office workers financed by developer, Fred F. French, on land acquired in the East 40s of Manhattan. That development offered what Bartholomew described as "close-in dwelling units," housing that provided for optimum density -- neither too sparse nor too congested -- and access to recreation, business, and commerce.<sup>32</sup> Tudor City offered an 18-hole miniature golf course and acres of landscaped lawns as well. Two years after Bartholomew's report was submitted, and perhaps to his delight, French himself would be breaking ground on a Lower East Side project of similar layout (minus the golf course) called Knickerbocker Village. While intended for a professional class of more modest means, Knickerbocker Village was to serve as a model for how building placement and open, green space might be arranged for optimally "sanitary and healthful living quarters."<sup>33</sup>

The mechanics of Bartholomew's plan for the Lower East Side Planning Association, which he presented with resounding success to the ESCC on May 4, 1932, were essentially no different from the recommendations of the ESCC or the RPA. He called for a rezoning of the area to secure it solely for residential usage, removing all waterfront industry. Streets were to be straightened to clarify the area's grid and remove all trace of the distinct colonial farms that had once characterized the area. Pushcarts, a fundamental source of commerce in the neighborhood, were to be removed and major thoroughfares were to be widened. Public bath houses would be demolished as well. Most importantly, building on the proposals of architect, John Taylor Boyd, who borrowed from RPA architect Clarence Perry's designs, was the self-contained "neighborhood unit." This rationally organized plot of land, varying in size from 4.4 to 51.5 acres, was to replace the existing, apparently chaotic Lower East Side neighborhood with an organized set of interlocking, self-sufficient pieces. In one example of a neighborhood unit model for the Lower East Side, Boyd suggested a series of twelve-story, fireproof residential buildings covering about sixty percent of the unit area. Each apartment would cost a maximum of \$18 a room per month to allow for investment profit to developers.<sup>34</sup> Interior pathways would link buildings together, but outside traffic would be blocked off. Shops, theaters, garages, pedestrian traffic, schools, and playgrounds would allow for community feeling. Most importantly, the highly functioning, enclosed unit would promote commitment to good and healthy "citizenship building," which would itself "slow obsolescence."<sup>35</sup> Reconstruction along the lines proposed by Bartholomew in service to the Lower East Side Planning Association and the ESCC, then, would result in the most scientific and efficient use of space the area had ever experienced, as well as the material conditions for better citizenship practices.

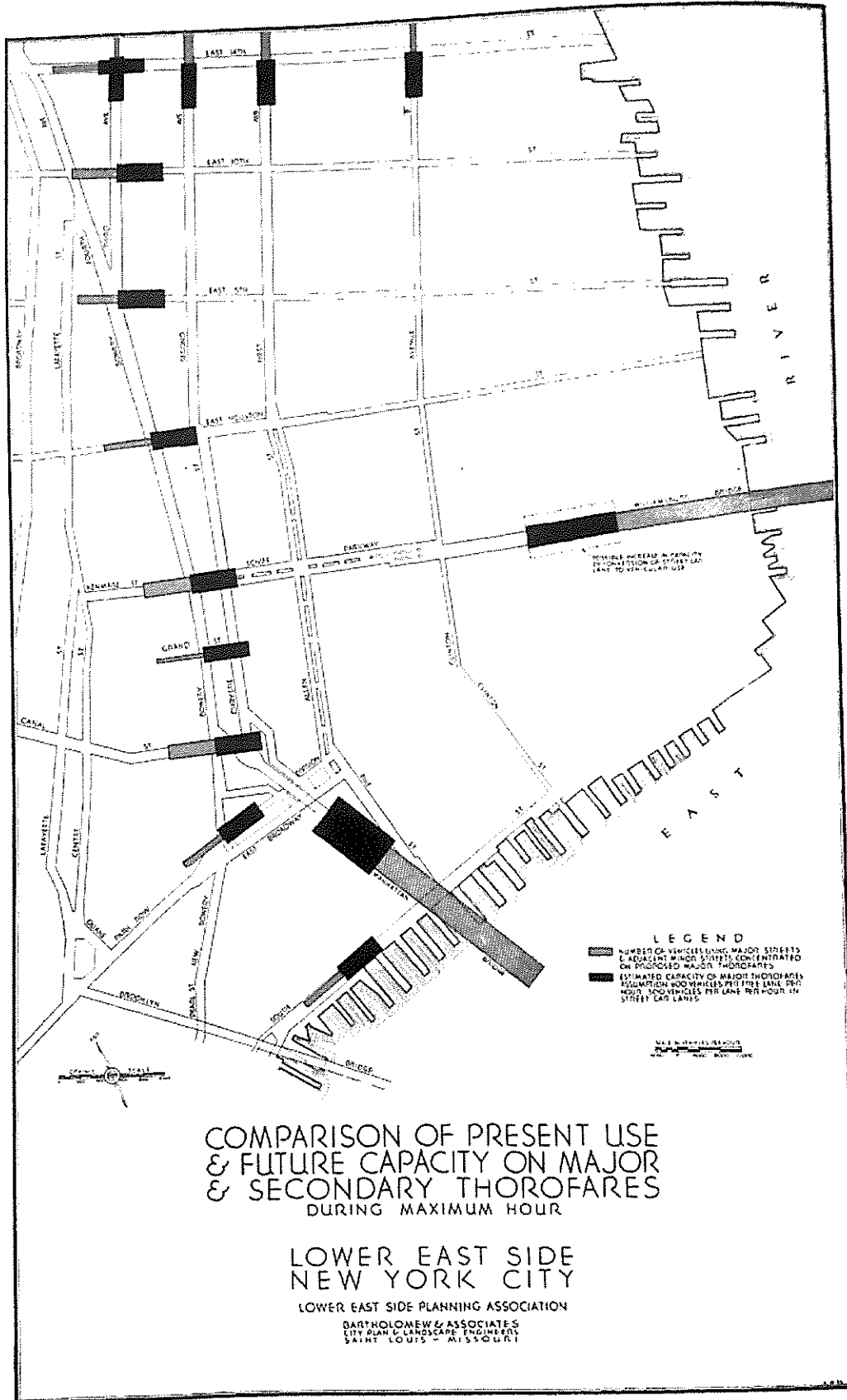


MAJOR TRAFFIC THOROFARES  
THROUGH THE DISTRICT

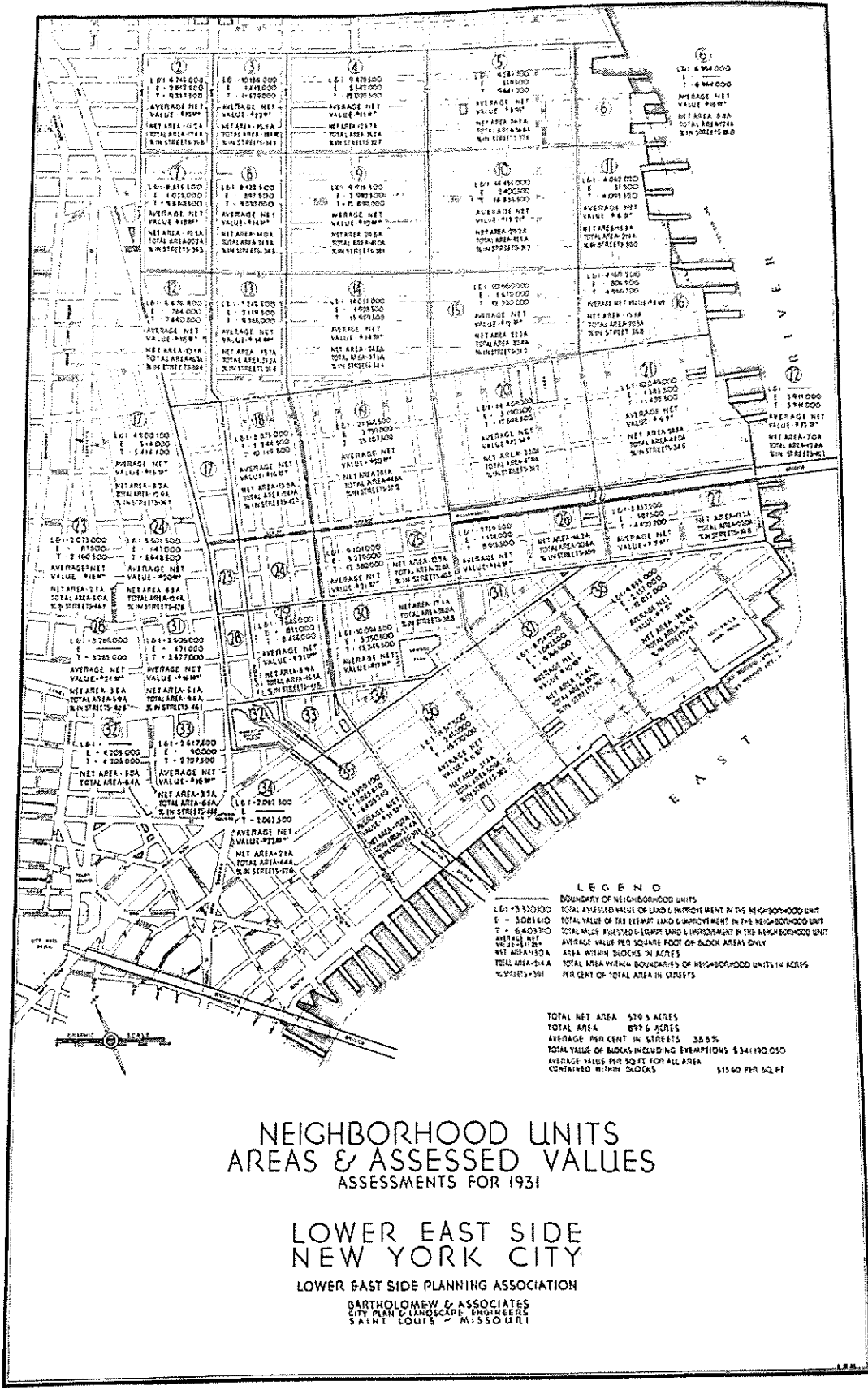
LOWER EAST SIDE  
NEW YORK CITY

LOWER EAST SIDE PLANNING ASSOCIATION

BAROLOMEO & ASSOCIATES  
CITY AND COUNCIL PLANNERS  
147 N. 5TH ST. - NEW YORK



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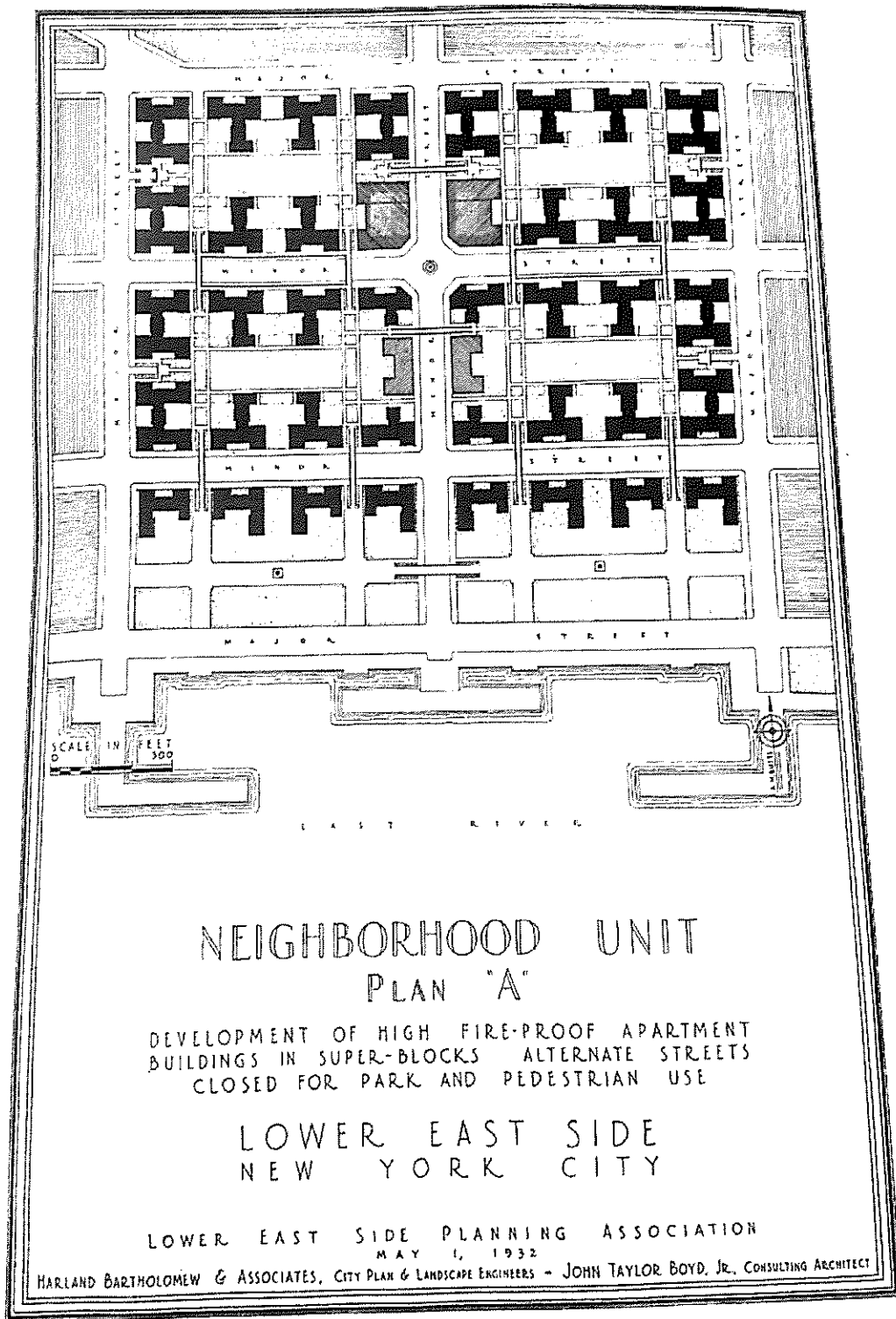


**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITS  
AREAS & ASSESSED VALUES  
ASSESSMENTS FOR 1931**

**LOWER EAST SIDE  
NEW YORK CITY**

LOWER EAST SIDE PLANNING ASSOCIATION

BARTHOLOMEW & ASSOCIATES  
CITY PLAN & LANDSCAPE ENGINEERS  
SAINT LOUIS - MISSOURI



Figs. 12-15: Maps taken from "Major Traffic Thoroughfares..." by Harland Bartholomew. These show how traffic would be redesigned and the layout of the Neighborhood Unit scheme.

Even the ESCC, however, did not have consensus on adopting such a radical plan. While the ESCC was generally in agreement with the proposals of the Lower East Side Planning Association and supported wholeheartedly the RPA's agenda for turning the Lower East Side into a feeder neighborhood for the city's FIRE economy employees, not all of its members were in favor of the complete demolition and reconstruction of Lower East Side properties. Partly, this was due to its desire to represent small business owners who fretted that they may be shut out of the new plans. Additionally, the ESCC hoped to represent Lower East Side property owners -- including those who owned tenements. The ESCC itself had found that the average 200x400 square foot block had at least twenty owners in 1931.<sup>36</sup> Eleven years later, a group of New York University researchers under the supervision of the Committee on Taxation of the Citizens' Council on Housing, found that in a sample of twenty-five Lower East Side blocks, 56.1% of its buildings were owned by individuals, most of whom lived on the Lower East Side. Slightly more than 25% were owned by real estate and property holding corporations, and 5 to 6% were owned by banks and insurance companies, in some cases presumably because they were the mortgage holders on the properties.<sup>37</sup> Property owners were not necessarily opposed to reconstruction projects of the kind the Lower East Side Planning Association and the RPA were proposing, but far more important than rebuilding the Lower East Side to this constituency was stabilizing or increasing profit. Those who owned property expected serious compensation if they were to relinquish their investments. The ESCC was well aware of this position.

Perhaps for this reason or because the Depression was clearly having an impact on the area's residents and its planning prospects, the tone of the ESCC's argument for redevelopment began to change almost immediately after Bartholomew's plan was unveiled. Between June of 1932, a month after Bartholomew presented his ideas to the ESCC, and the fall of that year,

Edward Lahm of the Citizens' Savings Bank, Acting Tenement House Commissioner, John P. Finnerty, architect William I. Hohausser, and Platzker himself all proposed cooperative block renovations – a gathering of owners to finance the renovation of their own tenements – as a means for rebuilding the Lower East Side, rather than adopting the grand and increasingly fantastic vision of the Lower East Side Planning Association. Platzker even wondered aloud on the pages of *East Side Chamber News* if a *combination* of Perry-style neighborhood units, as proposed by Bartholomew, and block renovations would be the best solution for redevelopment. "Let us think to improve and rebuild the Lower East Side for happy families that can save a little money regularly for future emergencies," he wrote, suggesting that a rental per room per month of between \$9 and \$12 for renovated apartments and \$12 to \$15 for neighborhood unit buildings would be more ideal than the \$18 estimate Bartholomew had made.<sup>38</sup> By September of 1932, Orrin Lester of the Lower East Side Planning Association, was publicly supporting this more pragmatic approach: "If...the East Side Chamber of Commerce is contemplating that property owners, lending institutions, and other interested agencies can be brought together on a cooperative arrangement for a centralized and well planned remodeling job, it should serve the double purpose of providing in that particular block or area better housing and more modern places of business, as well as to set a new standard for remodeling activities in the future."<sup>39</sup> Even these plans, when tried, however, tended to reward a more middle-class clientele. A study sponsored by the Henry Street Settlement in the mid-1930s of 54 remodeled Lower East Side tenements found that renovated apartments rented for around \$13 to \$15 per room per month – above Platzker's estimated range – and that this was about three times more than the apartments had cost before renovation. In one renovated building on Grand Street, rents similarly tripled, and "not a single old resident moved back in." Rather, "all the tenants here were young business

or professional people.”<sup>40</sup> Depression, therefore, while sharply reducing the ambitious schemes of the Lower East Side Planning Association, did not necessarily result in a modified vision of who might live on a renovated Lower East Side.

By 1934, however, after enduring the worst year of the Depression yet, Platzker began to write editorials in the *East Side Chamber News* that called for a different kind of development. While not abandoning plans for more middle-class housing or for zoning that would upgrade the waterfront for more leisurely pursuits, Platzker and the ESCC suggested that industry and industrial workers, indeed, would continue to have a place on the Lower East Side -- a clear contrast not only to his own rhetoric, but to the position of the RPA. “If the Lower East Side’s future could be developed along somewhat ideal lines,” Platzker wrote, “this 1 ½ square mile area would be broken up into six little villages -- each housing 10,000 families -- a jobbing and wholesale center and an industrial center.”<sup>41</sup> The Bowery, he argued, had been long associated with the Lower East Side and would serve as “the logical location of a central jobbing and wholesale center for trades.” Moreover, publicly-funded, low-income housing, which was being proposed by the newly-formed New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), would be a welcome addition to the modernizing neighborhood. By January of 1934, in fact, Platzker was working with soon-to-be NYCHA-head Langdon Post and other housing experts on the Slum Clearance Committee (see below) to begin investigating slum areas that should be cleared and replaced with “low-cost apartments.” The entire Lower East Side, with Platzker’s expert assistance, was designated early on as one of the slums to receive this treatment.<sup>42</sup> While the Lower East Side would not see its first low-income housing project until 1935 -- and would not be the first area to be chosen for one -- Platzker’s influence was undoubtedly powerful.<sup>43</sup> That the ESCC had evolved from its original, pre-Depression vision of a white collar village to one of

mixed-use neighborhood units and low-income public housing testified not to its lack of ambition or commitment, but to the politics of housing development in the depths of a Depression economy. Indeed, if the government would provide funds to conquer, modernize, and reintegrate the wilderness of the Lower East Side's decaying spaces, then the ESCC and Joseph Platzker were all too willing to assist, even if it meant putting its white collar fantasies on hold.

### **Emptiness and Obsolescence**

Jumpstarting the race to remake the Lower East Side was a discourse of obsolescence and emptiness that targeted the area as wholly ripe for reinvention. The notion that the Lower East Side was obsolete was, of course, one with a long history. Florence Kelley and Mary Simkhovitch had said as much at the Congestion Exhibit (Chapter 2) and Jacob Riis had built a career on the area's obsolescence in the 1880s and '90s. Decades before, Sanitary Inspector Ezra Pulling, too, had made the point that the Fourth Ward of the Lower East Side was a "domain of pestilence" and that constructing new, "hygienic" housing there would be "the proudest work of which our imperial city could boast." (Chapter 1) Yet the ways in which obsolescence was invoked in the Depression era differed from these earlier sentiments, if not in substance, then in presentation. Ethnic folkways and habits were still cast as primitive and, at times, even pathological. The physical environment of failing tenements and lack of green space were also noted, as usual, as a menace to the city. Now, however, with the technologies of urban planning and the agencies to back them up, obsolete behaviors were understood as improvable through modernized and regulated housing and streets, while obsolete blocks of tenements could be replaced by blueprints and bureaucratic plans for clearance and reconstruction. "Obsolescence"

and “blight,” in other words, were not simply sensational or aggrieved words; they now had technical meaning that was accompanied by concrete solutions such as engineering plans, parkways, and “neighborhood units.”

References to obsolescence and blight were legion no matter the ultimate agenda of the organization or individual making them. Primarily, this was due to the very real physical deterioration of the Lower East Side’s properties. As of 1934, 76.5% of the more than 9,000 structures in the area were used for residential purposes, and the majority of these -- 5, 724 -- were Old Law tenements (built before 1901), giving the traditional area of the Lower East Side the highest concentration of Old Law tenements in the city. Three quarters of the residences were without heat; 32% were without hot water; and only 34% had bathrooms. 52% of tenants used shared toilets in the hallways of their buildings, while 94 buildings still relied on toilets in the backyard.<sup>44</sup> Also in 1934, tenements across the city suffered from a spate of fires that left hundreds in the city without homes. Indeed, in February, after a fire that killed five children on East Seventh Street, a protest march of 1,000 Lower East Side children carrying signs emblazoned with the phrase, “We don’t want to burn” appeared at City Hall demanding relief from their “firetrap” apartments.<sup>45</sup> Fires, however, not only inspired activism, but also left behind empty lots. After a mile of dilapidated tenements comprising more than 1,300 dwelling units was razed on the Lower East Side in late 1934, one editorialist wondered: “What next?” then added, “Replanning an entire neighborhood, and then building new structures suited to it” was the only solution.<sup>46</sup>

Maurice Deutsch of the New York Chapter of the National Society of Professional Engineers was on the side of those who wished to raze the entire area and rebuild: “No slum clearance development can be successful, nor can obsolescence in a blighted area be eliminated,

unless there is a radical and permanent change in the environment.”<sup>47</sup> Harland Bartholomew, too, pointed to the “almost universal obsolescence of its improvements, both private and public” as the fundamental reason for planning the area according to his specifications. Echoing these words, Harry B. Brainerd, Architectural Advisor to the ESCC, railed against “the usual hodgepodge of tenements, stores, markets, police stations, fire houses, etc. in grand array of inharmonious styles, scape, color, and silhouette without composition, without good detail, without beauty and withal a potential slum of the future.”<sup>48</sup>

Descriptive terms such as “blight,” “obsolescence,” or even “slum” were not used simply to embellish the image of the Lower East Side as abnormal and unrefined. For groups like the Slum Clearance Committee, the New York City Housing Authority, and the City Planning Commission, all of which formed after the RPA, ESCC, and Lower East Side Planning Association had developed their own plans, they were official terms meant to designate the area for total reconstruction. The Slum Clearance Committee, a citizens’ group formed through the private City Club of New York in late 1933, and including such familiar names as Joseph Platzker, Mary Simkhovitch, George McAneny, Langdon Post, and Orrin Lester, determined an area to be “substandard” according to a specific set of criteria. These included: percentage of tax arrears, population gain and loss, rates of infant mortality and delinquency, racial make-up and shifts, presence of fire hazards, new applications for charity and aid, and availability of schools and social agencies.<sup>49</sup> According to the Committee’s calculations, the Lower East Side qualified as a “substandard” slum from Brooklyn Bridge all the way up to 23rd Street, between Bowery/Third Avenue and the East River.<sup>50</sup> The federal Works Progress Administration, working on behalf of NYCHA, identified several areas of Manhattan as “sub-standard.” The Lower East Side comprised its “Cycle Sub-Standard Area No. 2” and included the area between

Fourteenth and Catherine Streets, the East River to Bowery and Third Avenue. A small section including Centre and Spring Streets on the southwest of the area was also included. The predominance of Old-Law tenements, low land assessments, and a high percentage of properties behind in taxes served as the main determinants of “sub-standard status” for NYCHA.<sup>51</sup> The same standards and terminologies were used by the City Planning Commission, which was formed in 1936, in declaring areas ready for “clearance, replanning, and low-rent housing.” For that agency, slum clearance was the equivalent of “an opportunity for clearing blighted substandard residential districts, or unneeded and blighted non-residential districts.”<sup>52</sup>

Yet among the tallies and within the language of planning and housing advocacy, it was clear that “obsolescence” referred to the residents of the Lower East Side as well. This followed from a decades-old discourse in which slums and slum-dwellers were nearly interchangeable. “There are many persons who still believe and state that ‘people make the slums,’” wrote members of the Committee on Housing Management of the Citizens’ Housing Council, a pro-low-income housing policy organization, in 1938. “The very thought that families of low income who now dwell in slum buildings will occupy the nice new homes being built with public funds, fills certain minds with forebodings of deepest pessimism.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, sociologist James Ford, in his influential 1936 book *Slums and Housing*, remarked that “Not the least important, and possibly the most important, of the causes of the slum are the individuals who make it.” While many individuals were responsible for creating the slum, most “conspicuous” was “the slum dweller, with low standards of maintenance or with income too small to pay rent for decent quarters.”<sup>54</sup>

Lower East Siders, in particular, were viewed as desperately outdated and in need of modernization. Harland Bartholomew called the neighborhood “the most extreme example of

unsound social standards,” the only cure for which was reconstruction, re-planning, and re-tenanting. *New York Times* writer, R.L. Duffus, believed reconstruction of the Lower East Side was the only way to reclaim its territory for modern usage. “This European enclave or corridor could flourish only as long as it was continually reinforced from abroad and hemmed in on its American frontiers,” he wrote. Now that it was neither “reinforced from abroad” because of immigration quotas or “hemmed in” because of new planning, the stagnant, Americanizing neighborhood needed “new subway lines” and the means for “letting in a little sunshine in areas that have immemorially had too little” to attract new residents.<sup>55</sup> Less cheerful was a text James Ford co-wrote with economist John M. Greis in 1931, in which the authors castigated Lower East Siders’ foreign habits: “Like a migrating flock of blackbirds resting and feeding temporarily, so groups of immigrants as well as individual families and isolated individuals stop in this transitional area on their way up or down the social scale. Each of these waves leaves a residue of poverty-stricken, socially unadjusted, maladjusted defectives and delinquents which gradually accumulate into a slum population.”<sup>56</sup>

Such harsh language joined a chorus of mellower voices who believed the current residents of the Lower East Side were capable of reform, but only if they were taught how to behave properly. Writer Harry Shulman called the Lower East Side an “area of cultural lag” where “cultural re-education” would be necessary to bring its residents up to the standards of a modernized neighborhood.<sup>57</sup> Others believed that, among slum dwellers, “human habits -- if not human nature -- can be changed by a little patient instruction.”<sup>58</sup> Certainly, this was the theory behind the “friendly visitor” model used to monitor residents’ housekeeping and other habits in later NYCHA projects. Indeed, before prospective tenants were even considered for public housing, they had to demonstrate that they could meet the basic housekeeping and “character”

standards set subjectively by NYCHA's Tenant Relations division. After securing tenancy, new residents were expected to improve their skills through participation in training workshops.<sup>59</sup> No former slum dweller was judged eligible for public housing without at least some "patient instruction."

Particular vitriol was reserved for Lower East Siders' use of public spaces, such as the crowded, outdoor pushcart markets and vibrant street activity. Harry Morton Goldberg, a Lower East Side booster and lawyer who was allied with the ESCC in envisioning the neighborhood for a more upscale population, crusaded for the relocation of pushcarts into indoor markets that were far more "sanitary."<sup>60</sup> He was not interested, he argued, in putting pushcarts out of business, but rather felt that "Americanisation [sic] of the people had reached a stage where inexpensive merchandising can well be done in attractive city-built markets rather than the old world pushcart method."<sup>61</sup> Relocation to modern facilities would only help merchants gain respectability and add consistency to the modern revisions already taking place in the neighborhood. I. Goldberg, writing for *Real Estate News* in 1937, made the same point: "No one can deny that pushcart marketing is out of step with modern conditions...[and it is] incompatible with clean streets and clean homes...Permanent, sheltered market places offer the best solution to the problem, both from the standpoint of the present ambulatory dispenser of foodstuffs as well as the property owners in market areas."<sup>62</sup> This disapproval of activities commonly practiced in the streets of the Lower East Side extended to socializing as well. One July 1930 editorial in the *New York Times* bemoaned the "groups of women guarding baby carriages inside the curb, or huddled on stoops or on doorsteps, little ones toddling about and older children racing and darting in and out." Such "squalidness" and "ugliness of surroundings" made the writer wonder "how life can be endurable there."<sup>63</sup> The ESCC obliquely blamed residents' use of outdoor space for deterring

well-to-do Lower East Siders from either staying in or returning to the neighborhood. It was “the outward appearance of blocks, ugly fronts, damaged cornices and stoops, fire-escapes cluttered with clotheslines and refuse” that convinced those with more modern aspirations that the Lower East Side was mired in obsolete traditions.<sup>64</sup> One popular *New Yorker* cartoon even made light of the concern many had that Lower East Siders would practice private activities in public areas even if rehoused in modern buildings. In the drawing, artist Carl Rose depicted tenants at the Fred French complex, Knickerbocker Village, setting up a clothesline and airing out a mattress on the window sill of their sleek new, apartment building. Meanwhile, a horrified group of well-dressed planners is shown gasping and shouting on the sidewalk below.<sup>65</sup> That the tenants of Knickerbocker Village were, in fact, middle-class doctors, lawyers, clerks, and stenographers, many of whom moved to the Lower East Side for the first time to occupy the new development went unacknowledged.<sup>66</sup> The idea that they would naturally engage in the stereotypically “backwards” habits of the neighborhood, however, suggested that the Lower East Side’s essentially alien character could never be neutralized, no matter who lived there.<sup>67</sup>

This notion of the Lower East Side’s obsolescence – and of its residents’ stubborn, almost infectious refusal to give up alien behaviors – was coupled with the idea that the area was nearly empty. Harland Bartholomew claimed in 1932 that “over 50 percent of the former population [of the Lower East Side] had been lost, and the present population is gradually declining in numbers.”<sup>68</sup> Likewise, the Committee on Taxation of the Citizens’ Housing Council called the twenty-five blocks it studied between Grand and Houston Streets, Columbia Street and the East River, a “ghost area.”<sup>69</sup> Correct though they were that the neighborhood was undergoing a drop in population, Bartholomew’s suggestion that the consequence of this decrease was actual “emptiness” was an exaggeration. According to calculations made by

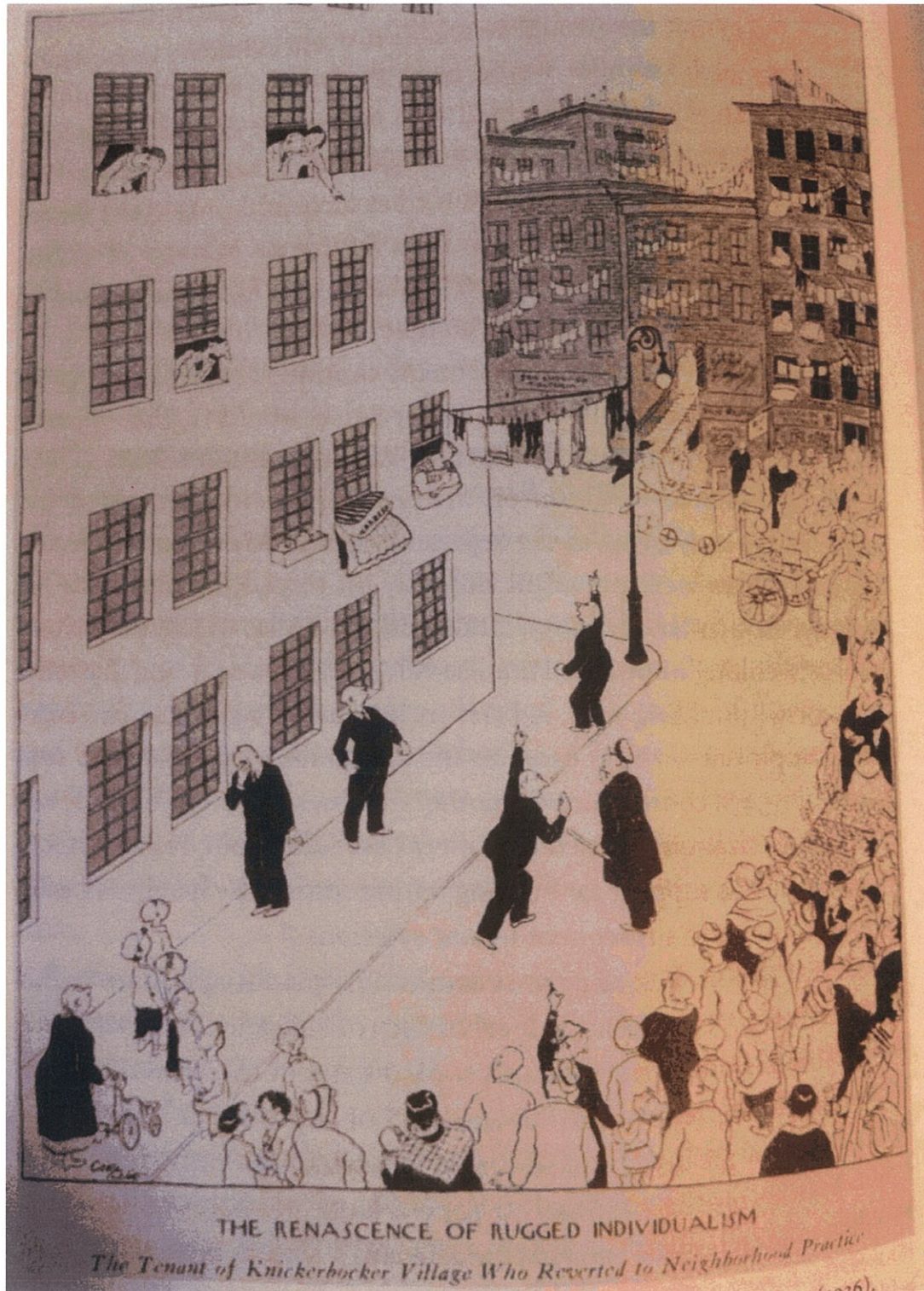


Fig. 16: Carl Rose's cartoon of Knickerbocker Village.  
Reprinted from Mele, p. 104. Note the reference to "rugged individualism" and the idea of the Lower East Side as another wilderness frontier.

Walter Laidlaw in his *Population of the City of New York, 1890-1930*, the drop was from 542,061 in 1905 to 249,755 in 1930, a 54% decrease over 25 years. This change represented a decrease from an average of 542.6 people per acre, when the Lower East Side was considered the densest area in the world, to one of 249.8 per acre. While population dropped dramatically, then, so did the overwhelming congestion that twenty years of reform had worked to relieve.<sup>70</sup> Even with this astounding decrease, the Lower East Side was still the most congested neighborhood in the city in 1930, and by 1935 it was the second most congested behind East Harlem.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to the increasing movement of Lower East Siders with means to new homes in northern Manhattan and the outer boroughs, as the ESCC argued again and again, population decline was a consequence of two main factors to which contemporary analysts often referred: the Immigration Act of 1924 and a paucity of adequate housing. The first -- federal immigration legislation -- placed quotas on the very immigrants who tended to make their homes on the Lower East Side. It limited the number of immigrants allowed into the country on the basis of national origin, favoring newcomers from Ireland, Germany, and other parts of Northern Europe over those from Southern and Eastern Europe. (The Chinese Exclusion Act, which had been passed in 1882, remained in effect until 1943.) The total number of immigrants admitted could not exceed more than two percent of that nation's United States population as it was reflected in the 1890 census. Thus Italians and Eastern European Jews -- those who traditionally replenished the Lower East Side from year to year -- arrived in the United States in much smaller numbers after 1924. Laidlaw found that this demographic change was reflected in the number of foreign-born immigrants living on the Lower East Side in 1930: whereas in 1905, 57% of residents had been born in Southeastern Europe, by 1930 that number declined to 48%. Moreover, the number of "Negro and other non-white" residents had, by 1930, risen from zero to 2,332.<sup>72</sup>

The combination of population decline with continuing congestion, however, pointed to another alarming and likely more determining factor in the neighborhood's changing demographic, and that was the increasing unavailability of housing. The main culprits for this were landlord abandonment due to the low profit-making potential of Lower East Side properties and the active enforcement of the Multiple Dwellings Law of 1929, which required improved standards for tenement apartments. When the law went into effect in 1934, the process of abandonment by landlords who claimed -- perhaps justly -- to be unable to afford the upgrades, sped up. And with the formation of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) the same year, many property owners anticipated that their tenements would eventually be demolished to clear the way for public housing later. This made the prospect of investing in upgrades seem particularly absurd. Four years later, it was estimated that 6% of the neighborhood's housing stock had been removed from the market as a result of the legislation.<sup>73</sup> Langdon Post, chair of NYCHA, put a more specific number on the estimate: 35,000 low-rent apartments, he asserted, were removed from the market because of the law's requirements.<sup>74</sup>

The figures to which different organizations referred, however, fluctuated. There was little debate that vacancies on the Lower East Side were on the rise, but the reasons for empty buildings and apartments were not always so clearly traceable to legislation aimed at tenement improvement. Data for 1933 collected by the *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, before the law was enforced, showed vacancy rates on the Lower East Side hovering around 22% percent.<sup>75</sup> Yet a 1934 report from the Works Progress Administration on behalf of the New York City Housing Authority reported that 689 of 9,229 buildings on the Lower East Side -- around 7% -- were vacant. These included tenements, one- and two-family dwellings, businesses, storage warehouses, and public or recreational buildings.<sup>76</sup> Three years later, in a frenzy of demolition,

more than 25,000 apartments in roughly 8,800 mostly Old Law tenements, were eliminated.<sup>77</sup>

With the high concentration of Old Law tenements on the Lower East Side, the impact there was palpable. Fewer buildings meant fewer vacancies. By 1939, the vacancy rate for low-cost apartments on the Lower East Side dropped to 4.8%, according to NYCHA's Vacancy Listing Bureau. While still the highest of any area in Manhattan, at least half of the vacant apartments were considered "acceptable but hardly desirable."<sup>78</sup> Such reports suggested that even if "empty," the Lower East Side's housing was still in demand.

Even so, for planners, the emptiness and obsolescence, vacancy and blight of the Lower East Side, were apparent enough that the need and desire of residents for very low-income housing in the area seemed negligible. Nearly all agreed that the slum had run its course and that the separation of the Lower East Side from the rest of the city required mitigation if the area was ever to survive. Yet even while this was true – and even if working people themselves longed for decent, modern housing -- the typical Lower East Sider who lived and struggled in the area was as bound by everyday survival as by planning for the future. At the same time that the ESCC and Lower East Side Planning Association proposed its "neighborhood units," new roads, and zoning solutions, tenants in the area's buildings were facing the strains of imminent eviction. While Platzker and the Slum Clearance Committee counted Old Law tenements to determine the extent of blight on the Lower East Side, residents of these same tenements scrambled to make rent, even when it was as low as \$3 per room per month.<sup>79</sup> For these Lower East Siders, the most useful kind of planning and assistance came not from professional planners whose data and diagrams made such convincing cases for the future, but from the tenant organizations that understood what immediate shelter meant in the desperate days of the Depression.

## Red Ambitions

The emptiness planners observed and measured on the Lower East Side to prop up their assertion that the area was ready for reinvention was not only a result of deteriorated tenements and population decline. Certainly many of the Lower East Side's apartments were left empty because they were, in fact, in poor enough shape to be uninhabitable. A great number, however, were vacant because residents had been evicted. Land values had dropped so far between 1912, when the area was worth a total of \$187,000,000, and 1933, when it was worth \$145,000,000 that many landholders found it more expensive to keep their buildings tenanted than to leave them empty, with or without the upgrades required by the Multiple Dwellings Law.<sup>80</sup> Other landlords lost their buildings to the banks that had mortgaged them, while the banks themselves, in turn, foreclosed on the properties and evicted their tenants. While it was reasonable to imagine individual owners having difficulty meeting the cost of compliance with the law -- estimated at about \$3400 -- banks were much more capable of affording such improvements. In most cases, however, they chose not to do so. In late 1936, a group of savings banks moved to evict tenants in an effort to skirt compliance with the Multiple Dwellings Law by its January 1, 1937 deadline. More than seven hundred Lower East Side families received notice from local banks -- many of which were members of the ESCC -- that they had less than a month to find new quarters. An uproar followed, prompting NYCHA's Post to complain to Mayor LaGuardia about the "wholesale notices of dispossession sent out by some of the savings banks," which had caused "the recent agitation rising from the Lower East Side." Reluctant to scold banks for resorting to eviction to avoid complying with the law, Post lamented only "that they could have done this more systematically and with less dislocation of their tenants if they had started earlier as did two or three of the banks in the City owning such properties."<sup>81</sup>

Other organizations were less timid about blaming banks for unjust evictions, including the Lower East Side Public Housing Conference, a coalition of social workers, mothers' clubs, and religious organizations, the Housing Section of the Welfare Council, and the United Neighborhood Houses. The latter two, along with other social welfare agencies submitted a statement to NYCHA in mid-December of 1936, stating: "Saddled with these unprofitable buildings [the banks and insurance companies] can treat them as they have heretofore done, simply as unsatisfactory investments. On the other hand, they might well realize that in these ownerships they now have an obligation to the entire community, and that they are concerned not merely with so many investments, but also with homes in which many of their depositors live."<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps the most furious about the banks' role in clearing the Lower East Side of low-income residents were, however, tenant groups, chief among them the East Side Tenants Union, the local affiliate of an umbrella tenant organization, the City-Wide Tenants Council. A report from NYCHA's Vacancy Bureau, a group formed in 1936 to assist in rehousing those tenants displaced by government construction, claimed, "The tenants maintain that they are being used as scapegoats by the banks to effect [sic] a moratorium on the Multiple Dwelling Law. The tenants claim that the bankers hope to evade taking minimum measures to protect their (the tenants') life and health by precipitating a crisis just before the legislature convenes in Albany."<sup>83</sup> Moreover, tenant groups believed the banks wished to use the Multiple Dwelling Law as subterfuge to vacate low-income tenants, and then follow up with repairs to attract new residents who could pay higher rent. This idea was hardly far-fetched considering the block renovation plans proposed by Joseph Platzker and others only a few years earlier. Banks, for their part, denied such charges.

The result of the fracas over compliance-related evictions in the winter of 1936-37 was the city's issuance of a temporary moratorium on enforcement of the Multiple Dwellings Law, a solution opposed vocally by the City-Wide Tenants Council.<sup>84</sup> The Council had lobbied the city to continue to enforce the Multiple Dwellings Law, but to offer stays of eviction to tenants. More importantly, it had urged the city to work more diligently and quickly to provide modern low-income housing for those suffering with ailing tenement apartments. Such immediate construction would obviate the need for maintaining deteriorating tenements that should be eliminated anyway. This last request brought the tenant organization oddly in-line with the proposals of the ESCC in the mid-1930s. Obvious incongruity existed between the visions of the ESCC, RPA, and Lower East Side Planning Association and organizations such as the East Side Tenants Union and the City-Wide Tenants Council. The tenant groups, as well as their constituents, were sensitive to the attempts of planners and moneyed interests to remake the Lower East Side into a white collar haven, as the accusations about the bank's ultimate intentions after eviction would suggest. Yet, at the same time, the City-Wide Tenants Council and its allies were not at all opposed to the fundamental idea of clearance and reconstruction if the ultimate goal was the construction of low-income public housing. In this sense, then, Left-leaning tenant organizations spoke more believably and more genuinely for the Lower East Side's majority population, but they did not necessarily diverge dramatically from the "clean slate" approach of planning technocrats like the Lower East Side Planning Association and the RPA.

That the city's largest tenant organization and its local affiliate, the East Side Tenants Union, might find common ground with the business leaders who constituted the RPA and its own local affiliate, the Lower East Side Planning Association – however much their ultimate

objectives differed -- was ironic. Formed in late-1936 as a successor to the similarly-named and nearly identical City-Wide Tenants League, the City-Wide Tenants Council and the East Side Tenants Union were the latest and most professionalized versions of the kinds of tenant organizations that had populated the city – and the Lower East Side, in particular – since at least the turn of the twentieth century. As early as 1904, Lower East Side residents were taking to the streets and withholding rent to protest landlord rapacity. Chanting that the “landlord is czar,” protestors borrowed from the languages of both Socialism and the trade union movement to draw their neighbors to the cause of stabilizing rent increases and gaining much-needed repairs to their deteriorating tenement homes. As Abraham Cahan claimed, rent strikes, as the protestors called them, were “the outcome of the same spirit, the offspring of that same struggle against Capital, which has grown up in our quarter owing to the work of Socialists and trade unionists.”<sup>85</sup> This energy remained strong through the First World War and into the early 1920s, resulting both in victories in individual buildings and in the passage of legislation, the Emergency Rent Law, which protected the city’s tenants from excessive rent increases, particularly during what would be a lasting housing shortage.<sup>86</sup> By the start of the Depression, tenant activism on the Lower East Side had gained steam again, most notably with volatile rent strikes, eviction resistance, and with the campaign to construct low-income public housing for the city’s working poor.

Most influential in building a campaign for tenants’ rights during the early years of the Depression was the Communist Party. Its large membership amongst Eastern European Jews on the Lower East Side helped fuel radical activity and secure shelter, however temporary, for some of the area’s neediest cases. Eviction resistance on the Lower East Side in the fall of 1930 was so common, in fact, that police officers rarely bothered to intervene.<sup>87</sup> Residents Sol Rubin and Frank Miggs Regina both remembered the Communist-led Unemployment Councils carrying the

furniture of evicted tenants back up to their apartments. Rubin explained, “They would take all their belongings from the street up to their apartment to the third floor, the fifth floor...break open the seal that the marshal put on (this is very serious) and put the furniture back, put it back inside. Then the landlord had to go through the whole trouble again with courts and this and that, and finally had to throw them out again.” Regina recalled groups of neighbors – not only Communist organizers, but others -- banding together to assist the evicted. <sup>88</sup>

By the winter of 1932-1933, the small-scale tactic of eviction resistance, which helped only one family at a time, was enhanced across the city by rent strikes. The Communist Party, hoping to draw attention to the plight of the unemployed through a multi-pronged attack on landed power, included rent strikes among a cadre of strategies, including hunger marches and sit-ins, to agitate for direct financial assistance to the city’s poor.<sup>89</sup> This idea found a ready audience among politically active Lower East Siders who were willing to mobilize on behalf of the larger movement. The *Daily Worker* noted that the “Avenue A section of Manhattan” was one of the strongholds of the winterlong rent strike and that demonstrations were drawing upwards of 3,000 to 5,000 people.<sup>90</sup> By late-January of 1933, however, the city had clamped down on the protests, declaring that not only was there “no such thing known to the law as a rent strike,” but that all strikers would be immediately arrested and held on criminal charges.<sup>91</sup> Within days, the rent strike “epidemic” of 1932-1933 ended. But by the fall of 1934, yet another rent strike emerged on the Lower East Side, this time at the newly-opened Knickerbocker Village, where facility breakdowns had occurred almost immediately upon the development’s occupancy. Only three weeks after the first tenants moved into the Village, a group of the more active new residents voted to withhold rent until repairs had been made. Two weeks later, their demands – made more appealing by the fact that the tenant group was composed of dozens of

lawyers and journalists -- were met and a permanent Knickerbocker Village Tenants Association was formed. Far from the large-scale, grassroots protest that the Communist Party had encouraged in the previous years, the Knickerbocker Village Tenants Association marked a professionalization of tenant organizing, one that relied on the political savvy of its members.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the Association's members were intent on thinking about tenant issues outside their development's immediate concerns, turning attention in particular to the construction of low-income, publicly-funded housing for their tenement-sheltered neighbors. By the time the City-Wide Tenants Council formed in late 1936, bringing together the Knickerbocker Village Tenants Association, the affiliated East Side Tenants Union, and several other groups, the Council built on this experience and vision. In fact, Heinz Norden, an active member of the Knickerbocker Village Tenants Association, was elected the City-Wide Tenants Council's first Executive Secretary.

While the City-Wide Tenants Council would set objectives for more than the large-scale creation of public housing, working toward the adoption of rent control laws and tenement improvements, public housing was at the top of the agenda. The Council organized groups of community members to take trips to Albany and bus tours for housing enthusiasts to view up-close the conditions of slum living; it produced newsletters, leafleting campaigns, and building-by-building tenant meetings; and it made lobbying alongside other housing reform organizations, such as the Community Service Society, the Housing Committee of the United Neighborhood Houses, and the Housing Section of the Welfare Council a priority.<sup>93</sup> City-Wide lobbied vociferously for the Housing Act of 1937, legislation that created the United States Housing Authority and cleared the path for federal dollars to pour into local public housing projects. It also worked on behalf of the State Housing Bill in 1938, with Norden writing to the State

Delegates directly, declaring much as the social reformers of the past had done: “There can no longer be any reasonable doubt of the need for government action to clear the slums and help provide decent low-rent housing... This state of affairs has much to do with our ghastly toll of disease and death, crime and delinquency, economic unproductivity and other social evils, making the slums our costliest luxuries.”<sup>94</sup> Once public housing was introduced to the city, both on the Lower East Side and elsewhere, City-Wide made it a priority to influence the tenant selection process, offering an alternative and more open policy toward needy tenants who did not meet NYCHA’s criteria. In 1940, for example, City-Wide worked to come up with recommendations that would allow for both large families and families with secondary wage-earners to be admitted to public housing projects.<sup>95</sup> Later that year, the organization and other tenant groups began to lobby for the inclusion of apartments for single people in public housing.<sup>96</sup>

While this activity was welcome on the Lower East Side, the desire for low-income housing was also tempered with a need to make sure residents had any kind of shelter. In one September 1938 issue of City-Wide’s newsletter, *The Tenant*, a report on a landlord-tenant deal brokered by the East Side Tenants Union on East 1<sup>st</sup> Street was juxtaposed with an advertisement encouraging readers to apply for public housing: “Do you want to live in one of the fine new projects the government is at last beginning to build for the likes of us? Silly question! Of course you do!”<sup>97</sup> Sol Friedman, writing for the East Side Tenants Union’s own newsletter, was equally enthusiastic about the promise of public housing, declaring that it was the duty of young people like himself to bring this resource to the Lower East Side: “Here in these filthy, rotting, indecent, socially degrading, rat-infested fire-traps, the youth, the young men and women are forced to live....It is up to us, the young people who were born and raised in these slums to roll

up our sleeves and get ready to fight for decent homes!”<sup>98</sup> Yet, at the same time, as the tenant organization was well aware, new housing could also mean displacement. In April 1939, as the city prepared to make way for the construction of Vladeck Houses, the East Side Tenants Union organized a last-minute meeting at Henry Street Playhouse to seek a solution to the imminent eviction of the two hundred families who already occupied the area. Committed though it was to creating government-funded low-income housing for tenement dwellers, the Union, as well as the City-Wide Tenants Council, recognized that displacement of some slum residents in the interest of housing others was both unjust and undesirable.

Many of those who would be displaced, these organizations noted, were those who felt they had no leverage battling with the city no matter who was on their side. The Vacancy Bureau reported in January 1937 that a large group of tenants being served with vacate notices were both “indigent and on home relief.” Many were “persons with health problems, cardiac cases in particular. There are also a great many persons suffering from rheumatism, high blood pressure, partial paralysis and other physical handicaps which...prevent or hamper their moving.”<sup>99</sup> The rest were simply reliant on Home Relief, as so many New Yorkers -- 190,275 in total -- were in 1937.<sup>100</sup> These residents had so little income, the report stated, that they “run the risk of moving repeatedly into buildings in which they may receive vacating orders.” Indeed, at a conference examining the functions of the Vacancy Listing Bureau, Alec F. Down, its director, admitted that 80% of the vacate cases his staff had received -- most of which were displaced residents from the Lower East Side -- were referred by the Emergency Relief Bureau. That is, the majority of evicted residents seeking assistance from the Vacancy Listing Bureau were not those who had been displaced by government construction projects like highways, bridge approaches, or public housing. Rather, they were tenants on relief who had been evicted either

because the buildings in which they lived were judged “unfit” by the Emergency Relief Bureau or because they could not pay rent. In one week in 1937, 287 out of 362 applicants to the Bureau fell into this relief category.<sup>101</sup> So numerous were the Home Relief cases in relation to the others that the WPA, which funded the Vacancy Listing Bureau, bristled that its money was not being spent as it was intended. Thus dependent upon government subsidies for survival, as well as government assistance for relocation, tenants on relief were often least likely to resist eviction, protest displacement, or jump on a bus to Albany to lobby for public housing.

It was these tenants – the least represented -- that most concerned City-Wide and the East Side Tenants Union. When the Union called its April 1939 emergency meeting to address the needs of those who would be displaced by the construction of Vladeck Houses, its rallying cry was that the full \$300 million the State had appropriated for public housing in 1938 ought to be used right away.<sup>102</sup> It also demanded that the federal government chip in ten billion to clear the slums and immediately rebuild so that displacement and lack of shelter could be avoided for all project construction in the future. Neither of these demands met with the success tenant organizations sought.<sup>103</sup> By the start of World War II, ten thousand families had found housing in government-built low-income projects in New York City, but this left tens of thousands more still housed in dilapidated shelter.<sup>104</sup> It also meant that displacement continued as block after block of Lower East Side land was demolished and slated for new construction. What and who was left behind as clearance gave way to construction put the lie to the notion that the Lower East Side had ever been truly empty – or that a total reinvention of the neighborhood and its spaces would be without its drawbacks even for slum-dwellers.

## Attachments

Only a few small-scale studies were undertaken during this period of re-envisioning a new Lower East Side to determine what residents themselves thought about slum clearance, the prospect of new housing, and relocation. All of these studies were performed by settlement houses, social service and tenant organizations -- groups that tended to have more direct contact with slum residents than did planners. Platzker, on behalf of the ESCC, also collected meticulous information about what sorts of shops and other businesses existed on the streets of the Lower East Side. These were meant more as an aid to the ESCC in identifying their constituency than they were intended to be part of a planning agenda. Similarly, the writers who produced *The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New York*, hoping to provide an imagery-heavy tour of the city, described local landmarks and scenes of daily life that the clearance narrative failed to capture. Finally, adding to Platzker's commercial counts were those of the Statistical Department of NYCHA. The department's task was to calculate blight and increasing vacancy -- grounds for demolition -- on the Lower East Side. Unwittingly, however, they also documented dozens of functioning institutions that, if seen in a different light, challenge the notion that the neighborhood was essentially barren. Despite its emptiness and imminent extinction, then, it seemed at least some Lower East Siders might have believed they were living in a working and active neighborhood.

The first organizations to turn their attention to the area's residents were the Lavanburg Foundation and Hamilton House in their 1933 joint-study of "What Happened to 386 Families who Were Compelled to Vacate Their Slum Dwellings to Make Way for a Large Housing Project," which studied the area replaced by Knickerbocker Village. The study, conducted by Abraham Goldfeld of the Lavanburg Foundation and Lillian D. Robbins, a settlement house

worker, found that most of the 386 families who had lived on the clearance site had lived on the Lower East Side for at least a decade, if not longer. Their longevity in the neighborhood translated to an attachment both to the area and to their neighbors. As James Ford reported, “The great majority of tenants expressed a desire to remain in the immediate neighborhood and when forced to vacate only fourteen percent left the district, eighty six percent settling in adjoining blocks.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, only three of the families displaced by Knickerbocker Village were able to afford and qualify for an apartment in the new project, though almost all said they would have liked to live there. In one dazzling case, six of the families who had been displaced moved together to a tenement at 55 Pike Street, suggesting that attachment to their former homes was as tied to neighbors as to neighborhood.<sup>106</sup>

Goldfeld collaborated with Duane V. Ramsey of the Henry Street Settlement two years later to produce a similar study of the block bounded by Henry, Montgomery, Clinton and East Broadway. Careful to acknowledge that the tenements facing East Broadway represented a higher-income group than those facing Henry, Goldfeld and Ramsey examined the two sides of the block separately. Even with this attention to detail, the researchers learned that, in general, the tenants of the block behaved and felt similarly. Their differences were very often attributable to income, rather than neighborhood. Of the 286 families studied, 60% had lived in the immediate neighborhood for more than twenty years and, even when they moved to different apartments after a few years, as 60% did, they tended to stay in the general vicinity. This did not mean they were completely happy with their homes. 32% of residents on Henry Street said they were dissatisfied with their current apartments, while 52.5% on East Broadway made the same report. Most, however, pointed to a lack of heat or to dark rooms as their reasons for dissatisfaction. Predictably, those who lived on East Broadway where the vast majority of

buildings featured steam heat and bathrooms in each flat, were generally happier with their homes. Only two families -- one on each side of the block -- cited the "bad neighborhood" as their source of discontent. When asked if they would be willing to leave the neighborhood for garden apartments in the outer boroughs within their financial means, 50.6% of tenants on Henry and 22.2% of those on East Broadway said they would. Considering that Henry Street residents would be replacing cold water, walk-up flats with modern facilities in such a move, it is understandable that half of the residents would be pleased to move to an outer borough, if necessary. More remarkable, however, is that the other half -- while enduring the same living conditions -- were unwilling to relocate. Reasons for remaining on the Lower East Side included: being used to the neighborhood, business and employment connections, children in school, and a preference for Manhattan. By far, the most popular reason for staying on the Lower East Side, however, was familiarity with the neighborhood. Goldfeld and Ramsey were not surprised with this answer. While their research was intended to help public housing officials and planners determine what slum dwellers hoped to find in a newly planned neighborhood unit, including libraries, schools, swimming pools, music studios, movies, and stages for performance, they found that: "The district in which these people live [already] provides all the facilities...in varying degree of adequacy, and through participation in the activities...the people have come to appreciate them."<sup>107</sup>

Even when information about current Lower East Side residents was not the focal point of a study, those who engaged with the neighborhood found that people felt an attachment to their surroundings. The Vacancy Listing Bureau of NYCHA, which was charged with rehousing the families who were to be displaced from the Corlears Hook area for the construction of Vladeck Houses, found that "In all such movements, the great majority of families always

express a desire to remain in the immediate neighborhood. They have their friends or their married children in the adjoining streets, they know the storekeepers, they attend a special place of worship or have their children in adjacent schools.” Like the white collar gentry who the RPA, ESCC, and Lower East Side Planning Association hoped would replace the working-class Lower East Siders, “Some live there because they work within walking distance.” So integrated were their daily lives with their surroundings, the Bureau noted, that, “For the family living on the Lower East Side to move uptown or even above 14th Street is equivalent to locating in another city.”<sup>108</sup> The Bureau had encountered similar attachments when it helped rehouse those displaced by the spate of bank-initiated evictions on the Lower East Side in 1937. These tenants, too, “were unwilling to leave the environment of their neighborhood because of social and economic contact established with local tradesmen, schools and other public institutions after long years of association.”<sup>109</sup> Such findings were also paralleled in other parts of the city, as tenants displaced from Red Hook, Brooklyn for a new NYCHA development and tenement families city-wide who were studied by the League of Mothers’ Clubs, expressed a shared desire to remain in their neighborhoods, sometimes remarking that “their parents, and often their grandparents were born in this Area.”<sup>110</sup>

For those who lived on the Lower East Side, attachment to the neighborhood clearly extended from the tenement apartment to the streets and on to local businesses and institutions. Joseph Platzker regularly published his tallies of “Lower East Side Streets To-Day” in the early 1930s, drawing an intricate picture of the diversity of businesses serving the community. Walking along St. Mark’s Place in February 1932, Platzker counted 122 stores, only 14 of which were vacant. These active stores included one that manufactured musical instruments, one bird and dog kennel, five butchers, eight candy stores, one optometrist, nine

grocers, two churches, three plumbers, three milliners, one parochial school, and three cafes. The following month, a stroll along Avenue D revealed 106 buildings on either side of the street, three of which were vacant. There were 828 apartments renting at four to five dollars per room per month. While 20% of the stores on the avenue were unoccupied, those that were actively doing business included eleven groceries, thirteen barbers, three auto repair shops, four bakeries, five drug stores, seven dairies, fifteen candy stores, one egg noodle shop, and four hardware stores.<sup>111</sup> Broader than Platzker's first-hand observations were surveys performed by NYCHA's Statistics Department in 1934, which studied the entire area between East 3rd and Pearl Streets, Bowery and the East River. These studies found 4,408 residences, 155 public and recreational buildings, 96 churches, 336 businesses, and 1,034 manufacturing and storage facilities. Of these, 71% were regarded as being in either "fair" or "good" condition. The businesses the department found ranged from restaurants (515) to agencies and offices (211), as well as manufacturing and repair shops (1,319) and food stores (1,605.) In between, were mercantile trade stores, recreation facilities, paint stores, and furniture stores, among others.<sup>112</sup> Bountiful summaries such as these contradict both the vision of emptiness propounded by clearance lobbyists and the bewilderment many felt when residents defended their desire to remain in the neighborhood.

Sensitivity toward the residents of the Lower East Side and an appreciation of their ties to the neighborhood -- even when they simultaneously hoped for new housing -- did emerge from some social service providers and settlement houses. In a statement to NYCHA shortly after it formed, agencies such as the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the Jewish Social Service Association, the Emergency Relief Bureau, and the Charity Organization Society pleaded with NYCHA to preserve

neighborhood ties. “We are interested in the continuance of neighborhood contacts which enrich family life,” the groups wrote. “Families who for generations have been brought up in their own schools, churches, and settlement houses have formed strong ties with their friends, relatives, and institutions in their community...We believe that slum clearance projects should have as their purpose the rehousing of families on the same site.”<sup>113</sup> The Charity Organization Society -- now called the Community Service Society (CSS) and an ally of the City-Wide Tenants Council in the battle for public housing -- later reiterated the point after a thorough study of what it called the “St. Mark’s Neighborhood” between E. 14th and E. 3rd Streets, 1st and 3rd Avenues.<sup>114</sup> The area’s need for improved housing was undeniable, the CSS reported, but any redevelopment required a deeper understanding of the area’s people and institutions: “A plan based merely on economic or physical facts divorced from the social aspects of the community is hardly likely to succeed, and even if it were, cannot be considered desirable.” Quoting an undated *New York Times* article, the CSS report ended with a passionate note: “Those who have lived on the East Side and who have, with all its drawbacks, loved it, should not be driven out.”<sup>115</sup>

Social workers, area boosters, and even different NYCHA departments were unable to make the qualitative aspects of life on the Lower East Side more prominent in planning discourse. Yet others more keenly aware of the details of everyday life in the area, as well as the spectacle of its ethnic folkways, did not overlook the activity taking place in the neighborhood. The Federal Writers’ Project, composed of writers receiving public relief, wrote about the Lower East Side with affection and nostalgia, noting in particular what would be lost as new plans for housing were implemented. Writing of the Lower East Side’s tenements, all of which were in the pathway of a bulldozer, the authors mused that they “have been home to so many generations [and] will probably be home to many more...Great slums die hard.”<sup>116</sup> Of the Orchard Street

pushcart market, lamentations abounded: “It may not be long before this and other open-air pushcart markets will disappear, for the Department of Markets, more interested in sanitation than in the picturesque, plans to house them all indoors.”<sup>117</sup> Throughout the area, the authors found buildings, commercial activities, and strange obscurities worthy of description, none of which found mention in the neighborhood studies organized by planners. In one corner of the Lower East Side was the Jewish Daily Forward Building, while in another were all-night restaurants.<sup>118</sup> On one street of the neighborhood, one might purchase “copper coffee urns, silver vases, and candlesticks,” while on another “the longest row of secondhand bookstores in the city” might be found.<sup>119</sup> The authors described a Lower East Side population as diverse as its shops, including Italians, Eastern European Jews, Russians, Chinese, Greeks, and “Americans.” “Not all the district is blighted, not all of its people are of foreign stock, and not all are Jewish,” they wrote. Indeed, most salient of the characteristics the Federal Writers Project found on the Lower East Side was its “generations of American workers.”<sup>120</sup> These observations were reiterated by the French fashion designer, Lilly Dache, upon her visit to the Lower East Side during the same period: “We went to Grand Street, the main street of a city within a city -- the teeming, colorful, lower East Side, where every race and every creed rubbed shoulders, and you could hear a dozen tongues spoken in one block. Here were small shops with strange and wonderful silks, and rich fabrics stacked on dusty shelves in dark little holes in the wall. One would never suspect what was within, unless one knew.”<sup>121</sup> Reminiscent of the bohemian slummers like Hapgood and Steffens who toured the area decades before, the writers who chronicled it for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, as well as one soon-to-be-famous tourist, drew attention to everything *but* empty spaces. For them, it was a neighborhood worth seeing, not for its decay, but for the local color and oddities one might pick up along the way.

While the social service organizations were less likely than guidebook writers to focus on the unusual, they too believed the Lower East Side was a place of value. The perspective had its biases, just as the planners' vision did. But the yawning difference between them was obvious: the writers and social workers emphasized vibrancy, while the planners saw only obsolescence. The fact that they were all looking at the same two square miles of the city over the same period of time should have testified that the Lower East Side was more than just an abstract space with a declining population. It was also a living place that thousands of individuals, even with mixed feelings, called home.

## **Conclusion**

By the late 1950s, dozens of blocks, comprising 111 acres of the Lower East Side, had been replaced with mostly low-income public housing, a development that changed the built environment dramatically and spurred a demographic transformation in the neighborhood as well.<sup>122</sup> These housing projects, tall and imposing, lined the entire waterfront of the neighborhood and contrasted sharply with the six-story tenements that remained in the rest of the area. In addition to the new, high-rise structures, a phalanx of new residents, totaling around twenty thousand, moved into the Lower East Side to populate the modern constructions.<sup>123</sup> Strict tenant selection guidelines, which required a baseline income and steady employment, initially raised the income level of the neighborhood such that public housing residents substantially out-earned longtime Lower East Siders who could not meet such basic requirements. The new housing soon opened the door to greater racial diversity, as African Americans and Puerto Ricans, in particular, were gradually selected for the apartments. Not only physical boundaries in the form of planned superblocks, but class and racial boundaries as well, divided the

neighborhood into separate and seemingly distant enclaves, as would become evident as a policy of urban renewal went into effect in the 1950s. An area that had once been characterized by a ragged patchwork of affiliations based on ethnicity now became a taxonomy of residential types correlating with the predominant race and ethnicity of their tenants. The social circles of tenement dwellers and public housing residents overlapped very little. So, eventually, would their competing definitions of what constituted the true Lower East Side and how urban planning could and could not help them imagine its future.

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<sup>1</sup> *East Side Chamber News* (hereafter “ESCN”), January 1931, May 1931, July 1931. So impressive was his active role in keeping the Lower East Side at the forefront of public conversations about city planning that Platzker was appointed by LaGuardia secretary of the Department of Housing and Buildings in 1939. That year, he personally visited all of the 12,775 tenements constructed before 1902 and categorized as “Old Law.” See *New York Times*, August 18, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> “Great Building Boom on the Lower East Side Predicted: Thousands Seek New Homes Here. Chamber Office Crowded Daily With Endless Enquiries for Apartments in New Houses. Brooklyn and Bronx Residents Come in Large Numbers. Young Couples Almost in Majority,” ESCN, October 1928.

<sup>3</sup> I am greatly influenced in this analysis by Suzanne Wasserman whose argument in her dissertation “The Good Old Days of Poverty: The Battle Over the Fate of New York City’s Lower East Side” aligns a great deal with my own. I veer from her conclusions only in relating the developments of this period to a longer narrative of alienness and atavism – and the planning objectives that would resolve it by rejoining the Lower East Side to the rest of the city – that existed both before and after the Depression era. Suzanne Wasserman, “The Good Old Days of Poverty: The Battle Over the Fate of New York City’s Lower East Side” (Ph.D. diss, New York University, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> James Ford, *Slums and Housing with Special Reference to New York City, History, Conditions, Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1936), 209; Robert Fishman, “The Regional Plan and the Transformation of the Industrial Metropolis,” in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940*, eds., David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 106.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, August 15, 1930. George B. Ford and Harold M. Lewis provide a bit of a through-line back to the Committee on Congestion of Population. Ford, of course, a Harvard-trained engineer and the brother of James Ford, one of the main documenters of the Progressive housing movement, of course, wrote the technical chapter for Marsh’s book on city planning. Harold M. Lewis was the son of Nelson Lewis, who worked with George Ford to draft the 1916 zoning ordinance. Lawson Purdy was on the zoning commission as well. Lawrence Orton, meanwhile, would go on to join the New York City Planning Commission in the 1940s and 1950s, serving alongside Robert Moses. While these men were the technicians of the RPA, George McAneny, Frederic Delano, Norton, and Dwight Morrow were its brawn. As mayor, George McAneny organized the first zoning commission; he would replace Ford as president in August of 1930.

<sup>6</sup> Regional Plan Association, *From Plan to Reality* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1933); Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, July 7, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Though it was not explored in the press, board members’ personal financial and political interests in regional planning abounded as well. Norton, also a treasurer of the Russell Sage Foundation, was president of the First National Bank, while Dwight Morrow had worked for the Morgan Bank and directed the New York Central Railroad. The latter also financed part of the Interborough Rapid Transit system, which brought subway and elevated service throughout the metropolitan region. George McAneny had been chief lobbyist for the Pennsylvania Railroad, while Frederic A. Delano, uncle of the future President, had been the director of several other

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railroads. Finally, also joining the board was long-time housing reformer, Robert DeForest, who coincidentally owned acres of undeveloped Long Island real estate. Whether their financial consciences were more substantial than their social ones is impossible to discern. In any case, the industrial policy of the RPA, which would have a direct impact on the Lower East Side, fit nicely with the personal interests of its board. Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York* (New York: Verso Books, 1996), 59; Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of the World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 27; Fishman, 107-110. Fishman is being anachronistic with his use of the term “gentrification,” which was coined by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, but his point remains useful.

<sup>9</sup> Regional Plan Association, *Plan of New York and Its Environs, The Meeting of May 10, 1922* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1922), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Regional Plan Association, *From Plan to Reality, Vol 1* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1933), 91, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Adams, et al., *The Building of the City* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1931), 402-404.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Haig, “The Assignment of Activities to Areas in Urban Regions,” in *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1933), 31.

<sup>14</sup> One might argue that this scheme would also move the working-class and poor residents of the Lower East Side to less expensive locales so that they could afford better conditions. While this might have been an immediate result and was surely the thinking behind both this plan and the same one proposed by Marsh, et al., at the Congestion Exhibit, the idea also presupposes either a forced or spontaneous mass exodus of Lower East Siders from their established homes, social networks, and institutions without the promise of economic or social mobility.

<sup>15</sup> ESCN, 1/31

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, December 30, 1928.

<sup>17</sup> United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending, BLS Report 991* (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 3, 2006), 15-18. By 1933, in the area where Knickerbocker Village would eventually be built on Cherry Street, residents were paying an estimated \$10 a month for three-room apartments – and even then they were having trouble making rent. See Joseph Mitchell, “‘Village’ Plans Worry Tenants of ‘Lung Block,’” *World-Telegram*, February 1933. Clipping from Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

<sup>18</sup> *New York Times*, December 30, 1928.

<sup>19</sup> ESCN, September, 1928.

<sup>20</sup> ESCN, August, 1929.

<sup>21</sup> Loula Lasker, “Putting a White Collar on the East Side,” *Survey Graphic*, March, 1931.

<sup>22</sup> William W. Bremer, *Depression Winters: New York Social Workers and the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> ESCN, July, 1931.

<sup>26</sup> ESCN, January, 1932.

<sup>27</sup> ESCN, July, 1931.

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Heathcott, “‘The Whole City is Our Laboratory’: Harland Bartholomew and the Production of Urban Knowledge,” *Journal of Planning History* (2005), Number 4: 327.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>30</sup> Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *Plans for Major Traffic Thoroughfares and Transit, Lower East Side, New York City, Prepared for the Lower East Side Planning Association by Bartholomew and Associates* (New York: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1932), 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-29. Fred French had originally hoped for a wealthier professional class to occupy his initially “luxury” development, but the Depression and his need for government financing forced him to modify his plans to serve a more modest, middle-class clientele. See Wasserman, 119-120.

<sup>34</sup> \$18 per room per month was a slightly above-average rental cost in 1930 and perhaps even more so by May of 1932, just over two years after the start of the Depression. At a time when Lower East Siders were recorded as paying as little as \$3 and \$5 per room per month, however, the \$18 rate would have seemed out-of-reach to many. See Footnote 15.

<sup>35</sup> ESCN, May, 1932.

<sup>36</sup> ESCN, April, 1931.

<sup>37</sup> Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, Committee on Taxation, *The Relation of Tax Delinquency in Slum Areas to the Housing Problem* (New York: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, Inc., July 1942), 14.

<sup>38</sup> To be more precise, Bartholomew believed rental prices could go down to \$15 per room per month or less only if the city government contributed to the financing of remapping the streets. How likely the city was to take on this added cost is difficult to discern, however. The only government entity to make an investment in Knickerbocker Village, another private development, for example, was New York State through a Reconstruction Finance Corporation mortgage loan. Wasserman, 120.

<sup>39</sup> ESCN, September, 1932.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Knepper and George Stoney for Henry Street Settlement, “Can We Renovate the Slum: A study of 54 remodeled tenements on the Lower East Side,” Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

<sup>41</sup> ESCN, January, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, January 14, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> First Houses – a series of renovated tenements -- was constructed in the spring and summer of 1935, but a site in Williamsburg, Brooklyn was the first choice for construction from scratch. In a flurry of articles and letters to the editor in the May 1934 *New York Times*, Platzker accused the incipient New York City Housing Authority of discriminating against the Lower East Side by not choosing to build a housing project there first. Enraged by Platzker’s comments, B. Charney Vladeck, a NYCHA member and ESCC member, resigned from the ESCC claiming that Platzker and the ESCC were only interested in rewarding landlords and property owners with inflated prices, rather than building where NYCHA could have the most impact. Vladeck further argued that if the Lower East Side wanted new housing, its landlords would have to sell their land at realistic – rather than speculative – rates. See *New York Times*, May 17-23, 1934.

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<sup>44</sup> Works Progress Administration for NYCHA, Statistical Department, "Analysis of Survey: Cycle Sub-Standard Area No. 2, Borough of Manhattan," Folder 2, Box 0056A2, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, February 23, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> *New York Times*, October 30, 1934.

<sup>47</sup> Maurice Deutsch, "Memorandum," Folder 3, Box 73C1, New York City Housing Authority Collection (hereafter "NYCHA"), LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>48</sup> ESCN, April 1932.

<sup>49</sup> William Ballard to Tenement House Department, January 20, 1934 in "Description of Work," Slum Clearance Committee, Folder 4, Box 55C6, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, New York, New York.

<sup>50</sup> Folder 20, Box 53A3, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College

<sup>51</sup> NYCHA requested two simultaneous studies from the WPA in the period January to April 1934. One studied the "Cycle-Substandard" areas and the other focused on areas that corresponded to the same boundaries proposed by the Slum Clearance Committee. Why this was done – and why different boundaries were in place for the same general area -- is a mystery. However the "Cycle-Substandard" studies were more finely textured, counting businesses, building types, and quality of residential structures, while the other reports analyzed only basic land-use and property taxes.

<sup>52</sup> City Planning Commission, *Adoption of a City-wide Map Showing Section Containing Areas for Clearance, Replanning and Low Rent Housing, As a Part of the Master Plan. Adopted January 2, 1940* (New York: City Planning Commission, 1940), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Citizens' Housing Council, *Report and Recommendations of the Committee on housing management, June 1938* (New York: Citizens' Housing Council, 1938).

<sup>54</sup> Ford, 441.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, May 3 1931.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Mele, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Wasserman, 64-65.

<sup>58</sup> Citizens' Council, "Preliminary Report and Recommendations of the Committee on City Planning and Zoning of the Citizens' Council," June 1938.

<sup>59</sup> See Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 94-6; Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 166.

<sup>60</sup> ESCN, June 1929.

<sup>61</sup> ESCN, August 1934.

<sup>62</sup> *New York Times*, February 7, 1937.

<sup>63</sup> *New York Times*, July 1, 1930.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times*, July 31, 1932.

<sup>65</sup> *New Yorker* Collection, 1936; reprinted in Mele, 104

<sup>66</sup> Wasserman, 120-123.

<sup>67</sup> Wasserman also argues that reformers' concerns over the citizenship status of many foreign-born Lower East Siders contributed to the notion that the area and its residents were "obsolete."

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She explores this most fully in her essay, “Our Alien Neighbors: Coping with the Depression on the Lower East Side,” *American Jewish History*, Volume 88, Number 2, June 2000: 209-232.

<sup>68</sup> Bartholomew and Associates, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Citizens’ Housing Council, “The Relation of Tax Delinquency...,” 16.

<sup>70</sup> Ford, 312.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 326

<sup>72</sup> Walter Laidlaw, ed. *Population of the City of New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Cities Census Committee, 1932), 85-86. One might guess that the decline in foreign-born residents in 1930 would also suggest that the population was “aging out,” or, in other words, that a large proportion of Lower East Siders were elderly. This was not the case. Laidlaw shows that in 1930, the largest proportion of Lower East Siders was in the range of 5 to 24 years old, with a smaller group represented in the 45 to 64 range. Those over 60 comprised the smallest proportion of the Lower East Side, rising to only as high as 6% of the population in the Corlears Hook area designated by Laidlaw’s code “M2A.”

<sup>73</sup> Jared Day, *Urban Castles: Tenement Housing and Landlord Activism in New York City, 1890-1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> Langdon Post to Mayor LaGuardia, Folder 3, Box 73C1, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>75</sup> “Manhattan Apartment Vacancies by Census Tract,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 132, August 5, 1933, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Works Progress Administration for NYCHA, Statistical Department, “Analysis of Survey: Cycle Sub-Standard Area No. 2, Borough of Manhattan,” Folder 2, Box 0056A2, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>77</sup> Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 46.

<sup>78</sup> New York City Housing Authority, “Report from Vacancy and Rehousing Bureau of NYCHA, Rehousing of Families Corlears Hook Area, June 23, 1939,” Folder 15, Box 54C3, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>79</sup> See Footnote 17.

<sup>80</sup> Ford, 525.

<sup>81</sup> Langdon Post to Mayor LaGuardia, Folder 3, Box 73C1, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College Long Island City, New York.

<sup>82</sup> “Statement on Behalf of the Housing Section, Welfare Council, United Neighborhood Houses and Other Social Welfare Agencies, December 15, 1936,” Folder 10, Box 53C1, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>83</sup> Vacancy Bureau to W.F. Howes, Proj. Eng., “Memorandum re: Evictions – Lower East Side,” January 1937, Folder 6, Box 55C5, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>84</sup> “Lehman Signs Bill to Halt Evictions,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1937.

<sup>85</sup> Abraham Cahan, “What Sense Is There In These Rent Strikes,” *Worker*, Apr. 17, 1904, quoted in Jenna Joselit, “The Landlord as Czar: Pre World War I Tenant Activity” in eds., Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 41.

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<sup>86</sup> Joseph A. Spencer, "New York City Tenant Organizations and the Post-World War Housing Crisis" in Lawson and Naison, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>87</sup> Mark Naison, "From Eviction Resistance to Rent Control: Tenant Activism in the Great Depression," in eds. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 101.

<sup>88</sup> Frank Miggs Regina interview by Helen Goodman, May 13, 1993, Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archives, New York, New York; Sol Rubin, interview by Helen Godman, May 10, 1993, Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archives, New York, New York.

<sup>89</sup> Naison, 107.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Naison, 110.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-118. Mark Naison argues that "The Party had no systematic analysis of housing issues and no legislative solution to the housing crisis." (106)

<sup>93</sup> *The Tenant*, Vol 1, No. 1, September 1938; *The Tenant*, Vol. 1, No. 2, September 1938; etc., Folder 1, Box 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York; Naison, 122.

<sup>94</sup> Norden to State, August 2, 1938, Folder 2, Box 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York. Norden also wrote scathing letters to Robert Moses and Al Smith regarding the bill, since neither politician voted in favor of it. See same folder.

<sup>95</sup> "Conference on Tenant Selection for Projects," *The Tenant*, Vol. 2, No. 3, March 13, 1940, Folder 1, Box 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York.

<sup>96</sup> *The Tenant*, Vol. 2, No. 4., May 1940, Folder 1, Box 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York.

<sup>97</sup> *The Tenant*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York.

<sup>98</sup> *East Side Tenant*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1937, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York..

<sup>99</sup> Vacancy Bureau to W.F. Howes, Proj. Eng., "Memorandum re: Evictions – Lower East Side," January 1937, Folder 6, Box 55C5, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>100</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 144.

<sup>101</sup> For the week ending September 21, 1936, the citywide totals showed that 80% of people vacating apartments were doing so for reasons other than government construction. 18% were evicted for non-payment of rent. On the Lower East Side, these totals were somewhat similar: 70% vacated for reasons other than government construction; 11% were evicted for non-payment of rent. Buildings were determined to be "unfit" for tenancy first by the Tenement House Department, which provided data for the Emergency Relief Bureau and the Vacancy Listing Bureau. While the criteria the Tenement House Department used are not available, it is safe to presume that "unfitness" was related to compliance with the Multiple Family Dwellings Law. "Vacancy Listing Bureau Applicants" September 21, 1936; "Conference on Vacancy Listing Bureau of WPA Project 65-97-201 -- NYCHA Sponsor," May 6, 1937 discussion between E.J.

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Bennett, Coordinating Committee for Federal Research Organizations and WPA and Wilfred S. Lewis, Secretary, NYCHA," Folder 11, Box 0055C5, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>102</sup> *The Tenant*, Vol. 1, No. 5, April 1939, Box 1, Folder 1, Heinz Norden Papers, Tamiment Collection, New York University, New York, New York.

<sup>103</sup> Naison, 130.

<sup>104</sup> Naison, 130.

<sup>105</sup> Ford, 591-2.

<sup>106</sup> Abraham Goldfeld and Lillian D. Robbins "What Happened to 386 Families Who Were Compelled to Vacate Their Slum Dwellings to Make Way for A Large Housing Project" (New York: Lavanburg Foundation and Hamilton House, 1933).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> New York City Housing Authority, "Report from Vacancy and Rehousing Bureau of NYCHA, Rehousing of Families Corlears Hook Area, June 23, 1939," Folder 15, Box 54C3, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>109</sup> Langdon Post, "Report Describing the Rehousing Operation Undertaken By the New York City Housing Authority Through its Vacancy Listing Bureau in Relocating 4,120 Families Displaced From Tenements Owned By Banks and Other Institutions During Period March 21t to September 30 1937, Dates, November 22, 1937," Folder 8, Box 53D7, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>110</sup> Alec Down to Alfred Rheinstein, memo dated May 11, 1938, Folder 7, Box 53E8, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York; Ford, 536.

<sup>111</sup> ESCN, February/March 1932.

<sup>112</sup> Works Progress Administration for NYCHA, Statistical Department, "Analysis of Survey: Cycle Sub-Standard Area No. 2, Borough of Manhattan," Folder 2, Box 0056A2, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>113</sup> Langdon Post statement before a meeting at the Office of the Mayor, Tuesday, December 15, 1936, Folder 3, Box 73C1, NYCHA, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, New York.

<sup>114</sup> The Community Service Society was founded in 1939 and represented the merger of the Charity Organization Society and the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), which overlapped in clientele.

<sup>115</sup> Community Service Society, "A Study of Housing and General Property Conditions in a Congested Urban Area. Made Jointly by the Staffs of the Department of Real Estate, School of Commerce, Accounts and Finance, New York University, and the Committee on Housing of the Community Service Society of New York, 1943 (originally research from 1941)" Housing Reports Folder, Box 419, Community Service Society Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University, New York New York.

<sup>116</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 113.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 115, 120.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 117, 122.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>121</sup> Lilly Daché, *Talking Through My Hats* (New York: Coward-Mcann, 1946), 59.

<sup>122</sup> This figure is a sum of the square footage for each Lower East Side housing project built before the end of the 1950s. See New York City Housing Authority web site:

<http://www.nycha.org/>

<sup>123</sup> Mele, 115.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Shifting Landscapes”

At the start of the 1950s, the Lower East Side once again began to transform. The exodus of second- and third-generation, white ethnic immigrants who had found an economic foothold in New York quickened as wave upon wave of the neighborhood’s residents resettled in the outer boroughs and suburbs of the city. The Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, intended to renew the housing stock of American cities and modernize urban spaces for a prosperous postwar future, sped the retreat of urban-dwellers who longed for the peace and possibility of the suburbs. Aging New York neighborhoods gave way to highways that ushered urbanites out of the tumultuous city; anachronistic industrial complexes were replaced by planned superblocks of high-rise housing. The Lower East Side, home to the second largest concentration of public housing in New York, became a haven for low-income New Yorkers displaced by the wrecking ball, but too poor to follow the path to jobs and housing elsewhere. This, in turn, fanned the flames of exodus for long-time Lower East Siders whose fortunes had risen. One resident, echoing Joseph Platzker’s assertion in an earlier era, argued that a lack of suitable middle-class housing on the Lower East Side meant that successful residents “of necessity had to move away.”<sup>1</sup> More philosophically, writer Delmore Schwartz, himself the son of Romanian Jewish immigrants who had met on the Lower East Side and started a family in Brooklyn, suggested that mobility was an elemental condition of life in New York: “The city in its very nature contains all the means of departure as well as return. Thus the city gives to the citizen a freedom from itself, and thus one might say this is the capital of departure.”<sup>2</sup> The desire to depart the “old neighborhood,” as Schwartz’s family did, or to maintain continuity with the neighborhood if conditions were favorable for doing so was a refrain that sounded throughout the postwar period

of urban renewal on the Lower East Side. And as had been the case for decades prior in that neighborhood, such desires were inextricable from the complexities of ethnicity and poverty as the population and the area's spaces underwent a drastic and contested overhaul.

In this chapter, I examine two organizations that hoped to represent Lower East Siders in their quest to refashion a neighborhood both attractive and attentive to their particular needs. Both the Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association (LENA) and Mobilization for Youth (MFY) represented distinctive visions for a renewed neighborhood that were bound up with divergent beliefs about the character and future prospects of the Lower East Side. Much as the East Side Chamber of Commerce and Lower East Side Planning Association had before, LENA believed that urban renewal could bring the chance for a "balanced neighborhood" of middle-class and low-income housing. As an outgrowth of Henry Street Settlement and a coalition of area settlement houses, churches, synagogues, and social service agencies, LENA's leaders considered themselves "insiders" with intimate knowledge of the Lower East Side. Moreover, they embraced collaboration with the city in producing a workable plan for the area. LENA believed it had the ability and the means to speak for a broad swath of Lower East Siders -- newcomers and "old-timers," Puerto Rican, Black, or White, and middle-class and poor alike. How accurate this self-assessment was, however, was a matter of perspective.

Mobilization for Youth, also a satellite of Henry Street Settlement but more influenced by its relationship with the Columbia School of Social Work, determined that LENA was not particularly successful in this endeavor at all. Envisioning a Lower East Side protected and modernized for its majority working-class population, MFY, steeped in academic and radical social theory developed "outside" the neighborhood, believed that LENA's objectives, though acceptably liberal in their embrace of racial and ethnic diversity and urban renewal, were also

woefully “middle-class.” In its desire for economic balance, MFY leaders argued, LENA denied the immediate needs and functional disenfranchisement of its working poor neighbors, particularly the Puerto Rican and Black residents who had more recently settled in the neighborhood. MFY also chided LENA for its faith in the willingness of city government to adhere to community-produced plans. More useful to Lower East Siders, MFY calculated, was training in the practices of radical citizenship – not just voting and attending town hall meetings, but organizing sit-ins and taking to the streets to demand improved housing and services. So, too, was social planning that would integrate job training and educational programs with the opportunity to rebuild the neighborhood. That LENA brushed off these tactics in favor of more traditional ones suggested to MFY leaders that its commitment to representing the entirety of the Lower East Side – especially its poor residents of color – was suspect. So, too, by association were its planning schemes.

Behind these differences, of course, were not only questions of race and ethnicity and “insider”/“outsider” status, but also whether the Lower East Side would continue to exist as an alien space set apart from the rest of the city, an urban wilderness requiring pioneering planning visions to bring it into alignment. While both groups agreed that the area needed rejuvenation, they could not settle on who would eventually live there. In a demographically shifting neighborhood, particularly one in which class status often correlated to ethnicity, this meant that contestation over space increasingly took place along ethnic lines. Therefore, the actuation of any plan, whether proposed by the more mainstream, “insider” LENA or the radical, “outsider” MFY, would necessarily mean the displacement of certain residents and the acceptance of certain others. This was reminiscent of the planning agendas of the 1930s, which were similarly unable to reconcile colossal plans with the everyday concerns of individual displacement. Ultimately,

as it turned out, neither LENA nor MFY, much like their predecessors, would succeed in bringing about the plan it wished to see. Racial, class-based, and ethnic animosity, as well as a chronic neglect of the neighborhood's built environment, however, lingered on.

### **The Changing Lower East Side**

With the passage of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, the slum clearance agenda of the 1930s and 1940s was replaced with a new term, "urban renewal," which was itself accompanied by a new set of priorities.<sup>3</sup> Urban renewal, financed by federal loans, made it possible for local governments to demolish and reconstruct areas of the city judged to be blighted and irreparable. While such developments typically, though not always, brought with them additional low-income housing for the poor who were displaced by demolition, the number of new units constructed was not equal to the number of units that were torn down. This was exacerbated by city-wide demographic change that not only altered the economic and ethnic composition of the city, but added to the demand for low-income housing. With 1.2 million middle-class New Yorkers leaving the city between 1950 and 1960 and almost half a million low-income migrants partly replenishing the population at the same time, the city's urban renewal administrators found themselves scrambling to plan for a city population fundamentally altered from the one that existed when the Housing Act was first passed. Moreover, of the middle-class residents who left, most were counted as racially "white," while the majority of newcomers were considered non-white – mostly Puerto Rican and Black.<sup>4</sup> The net loss of population to the city was an astounding 800,000 in the 1950s, yet this did not temper the need for new and affordable housing or the racial and ethnic tension that dramatic demographic change brought with it.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the combination of a transforming population and displacement due to urban renewal, Rose Albert Porter, the first director of LENA, noted early in the 1950s that “more and more of the displaced people from even more violently changing neighborhoods elsewhere in the city” were funneled into the affordable private and public housing of the Lower East Side. “The school statistics given out in June,” she noted, “were no longer valid in September as the ethnic divisions showed a steady rise in new arrivals, and the departure of old neighbors.”<sup>6</sup> This population turnover would continue to accelerate for the next two decades, but, since the Lower East Side was not the primary destination for new migrants as it was for new immigrants, change was slow-moving compared to other parts of the city.<sup>7</sup> The Community Council of Greater New York (formerly the Welfare Council) found that more than fifty percent of Lower East Siders qualified as “continental native white” in 1955, while almost 12% of the population was coded as “Puerto Rican,” “Negro,” or “Other nonwhite races.”<sup>8</sup> This constituted a marked increase in non-white residents in the area since 1930.<sup>9</sup> During the same period of time, however, non-white newcomers to the Lower East Side were joined by a small, but measurable, influx of white, Eastern European immigrants who had fled the destruction of World War II and subsequent Soviet occupation. The area’s rooted, working-class, Ukrainian population was augmented by new residents from not only Ukraine, but Romania, Poland, Russia, and Austria as well.<sup>10</sup> While the invigoration of the Eastern European community certainly changed the ethnic make-up of the Lower East Side, it did not greatly change its racial composition. For most of the 1950s, the Lower East Side remained primarily white.

By the end of the 1960s, however, as urban renewal struck down more than 314 acres of New York neighborhoods, the racial shift there was more starkly demarcated: In Health District 76, composed of the area between the East River and Ridge Street/Clinton Street/Avenue B and

Grand Street to East 6<sup>th</sup> Street, 39.2% of the population was of Puerto Rican descent in 1970 and 2,000 to 3,000 non-Puerto Rican Spanish speakers made homes there, as well. Just to the west of this area in District 67, 46.1% of the population was either from Puerto Rico or had parents who were born there; District 63, just to the north of District 76 all the way to Fourteenth Street had a concentration of 43.8% first- and second-generation Puerto Rican residents. Overall, between 2,000 and 10,000 Lower East Siders of Puerto Rican descent lived in each of the neighborhood's health districts. As this data demonstrated, the concentration of Puerto Ricans tended toward certain areas of the Lower East Side -- namely, the eastern sections where the majority of public housing was located.<sup>11</sup> This was true for Black Lower East Siders as well. Sociologist Christopher Mele traces this spatial distribution back to the 1960 census, suggesting that "a gradient formed in which the percentage of minority residents declined with greater distance west of Riis and Wald public housing...a pattern [that] remains today."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, even though the racial and ethnic transformation of the Lower East Side occurred over a longer period of time than in some other parts of the city, the area still constituted one of the most ethnically and spatially divided sections of New York during the period of postwar urban renewal.<sup>13</sup>

Lower East Siders starkly felt the tensions of demographic change and displacement. One 1958 article on the relocation activities that took place before construction of the cooperative Seward Park Houses on Grand Street reported that while "much of the housing scheduled for demolition is not fit to live in by any standards of health and decency...many people find it a hardship to move mainly because ties with old neighborhoods are abruptly severed." More distressingly, "Negro and Puerto Rican families often find that apartments in new neighborhoods are not open to them." Thirty-six percent of the relocated tenants comprised the latter group. Meanwhile, only about twenty percent of tenants displaced by the project

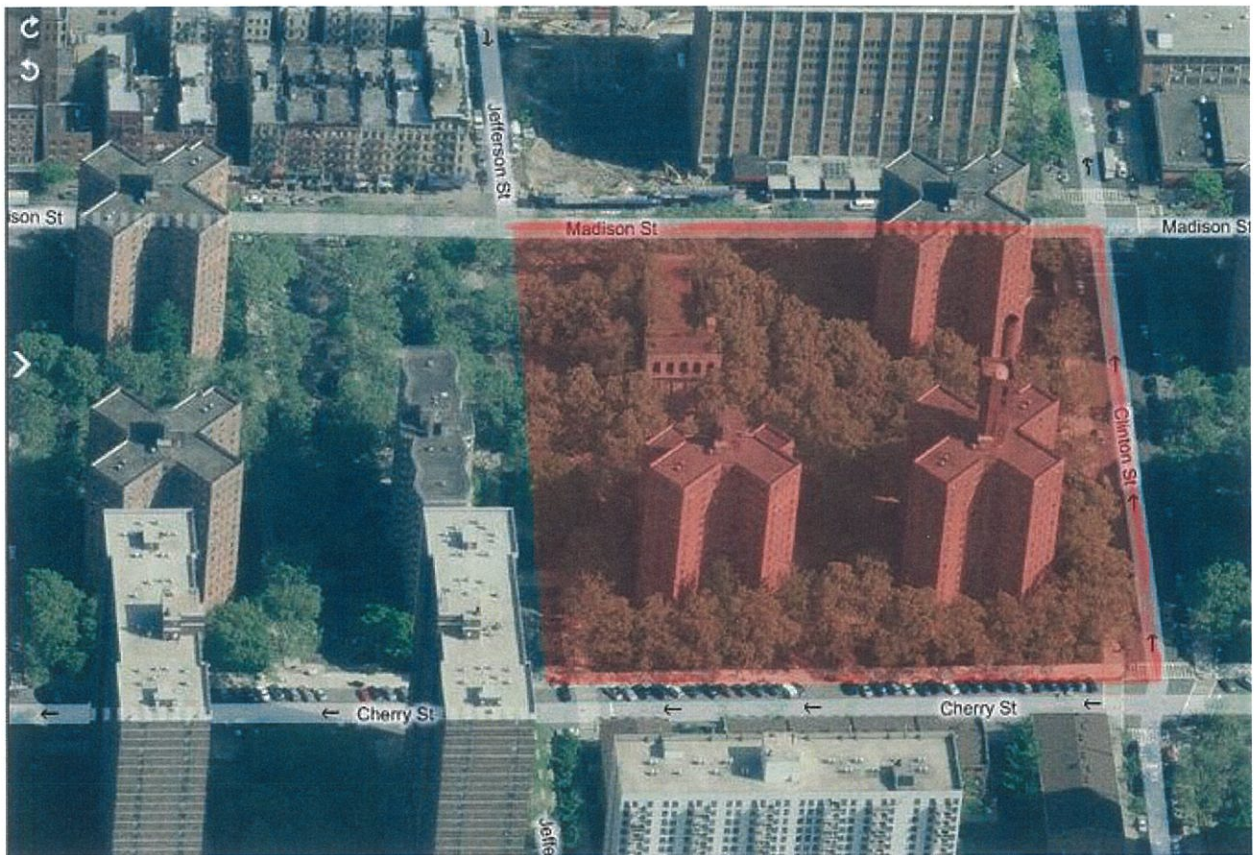


Fig. 17: A 1950 street scene on Monroe Street before the area was demolished to build LaGuardia Houses (top photo, courtesy of the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College) Aerial view of LaGuardia Houses today, located near a series of postwar public and cooperative housing developments (bottom, courtesy of Corlears Hook Studio.)

earned enough income to apply to live in it, and twenty-eight percent were eligible to live in public housing. This left almost half the displaced residents in search of affordable private housing in a market that was clearly limited.<sup>14</sup> Remembering her own dislocation from her Lower East Side neighborhood in the 1960s, Nilda Rivera noted that “Once the buildings in that area were destroyed, a lot of the people that lived there were, not only Puerto Ricans, a lot of Jewish people lived there and they just moved away.”<sup>15</sup> Mitch Kupfer, who had grown up on a primarily Jewish block in the 1950s then moved with his family to the Gompers Houses on Pitt Street in 1964 remembered a dramatic shift in terms of racial and ethnic diversity: “I didn’t have a problem integrating with the black and Chinese and Puerto Rican kids because I was always very athletic, so I always played sports with other people...But my brother had problems. As anything, when you have different groups of people that aren’t used to being next to each other, it happens.”<sup>16</sup> Victor Papa, an Italian-American Lower East Sider, observed a similar phenomenon: “My peers were largely white ethnic; Italian-Americans, Polish, Irish, a lot of Irish. I grew up in the fifties, and in the later fifties began to see changes in the community, which was that Alfred E. Smith projects having been built, displaced a very large Italian, Greek, and Spanish (from Spain) population, replacing them with the new ethnic-minority emigrating Puerto Rican [sic] to New York, and a very small black population. That kind of changed things in the community, and I do recall the racial and gang tensions in the late fifties.”<sup>17</sup>

Displacement, relocation, migration, and immigration, therefore, put strains on the community networks that had long existed on the Lower East Side, as well as among the newcomers who were just beginning to plant roots there. The added dimensions of racial and ethnic change, along with their association with the spatial politics of housing, also divided neighborhood loyalties and increased interethnic hostility. Against this turmoil, the Lower

Eastside Neighborhoods Association and Mobilization for Youth hoped to offer a plan, not only for the reconciliation of an increasingly fragmented population, but for a built environment that would stabilize the Lower East Side's future, whatever each organization determined that future to be.

### **Experimentation**

In the mid-1950s, the Henry Street Settlement, long an epicenter of reform activity on the Lower East Side, gained notoriety as a crucible of experimentation in the effort to increase democratic participation in municipal governance. The first project to come out of the institution was the local coalition, the Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association (LENA), which emerged in 1954 from concerns voiced by Helen Hall, director of Henry Street, and her colleagues about the rise of juvenile delinquency on the Lower East Side. Later, the federally-funded demonstration project, Mobilization for Youth, would also develop from furtive meetings at Henry Street about the same, lingering problems.

In Hall's telling, the seven community founders of LENA, including herself, were attracted to the issue of juvenile delinquency because of the recent rise of gang violence in the area. According to Mele, between 1951 and 1960, the Lower East Side recorded the highest concentration of juvenile delinquency in the metropolis, while city-wide at the same time, the incidence of gang activity was at its highest in history. Hall and her colleagues diagnosed the source of gang conflict on the Lower East Side as both a spatial and an inter-ethnic one. Only a total community effort, the LENA founders believed, could defuse escalating youth violence. This would require outreach to an array of institutions and residents, as well as a commitment to

representing the ethnic diversity on the Lower East Side. Conflict could only be quelled, these leaders argued, through unity and common cause.

As Director of Henry Street Settlement, Helen Hall and her colleagues represented a long tradition in New York reform circles that was tied to faith in both local consensus-building and the power of well-organized civic organizations to influence city government.

Sociologist Richard Cloward, who would later help form Mobilization for Youth and who worked closely with Hall, explained that “whether it was community organizing, or whether it was litigation, Helen Hall did not want to offend liberal political figures because she and other settlement figures thought that much of the progress in New York City came about because of their close relations with this political stratum.”<sup>18</sup> When LENA was established, Hall was not only involved in its board, but in long-established tenants’ organizations; the Neighborhood and Redevelopment Board of the good-government group, the Citizens Council; the advisory committee to the New York State Consumer Counsel; and the city’s newly-established community planning board, a community-based municipal unit that was intended to give citizens official advisory roles in city governance. Historian Marci Reaven has suggested that leaders such as Hall “often combined service on the [community planning] boards with other types of civic engagement...These types of interactions forged links among the different forms of citizen participation taking place, helping to create a broader public for its practice.”<sup>19</sup> While this type of multi-pronged civic activism did allow for greater dissemination of the discourse of citizen participation and perhaps drew in more of the public, as Reaven argues, this did not necessarily help Hall achieve the consensus she sought on the Lower East Side. It did, however, place LENA in a favorable position with city agencies because it aligned with the liberal values of city leaders. As LENA took root in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, expanding its programmatic

goals to include the improved provision of social services, as well as planning for the area's physical spaces, its advice was sought by, among others, the City Planning Commission and Housing and Redevelopment Board.

When it came to actually attracting an ethnically diverse array of supporters, however, LENA struggled. Shifting demography, of course, challenged LENA's ability to speak to and for the widening range of Lower East Side constituents in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the organization's stated hopes for integration and – echoing the words of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council -- “balance.” Also contributing to LENA's colossal task was its own definition of the Lower East Side as an enormous, but clearly demarcated area with a unique identity. Armed with a small pocket map of the city at their inaugural meeting, the founders of LENA identified their area of interest as “the Lower East Side, from Fourteenth Street down” – that is, Fourteenth Street to Brooklyn Bridge, Third Avenue/Bowery/Park Row to the East River. They were familiar boundaries, stretching back more than half a century and enduring through the early decades of NYCHA and the City Planning Commission. The blocks within this expanse, wrote Hall, were “too interdependent and too interdelinquent for us to stop at any one small neighborhood.”<sup>20</sup> This, along with the organization's commitment to maintaining ethnic, social, and economic diversity within that area, however, made its project an unusual, noble – and ultimately doomed one. Rather than acknowledging that the ethnic friction it witnessed among juvenile delinquents was tied to political and economic disparities that were spatially inscribed in real, legible, community turfs, LENA saw all of its residents as equal political subjects with an equal stake in the future of the vast area. In this way, LENA hoped to coalesce all of its constituents under a kind of united, territorial pride that downplayed any other differences or identities that may have divided their allegiances. This faith in the

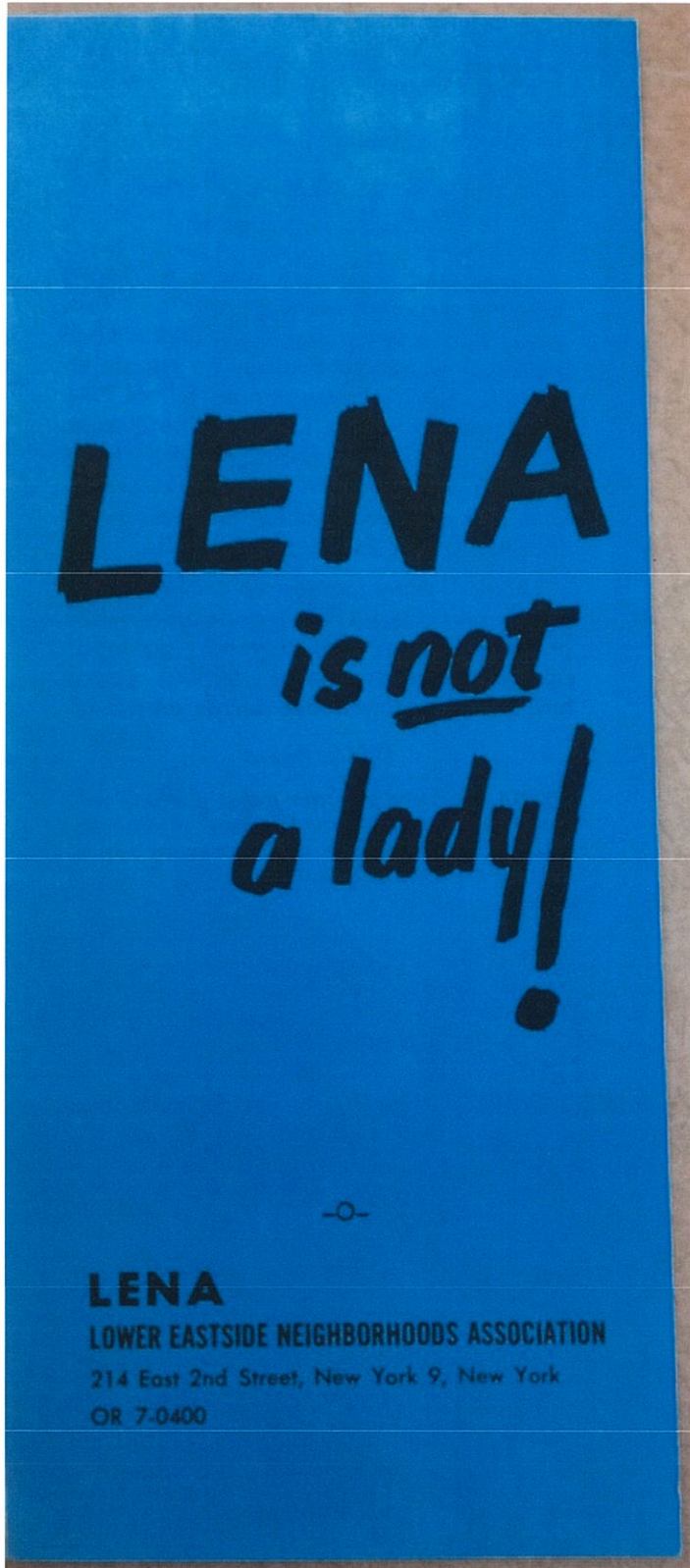


Fig. 18: Pamphlet for LENA. From the Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library.

interdependence of Lower East Side neighborhoods and in the equal access of all willing residents to the seats of democratic participation were the core values behind LENA's work, but also the seeds of its downfall.

In the same vein and as the more radical leaders of Mobilization for Youth would later contend, LENA's concepts of diversity and consensus-buildings were decidedly "middle class." That is, rather than attempting to innovate its organizational structure, alter its organizing methods, or consider its interpretations of the Lower East Side's planning problems to be provisional until more citizen participation – particularly from low-income newcomers – was achieved, LENA chose to be relatively traditional in its approach.<sup>21</sup> It assumed on behalf of Lower East Siders both political literacy and trust in the democratic process. Moreover, in terms of planning, its vision was never to strongly advocate for the low-income residents of the Lower East Side, but to stabilize the middle-class, so that greater "balance" could be achieved throughout the area. Treating diversity as a measurable planning goal – akin to checking off boxes on a questionnaire or adding up ethnic identifications on a census – was the predominant theme in LENA's planning work. In three of its ventures -- the creation of a community-wide map, the cultivation of neighborhood councils, and the development of a planning and housing policy – LENA's conservative interpretation of the "balanced neighborhood" and its wavering attempts to gain the support of a broad base of Lower East Side residents illustrated the limitations of its approach.

Its first project – the map – was intended to help the local coalition, as well as government officials, conceptualize what LENA meant when it referred to the Lower East Side as a single, capacious entity. It hoped such a graphical representation of the area would support the claim that the Lower East Side's neighborhoods were not distinct and independent units, but

were rather interlocking and overlapping circles. Moreover, a map showing “every street, by name, every major thoroughway, all projects and cooperatives, schools, playgrounds, settlements, churches, business areas” would, as map-proponent and early LENA member Albert Kennedy of the National Federation of Settlements explained it, spotlight the uneven distribution of neighborhood resources. Seeing the ways in which institutions crowded together in one area and neglected others – or how open space yawned between the public housing projects on the East River, but barely penetrated the blocks to the west – could give a sense of how residents experienced the spaces of the Lower East Side. And if “the ebb and flow of a resident’s life seems to determine his neighborhood,” as LENA members would later argue, then a graphical representation of the landmarks of everyday life might provide a clue as to how these residents’ pathways were drawn and what obstacles might lay in the way of a rational plan.<sup>22</sup>

More than a simple reflection of the area’s physical characteristics, Kennedy also proposed that some indication of its demography be added to the map so that “population density and ethnic groupings” could be figured into any analysis the map might arouse. This revived a historical tendency that had been lost during the earlier slum clearance decades to view the Lower East Side not simply as a set of boundaries within which the city might be rebuilt for modern needs, but also as an assortment of ethnic groups bound together by social ties and shared spaces. While there is no evidence to suggest that Kennedy was aware of the historical tradition of mapping poverty and ethnicity on the Lower East Side – specifically through the maps of the Tenement House and Congestion Exhibits of the early twentieth century – the similarity in strategy is worthy of note. As those maps had, LENA’s map demonstrated a linkage between social problems, ethnicity, and density that had the potential to become more legible when represented spatially. Unlike earlier maps, however, LENA did not use ethnicity as an

indicator of social problems, conflating ethnicity with poverty and pathology. Nor did it cast ethnicity and social problems as endemic to a corrupted Lower East Side. Rather, LENA mapped ethnicity to show that there was a relationship between one's ethnic and racial background and how likely it was that one would live close to neighborhood resources such as a library or recreational facility. In other words, LENA's map made clear that the area required better planning so that services could be delivered properly to *all* of its residents; the people themselves were not the source of the Lower East Side's social ills.

It took an estimated one thousand hours of labor to produce the final map, which, when completed, measured six by ten feet in size. Rose Albert Porter, LENA's first director, described the scene when the map was finally revealed to LENA constituents from various Lower East Side organizations: walking up to it, they not only identified their own institutions, but immediately remarked upon how bereft the area was of play-space and how uninterrupted and "isolated" was the phalanx of low-income housing projects along the East River. Hall herself found the "bright green we used to designate parks," few though there were, particularly eye-catching.<sup>23</sup> As Porter put it, with the map, "The planlessness of the city changes became all too apparent."<sup>24</sup> Later, when LENA staff met with city officials about planning for the Lower East Side, they relied on the map's persuasive power to lure supporters to their side: at meeting after meeting, LENA workers such as Porter hauled the massive object into the room, set it up, and referred to it in their presentations. In this way, "the map," Hall wrote in her autobiography, "took on meaning for everyone."<sup>25</sup>

While the map was meant to help Lower East Siders and the officials who decided their fate envision the area as a totality, LENA understood that strengthening the Lower East Side's component parts was also crucial to cultivating a unified and effective political voice. On one

level, this was done through the recruitment of board members who were to represent the ethnic diversity of the Lower East Side. On another, it was done through the sponsorship and coordination of neighborhood councils that represented smaller regions of the Lower East Side in matters such as health care, education, and, of course, planning.

While the first board of LENA was decidedly part of the old guard, with Henry Street's Helen Hall, William Calise, and Ralph Tefferteller occupying prominent roles in the organization, seven of the more than thirty original members were representatives of small, Puerto Rican churches in the area and one, Father Kilmer Myers, was pastor of the predominantly African American St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel.<sup>26</sup> In the mid-1960s, board members included Humberto Aponte of the Executive Committee of the Puerto Rican Organization of The Lower East Side; Edward G. Byrne, priest at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church; William Chang, editor of the Chinese-American News; Father Jeffree Cuffee, minister of St. Augustine's; Donald Hauser of the Bowery Savings Bank; and David I. Kaplan, member of the East Side Chamber of Commerce and former principal of P.S. 110 on Delancey Street. In 1968, Alwin Davis, who was African American, took over the position of Executive Director, and was supported by a board that was majority Puerto Rican and African American, a composition that reflected the ethnic transformation of the area.<sup>27</sup> Still, as Hall would later note when discussing the founding of MFY, the recruitment of specifically *low-income* people of color to join LENA's cause remained a challenge throughout its tenure.<sup>28</sup>

LENA encountered this obstacle again through its sponsorship of the neighborhood councils. Between five and six councils, representing different corners of the Lower East Side and operating for varying lengths of time in LENA's history, were coordinated under its umbrella and acted on behalf of their own geographic sections, each with the assistance of a full-

time LENA staff member. These included The Good Neighbors Council, the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, the North East Neighborhood Association, and the Hamilton Fish Park Neighborhood Council, among others. The Good Neighbors Council, located on Suffolk and Delancey Streets tended to have a mostly Jewish clientele, while the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, located in the southeastern-most corner of the area, was “once primarily Italian, Jewish and Irish...[and] now a polyglot community with thousands of new Puerto Rican, Chinese and Negro families.”<sup>29</sup> The Hamilton Fish Park Neighborhood Council focused its energies on the area just north of the Good Neighbors’ area and was active only briefly between 1961 and 1962. Its constituency consisted mostly of tenants at the Baruch Houses and Lavanburg Homes, who represented a mixture of Jewish and Puerto Rican residents. The North East Neighborhood Association, also known as NENA, was one of the more successful councils and organized the area from Fourteenth Street down to Houston, Avenue B to the East River – a section of the Lower East Side that was comprised almost completely of public housing complexes. Because so much of the area had already been “planned,” NENA’s work tended to revolve around issues of public health, education, and housing.<sup>30</sup> By the late 1960s, it was running its own health center with a \$350,000 grant from the Health Services and Mental Health Administration of the Public Health Service.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, a fifth neighborhood council dedicated to the Cooper Square Urban Renewal Area between Delancey and East 9<sup>th</sup> Streets, Third Avenue/Bowery and Second Avenue, was managed by an alternative organization of activists, the Cooper Square Committee, who devoted their energies specifically to more democratic planning.<sup>32</sup> While the Cooper Square Committee was sponsored by LENA as a neighborhood council until 1960, the two parted ways over a series of disagreements, possibly involving the definition of a “balanced neighborhood.”<sup>33</sup> At one

point in late 1965 or early 1966, LENA applied to the federal Office of Economic Opportunity for funding to establish a replacement neighborhood council in the area -- what it called the "St. Mark's-Cooper Square Area," bounded by Fourteenth Street, Avenue B, Houston Street, and Broadway. After the split with the Cooper Square Committee, this primarily Slavic and Ukrainian neighborhood was underrepresented in the larger LENA constituency and LENA argued that it required more concentrated poverty relief than was being delivered through other service providers. It is not clear whether LENA received funding to organize this section of the Lower East Side, but, in terms of planning and galvanizing the community around an urban renewal battle, the Cooper Square Committee would continue to be the dominant force. LENA's effort to reconnect the Cooper Square neighborhood to the rest of its council coalition, however, is a testament to its desire to remain active in all reaches of the Lower East Side, as well as to maintain a degree of diversity among its supporters.<sup>34</sup> Even so, the goal of diversity seemed increasingly unattainable.

Despite what it believed to be its best efforts, LENA and its neighborhood councils continually failed in "achieving economic and ethnic balance" in its constituency, calling the attraction of diverse representatives to the cause its "most difficult problem."<sup>35</sup> This was not only because LENA encountered complications in sustaining the councils administratively and financially. Nor was it entirely a spatial problem as councils debated over whether it was more accurate to define their territories through boundaries or "geographical center[s]."<sup>36</sup> Rather, as the case of the Cooper Square Committee demonstrated, there was sometimes disagreement about core principles, particularly what both diversity and citizen participation meant.

In a series of workshops in the spring of 1963, LENA organizers met to discuss ways to "further strengthen and define Councils as instruments of neighborhood unity, planning and

action, with LENA's Board as the ultimate instrument of unity, planning and action for the total Lower East Side."<sup>37</sup> Workshop participants finally determined that the councils did not appeal to large segments of the Lower East Side's residents, partly because the councils' public meetings were generally formal, relying on parliamentary procedure, and partly because they had made no real effort to reach out to the non-English-speaking population. LENA admitted that its task was not so much to attract supporters from all economic and ethnic backgrounds, but to court "newer" groups in such a way that "older groups" might realize "that low income groups have much to contribute as well as to gain in such a council." Fostering the "receptivity" of long-term residents to the contributions and ideas of their new neighbors was as much a challenge as was attracting newcomers to the project.<sup>38</sup>

This delicate predicament may have contributed to decisions LENA made that, in the end, undermined its very ability to achieve real diversity. While LENA did claim to want to develop "leadership on a grass roots level," its discomfort with more improvisational or non-traditional methods of reaching out to clients was evident. MFY, for example, had opened a combination café/drop-in center for neighborhood youth, created a "Lower East Side" teaching curriculum for local teachers about the historical and contemporary institutions of the neighborhood, and directly funded resident-proposed and resident-staffed organizing projects.<sup>39</sup> LENA took a more top-down approach. Moreover, "citizen participation," in LENA's definition, required formal and established rules. In addressing the issue of parliamentary procedure, for example, organizers decided the best solution would be to have smaller, language-specific meetings in addition to more formal meetings – "until those who have difficulty with the English language develop [sic] leadership and influence and thus do not always feel like underdogs at large meetings." Such arrangements, while well-intentioned, still favored those for

whom language and procedures posed no obstacles. Rather than altering the structure of the councils' meetings or the greater LENA hierarchy in which each council functioned, then, LENA's decision to train potential clients to better fit into the established scheme worked against its ultimate goals.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, just as LENA presumed that residents' dedication to the Lower East Side territory would override their other differences, the methods LENA chose to attract new participants were generally uninformed about the political and social issues, often revolving around class and ethnicity, that mattered to – and divided -- many Lower East Siders. These differences would come up time and again when problems like narcotics usage, assaults against the Orthodox Jewish community by non-Jewish youth, and tensions over the removal of the principal at Seward Park High School enflamed Lower East Side residents. Rather than face such controversies head-on, however, LENA turned to more innocuous tactics such as newsletter distribution and social gatherings, orchestral concerts by the river and arts festivals, to strengthen its ties to the area's many different residents.<sup>41</sup> Evidence from the minutes of LENA meetings later in the 1960s suggest that these overtures met with little success in increasing the diversity of LENA's base.

When it was not busy devising strategies to tempt newcomers into the LENA project, the organization turned its attention to creating – and then implementing -- a physical plan for the Lower East Side that would ready it for “balanced neighborhoods.” In perhaps its most straightforward statement of purpose, LENA published in 1961 a master document, “Plan for Urban Living,” which was meant to outline in detail how the Lower East Side should be re-planned to address its social, as well as physical, needs. Anchored in the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council's definition of a “balanced neighborhood,” outlined in their 1960 pamphlet A

*New Look At: The Balanced Neighborhood* by Elizabeth Wood, LENA's "Plan for Urban Living" explained that "balance" in a heterogeneous area such as the Lower East Side required adequate facilities for old and young, poor and wealthy, non-white and white, and everyone in-between.<sup>42</sup> In addition to demographic equilibrium, diversity in housing, architecture, design aesthetics, and landscaping were also necessary. These recommendations were consistent with early discussions within the LENA Housing Committee that there was a "need for a balanced community" and that "since the East Side was now predominantly low income," middle income housing should be favored until such balance was achieved.<sup>43</sup>

Elizabeth Wood had suggested that urban renewal planners misunderstood and minimized the importance of established neighborhoods, particularly when it came to the destruction wrought by urban renewal. However, her proposals on behalf of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council also presumed that balance and diversity needed to be introduced to neighborhoods through good planning, that these sought-after qualities were not already in place. Her pamphlet was intended to guide urban renewal administrators to better conceptualize the ultimate purpose of their work, which she asserted was the establishment and maintenance of a mixed and heterogeneous population in an area redesigned with modern facilities. Far from suggesting that the urban renewal concept was essentially flawed or even that demolition of neighborhoods was unjust, Wood began from the assumption that the city required renewal and that government, when it was the administrator of that renewal, was compelled to deliver appealing, healthy, and livable urban spaces in exchange. Such work would only win support from those who had heretofore bristled against urban renewal – business interests, displaced individuals and families – if the ultimate product was directly beneficial to them. The "balanced neighborhood," Wood argued, was precisely the product urban renewal administrators should be

crafting: “Variety and diversity is the basic characteristic of cities...The city as a whole requires heterogeneity.”<sup>44</sup> With this variety, she claimed, commerce, industry, social life, and democracy would thrive.

LENA made diversity of population its own planning goal, as well, reasoning that the purpose of any comprehensive plan for the Lower East Side needed to be “to develop an ethnically, racially, and economically balanced community.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of physical planning, LENA believed that the full complement of planning strategies – low-rise public housing, middle-income cooperatives, luxury housing, vest-pocket projects, greater home-ownership, and the construction of shared community facilities – should be utilized to achieve balance in the area.<sup>46</sup> While the Lower East Side already contained elements of most of these, LENA felt that planners had failed to approach the area with sensitivity. On the one hand, those who were fixed on clearance had a tendency to see the Lower East Side from a bird’s eye view as one atavistic space, lousy with the pathologies of the slum. On the other, those who saw some difference between the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side implemented the more subtle tools of planning – like vest-pocket development or cooperative housing – only in the parts of the area that appeared stable and, although never stated explicitly, middle-class. LENA asserted that it wanted the best of both worlds. Like Wood’s pamphlet for the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, LENA’s plan promoted “balance” as a realistic and humanistic vision that contrasted with the total demolition and displacement of past urban renewal policy; also like Wood’s argument, however, it assumed that displacement was an inevitable and a fair sacrifice to be made on behalf of a healthier and stronger city. If the Lower East Side was currently imbalanced because of the high percentage of low-income residents, then they certainly would face relocation to accommodate the needs of new middle-income ones.

The “Plan for Urban Living” conceived of the Lower East Side as a mosaic of seventeen separate planning units identified through a block-by-block survey conducted by LENA staff. These units, which drew directly from Clarence Perry’s “neighborhood unit” concept -- itself revived by Elizabeth Wood for the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council -- were treated as distinct slices of the area, each requiring its own balance in terms of population and built structures. In his proposal for the Regional Plan Association in 1929, Perry had determined that each neighborhood unit required its own elementary school and community facilities, a population of no more than 1,500 families, and a spatial measure of between fifty and two hundred fifty acres each. In determining its own units, LENA was less structured and relied more on the dominant type of housing it observed in its smaller areas, labeling each unit “good,” “fair,” or “bad.” Based on these qualifiers, certain units would require more demolition than others. But LENA also made clear that, while new construction would be necessary, it hoped to “rebuild without losing the undeniable charm and character of the Lower East Side.” In fact, as its staff observed, the kind of “balance and diversity” it sought through greater social and physical planning was often to be found in many rent-controlled, Old Law tenements on the Lower East Side. Though LENA suggested that this was “strange” and “purely by coincidence” – rather than a product of the flexibility rent-control provided low-income city dwellers or evidence of what Jane Jacobs called “spontaneous unslumming” – it was still somewhat protective of such housing, even if it did not meet high standards of livability otherwise.<sup>47</sup> In later proposals from the mid-1960s, LENA would continue to imagine a Lower East Side of mixed housing that included renovated tenements, as well as more modern construction.

LENA’s “Plan for Urban Living” cast the Lower East Side as a city within a city, an area so large – yet coherent – that it required its own central business district, as well as a centralized

location for all of its public services, including a library, health facilities, a police precinct, and a community auditorium. Rather than dispersing commercial areas throughout its seventeen planning units, LENA's vision was to establish a commercial "downtown" where neighbors could meet while leisurely shopping or running errands. This suggestion, together with the other points of its plan, was intended to give residents "a stake in their communities," while providing the conditions for the "most vital areas in any renewal project": balance and integration.<sup>48</sup> Also central to the plan was the claim that it had been "initiated and produced by the community" and that, if federal renewal funding required citizen participation, LENA's 90-page proposal was a model for what a community plan would look like.<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that as late as 1965, the Comprehensive Planning Committee of Community Board 3 (the community planning board for the Lower East Side) also considered LENA's plan an effective model for working with the City Planning Commission.<sup>50</sup> Still, while the "Plan for Urban Living" was introduced to the public at a well-attended LENA conference titled "New Horizons in Urban Living" in May of 1961, and while it was submitted to the city's Housing and Redevelopment Board, members of which attended and spoke at the May conference, the plan had little traction with the Board when it came to actual implementation.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, by 1965, Mobilization for Youth, which was quickly becoming LENA's main rival in organizing the Lower East Side around social welfare issues, had hired its own planner, Peter Abeles, to come up with another comprehensive proposal for the area.<sup>52</sup>

### **Forging a New Plan**

Like LENA, Mobilization for Youth (MFY) was conceived at Henry Street Settlement and was aimed at combatting the apparent rise of juvenile delinquency on the Lower East Side.

Its goals were more focused and experimental than those of LENA, but, at least initially, Henry Street administrators envisioned LENA and MFY working in partnership. At a June 1957 meeting, Helen Hall met with representatives of the J.M. Kaplan Fund who agreed to provide initial investment in the preparation of a grant proposal for MFY. Within only a few years, other funding would come from the Taconic Foundation, the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, the New York City budget, and the National Institutes of Mental Health. In 1960, MFY would undergo what it called a "demonstration" period, testing its novel approach with a target population and laying groundwork for future efforts; by 1962, it was being spotlighted by President John F. Kennedy as the pilot in a series of federally-funded anti-poverty campaigns.

The original goal of MFY, again similar to LENA, was to apply the hard-won wisdom of settlement social work to the Lower East Side to measure the impact adequate funding could have on the success of established social work methods. Unlike LENA, however, MFY was focused on a relatively constrained study area – Lower East Side health districts 63, 67, 72, 78, and 80 – and it was partnered with pioneering theorists affiliated with the Columbia School of Social Work who also hoped to use MFY as a springboard for innovating the field of social work beyond New York.<sup>53</sup> Because of the terms of its funding, particularly from the National Institutes of Mental Health, MFY was expected to experiment with cutting-edge, sociological research, most of which was anchored in the idea that deviant behaviors such as delinquency were an outgrowth of entrenched poverty and practical disenfranchisement. The tension between the traditionalists of Henry Street Settlement and the social entrepreneurs hailing from Columbia, then, would be built into the very foundations of MFY and distinguish the latter's approach to its programs from that of LENA.

Historian Noel Cazenave has argued that the real, determining differences between the settlement leaders who directed LENA and the more radical theorists and activists who would manage MFY were also political. While LENA was secure in its traditional approach to organizing and was satisfied to work within government structures to move forward its reform proposals, MFY functioned under the assumption that government itself required modification and was best improved by direct agitation from the outside. Similarly, while LENA and its representatives from Henry Street believed that poverty could be eradicated through the saturation of social services – a method they argued had not been effectively tried due to the lack of a robust funding stream and not because of nefarious municipal governance or neglect – MFY leaders asserted that poverty was the result of an ailing democracy and that only vigorous instruction in the rights of citizenship could lead the poor to better resources. Despite their shared origins at Henry Street, as well as shared board members and, briefly, shared funding, the solutions each group devised for the core problem of juvenile delinquency and the broader problems of poverty, were therefore dramatically different. Put plainly, LENA’s approach was a version of “more of the same” – an expansion of reach and services and close alliance with city officials, as well as a more concerted appeal to newcomers to join its network; MFY, rather, hoped to alter the structures of power in New York and redefine what democracy and citizenship might mean for the poor by, as its leaders put it, “expanding opportunity” through voter registration drives, direct action, and self-help.

Urban citizenship was, therefore, central to both the LENA and MFY projects. LENA represented a model of what good citizenship looked like and hoped to bring its new residents into that formula. MFY, on the other hand, saw the current citizenship practices on the Lower East Side as exclusive and sedate. Indeed, its earliest programs, MFY administrators reported,

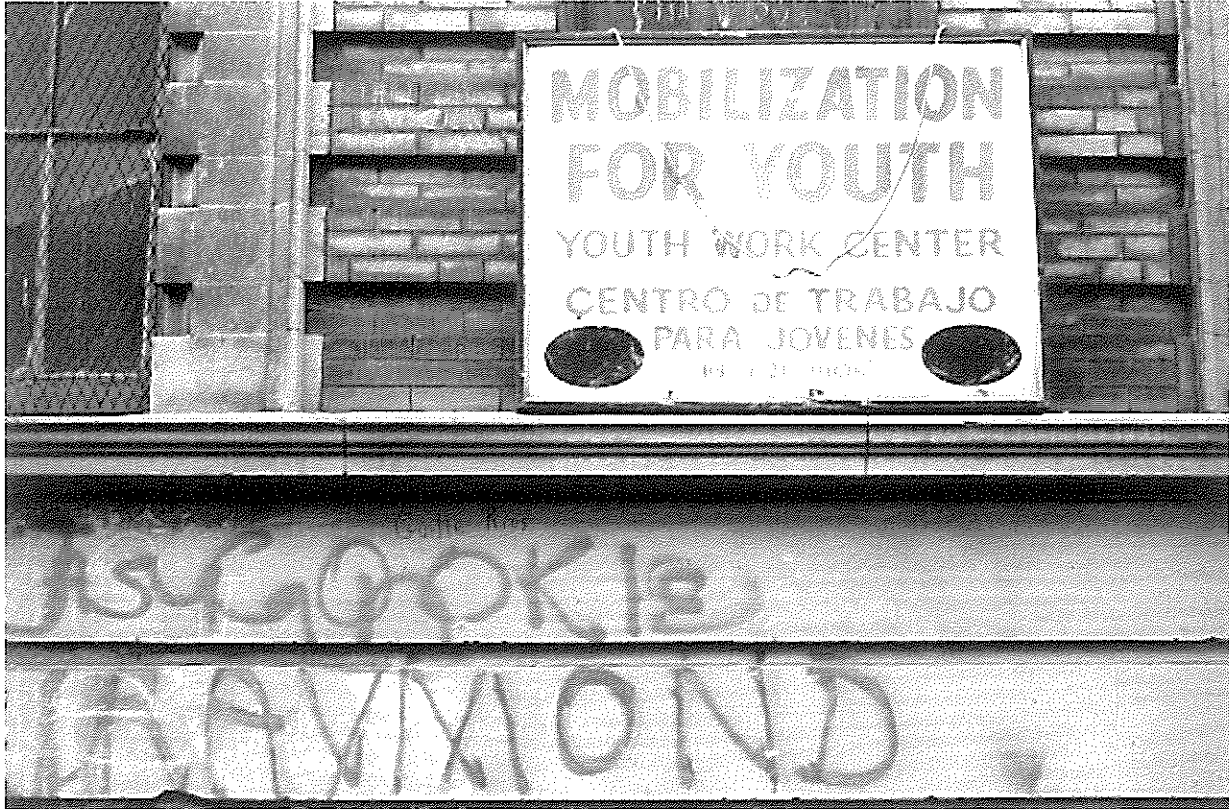


Fig. 19: Close-up of a weathered stone facade with a framed sign that reads, "Mobilization for Youth, Youth Work Center, Centro de Trabajo Para Jovenes (16 a 21 anos)." Image is included in *Once Upon an Island: New York Photographs 1968-1970*, by Richard Quinney and published by Borderland Books, 2011.

were designed to “train lower-income residents in 'clientsmanship,' to make sure that they are aware of their rights and privileges as citizens,” a tactic that had been overlooked by the settlement houses.<sup>54</sup> This was done especially through its controversial “Organizing the Unaffiliated” program, which was based in direct democracy methods and encouraged peaceful (and disruptive) protest.<sup>55</sup>

What historians such as Cazenave have underplayed in their discussion of MFY, however, are the ways in which MFY defined the space and meaning of the Lower East Side and how its definition, in contrast with that of LENA, would influence its perspective on what the area should be in the future.<sup>56</sup> While LENA saw a sprawling, mixed neighborhood in turmoil that required an infusion of unity to plan for a future, “balanced” community, MFY saw a low-income, ethnically oppressed population crowded into an area that should be improved and preserved for its current residents. These differing approaches were evident in the programs MFY spearheaded -- which ran the gamut of voter registration drives, tenant organizing, educational reform, and job training -- but especially in the area it originally chose to organize.

What would later be called the “Mobilization area” spanned between Avenue B/Clinton Street on its western side, the East River on the east, Fourteenth Street on its north, and Rivington Street/Division Street/Park Row/Spruce Street/Ferry Street on its curving southern border.<sup>57</sup> It matched almost precisely the boundaries the Community Council of Greater New York had drawn in 1955 for what it called the “Lower East Side: Eastern Area” or “the housing-project section.” As opposed to the “Lower East Side: Western Area,” the population of this section of the Lower East Side was less stable, more racially diverse, and poorer. Endorsing Rose Albert Porter’s observations of the neighborhood in 1953, the Community Council guessed that “the shifting of population caused by so much construction in recent years and the tensions



Fig. 20: Mobilization for Youth organization community service site, New York, NY, April 1967. Petra Santiago Papers, 1945-1994. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

which seem to develop between new and long-established residents” might have been “at least partly responsible for the delinquency rates,” which had remained stable for years, but were quickly rising.<sup>58</sup> Such activity marked the eastern section of the Lower East Side as a strong candidate for MFY’s anti-delinquency and anti-poverty approach when it would begin its work in earnest five years later. Indeed, by 1960 when MFY pioneered its programs in the target area, most of the more than 100,000 residents who were housed there lived in either substandard tenements or public housing; 41% received some sort of government aid, including unemployment compensation and social security; 31% of its families lived in abject poverty, making less than \$3000 per year; and 49% of its families lived in deprivation, earning less than \$4000 per year.<sup>59</sup> In keeping with MFY’s theory that delinquency was tied to poverty, and poverty to lack of democratic representation, this area proved to be a prime testing ground for the kind of politically-oriented organizing work MFY proposed to do.

It also indicated that when MFY referred to the Lower East Side, it meant a very different geographical territory than LENA or previous boundary-drawers such as the City Planning Commission, the Lower East Side Planning Association, the East Side Chamber of Commerce, or even the slummers of the late-nineteenth century had conceived. By the 1960s, it was a version of the Lower East Side that was characterized by higher concentrations of public housing, more of the recently-arrived, more of the ethnic poor, more young families, and more of the unemployed than either the rest of the Lower East Side or the area as a whole contained. In other words, while the area was an appropriate focus for the efforts of a project aimed at delinquency prevention, poverty alleviation and the cultivation of direct democracy, it did not necessarily represent the entire Lower East Side. MFY administrators noted in 1962 that the majority of the youths who were labeled as delinquents were Puerto Rican and that very small

groups of African American and Italian adolescents were also involved in gang activity. In 1964, MFY reported that 60 percent of its clients in job training programs were Puerto Rican and 25-30 percent were African American, while only 9 percent of white Lower East Siders engaged with the program.<sup>60</sup> The majority of residents who used MFY's "community house," which was established as a hub for "indigenous" residents to organize themselves, was also Puerto Rican, as were those groups who organized around housing issues.<sup>61</sup> Even so, MFY worker and Columbia social work student, Charles Grosser, found in 1965 that the area was far more diverse than MFY's clientele profile would suggest: 27% of the population was Jewish (white), 26% was Puerto Rican, 11% was Italian, 8% was Black, 25% was "Other white," and 3% was "Other non-white." More of the white population was considered middle-class, but the majority – 70%-- was still categorized as "lower class."<sup>62</sup>

Thus, while MFY's definition of the Lower East Side was a geographically exclusive one with a unique population profile, its clients were even more specific and somewhat restricted to non-white, mostly newly-arrived, young and poor residents. In important ways, this specificity made sense for MFY's agenda and revealed the structural and race-based underpinnings of poverty in New York. When it came to imagining plans for both housing and designing the built environment of the entire Lower East Side, however, it meant that MFY's vision was not only tailored almost exclusively to the population it served, but was also more radical than either LENA or the City Planning Commission was likely to accept.

In the fall of 1965, urban planners Peter Abeles and Harry Schwartz were hired to serve as Acting Associate Directors of the MFY Housing Division. According to Hall Winslow, Chair of the Comprehensive Planning Committee of Community Board 3, Abeles had been "retained...as a neighborhood planner" to fulfill the terms of MFY's most recent federal grant.<sup>63</sup>

Before Abeles and Schwartz joined MFY's Housing Division, strategies for improving the built environment of the Lower East Side were limited to rent strikes, tenant organizing, and the development of small areas of park space. None of these had been broadly successful because of the difficulty in bringing together large groups of residents on behalf of what seemed like small, individual changes. The legal intricacies of landlord-tenant relations were also discouraging to residents, many of whom were already mired in the bureaucracies of the welfare system.<sup>64</sup>

Harold H. Weissman, who was hired by MFY's then-Executive Director Bertram Beck to document the MFY experience, explained that from 1962 to 1967, the bulk of the housing program derived from a smattering of housing clinics MFY had set up to assist residents in solving everyday issues such as pest control, repairs, and rent increases. Early in 1964, with the consultation of organizer Jesse Gray who had spearheaded the Harlem Rent Strike, a Lower East Side Rent Strike did develop through MFY support. It lasted only four months, however, and resulted in few practical victories.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, MFY's efforts to streamline the process of admission to public housing were also met with minimal success. Weissman pointed out that, "Thousands of residents had applied for apartments in public housing over the years. They had never been told that they were ineligible; they were simply told that they would be placed on a waiting list." While some had spent years on the waiting list, others were placed immediately and without explanation. "There was also a legal question," Weissman explained, "as to whether a citizen's rights were violated by the refusal of Housing Authority personnel to tell him whether or not he was eligible according to the Authority's regulations which are not made public." After a MFY-led, grassroots campaign among Lower East Side residents and a sit-in at NYCHA offices in the late-spring of 1965, only a dozen residents eventually were offered housing in NYCHA projects.

Weissman admitted that the successes were small and that resources were fixed. In the end, he asserted, “Real housing improvement generally means tearing down and rebuilding.”<sup>66</sup>

Peter Abeles and Harry Schwartz agreed with this assessment – to an extent. Within months of their late-1965 appointment to the MFY Housing Division, they requested authorization from the MFY administration to begin a study that would result in the demolition and reconstruction of two new developments, half of which would be set aside for service facilities and the other half constructed for residential use, particularly for the elderly. The two buildings would follow federal guidelines for publicly-funded housing, but would experiment with the feasibility of combining construction with the relocation of the land’s original tenants. That is, buildings would be erected one at a time to ensure that displaced tenants would be able to return to improved housing on the site of their former homes as quickly as possible. Unlike other demolition projects under urban renewal, then, the aim of this small-scale experiment was to emphasize tenants’ “right of return” – that is, to develop new housing for those immediately displaced rather than for those immediately in need. Correcting for the forced displacement and relocation under urban renewal and slum clearance, this scheme was intended to preserve community ties *in addition* to providing housing for those who needed it – an approach that had long been sought from planners, but was rather novel in the 1960s.

A month later, the project was expanded to include a larger, nine-block area that, by April of 1967, would form the backbone of a formal funding proposal to the federal Office of Economic Opportunity as part of its new Demonstration Cities program. The “Housing Rehabilitation and the Economic Enhancement of the Poor” proposal, as it would come to be called, was the closest MFY would come to developing a comprehensive city plan for the Lower East Side. It would encompass two census tracts – 22 and 26 – that were located between East

6th and Houston Streets on the north and south ends, respectively, and Avenues B and D on the west and east ends. In 1966 when the Housing Division began to study the area, 13,400 residents lived there, 65% of whom were Puerto Rican, 20% of whom were white, and 15% of whom were listed as “non-white.” The “typical” household had lived in the area for fewer than nine years. About two-thirds earned less than the poverty level in 1966 of \$4,400 per year, while more than one-third of all families received welfare assistance of one kind or another. Eighty percent of the buildings these residents called home were Old Law tenements, constructed before 1901. Another eighteen percent were New Law tenements, built after 1901. The dire need, then, for both housing and poverty relief within the nine blocks was unquestionably apparent. In an effort to satisfy federal officials that such a project could provide a model for other urban planning efforts, Abeles and Schwartz also brightly suggested that the study area was “representative of the physical and social conditions of the surrounding communities” and “should have applicability to problems of the entire Lower East Side and to similar sections in New York.”<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, they would admit that other portions of the Lower East Side had different population profiles and might require approaches appropriate to their particular needs.

In their proposal, Abeles and Schwartz first acknowledged that the private market alone was not enough to solve the housing needs of the area’s low-income population. Maintenance of decades-old tenements that had been long-neglected had become a losing battle for landlords, as well as tenants. An investment in total rehabilitation of the buildings on the part of landlords seemed equally untenable when tenants themselves were trapped in cycles of poverty, unable to capture an income reliable enough to keep up with the rental increases that would surely follow. These same tenants, dependent on welfare assistance to stay afloat, were also often excluded from the opportunity for public housing, which was itself designed for the “worthy poor” who

could satisfy NYCHA's stringent requirements.<sup>68</sup> The occasional rent strike could offer temporary relief, but it would not provide a permanent solution to the housing crisis.

Abeles and Schwartz believed the answer lay in the adaptation of an old proposal – limited-dividend housing – that could turn federal dollars into direct relief for the poor. Through the increasing pressures of tenant groups on landlords and the concurrent depression of real estate values, the Lower East Side in the mid-1960s, they argued, was politically and economically ready for massive private and public investment in the purchase and redevelopment of failing neighborhood housing. This time, however, the corporate entity that would receive federal funds and sponsor the housing would not be an insurance company or a bank, but rather a “community corporation,” an amalgamation of local institutions and tenants endowed with the power to invest in its own neighborhoods. This would not be a group “attuned to profit,” but rather a democratic, “public enterprise.” So democratic would this community corporation be, in fact, that within five years, “tenants in buildings owned by the corporation will constitute a majority of the board.” Like the cooperatives constructed by the United Housing Foundation a decade before, the homes built by the community corporation would boast politically active tenants committed to local empowerment. While some buildings in fact would work on a cooperative basis, others would remain as rentals, while still others would be condominiums available for purchase. This diversity of construction, the housing directors believed, would help serve the long-term residential needs of the population and stabilize their commitment to the area. Stemming from MFY's basic assumption that poverty and its attributes – poor housing, un- or underemployment, poor health, and even delinquency – were symptoms of political and social disempowerment, a housing program built on community

control and devoted to maintaining that community was, therefore, a practical application of the bedrock values upon which MFY was founded.

So, too, was the crucial assertion – in contrast to that of LENA – that the Lower East Side should be rebuilt for and by its current residents and that, in words that would be repeated again and again by MFY and its housing directors, “The Lower East Side Should Be Preserved as a Low Rent Community.” Like its original two-building plan, Abeles and Schwartz made clear in this proposal that relocation of residents would be minimal as the process of reconditioning, rehabilitation, and eventual demolition of areas primed for reconstruction took place. Some Lower East Siders no doubt would move outside the nine-block demonstration area or elsewhere, but at least eighty percent, the housing directors estimated, would remain. Unlike the policies of urban renewal, which too often resulted in the displacement of low-income residents by either higher-income residents or selectively tenanted public housing, the MFY plan for relocation and tenancy affirmed its dedication to community stability and place attachment over either the simple creation of modern housing or the recalibration of a “balanced community.” Indeed, as Abeles and Schwartz saw it, the Lower East Side was already “relatively well integrated racially; it has never been a victim of the mythology of residential racial segregation which turns low income communities into ghettos [sic].” In other words, the area lacked decent, solid housing and planning, but all else – its working class character and its racially mixed population – was worthy of preservation. This, too, was in contrast with LENA’s view.

Ultimately, MFY’s “Housing Rehabilitation and the Economic Enhancement of the Poor” proposal was not selected as part of the Demonstration Cities grant cycle. MFY did receive seed money from the Ford Foundation to further plan for its nine-block area, which helped fund a small-scale version of the proposal focusing on the redevelopment of four buildings on East 4<sup>th</sup>

Street. This pilot project was relatively successful and brought about the creation of a small non-profit housing corporation, as well as a neighborhood organization, the Coalition for Human Housing, which helped rally Lower East Siders to the greater housing cause. It also helped MFY secure an FHA mortgage in 1969 that had the potential to finance a reprise of the nine-block project. In the short span between MFY's original proposal and the acquisition of the FHA mortgage, however, the landscapes of housing and planning shifted again on the Lower East Side, as did the bureaucracies responsible for approving the plans MFY proposed.

After only two years at MFY, for example, Peter Abeles and Harry Schwartz splintered off into their own private planning consultation firm as the majority of funding for the MFY housing program met with severe cutbacks.<sup>69</sup> While Abeles and Schwartz agreed to act as technical advisors to MFY and continued to share the same vision they had promoted for housing on the Lower East Side, they also took on direct consulting projects with the city's Housing and Development Administration, led by Jason Nathan. Abeles later explained that Donald Elliot, chair of the City Planning Commission and former chairman of the Antipoverty Operations Board, had invited him to plan for the city after the de-funding of the MFY housing division. While Abeles politely declined the offer, choosing instead to work with Schwartz in establishing their own firm, the opportunity to plan for the city as consultants was an appealing one. Immediately, they were recruited to work on a plan for Washington Heights and another for the far southern section of the Lower East Side, the Two Bridges area.<sup>70</sup> Under the leadership of both Elliot and Nathan, with whom both planners had worked in their capacities at MFY, the radical inclusion of citizens in the planning, construction, and management processes, as well as the incorporation of rehabilitation into plans for new development, as outlined in the nine-block proposal, found support.

The re-election of reform-minded Republican Mayor John Lindsay in 1969, however, brought with it the resignation of Jason Nathan in November of that year. Despite his conceptual support of plans such as those of Abeles and Schwartz, Nathan was accused by city Democrats of being too conservative and slow-moving in the face of real housing needs.<sup>71</sup> Don Elliot, meanwhile, could do little without the support and purse-strings of the Housing and Development Administration, now under the leadership of Albert A. Walsh. Whatever alliances Abeles and Schwartz or MFY had made in the mid-1960s to help launch the nine-block renewal project, therefore, were revised by the end of 1969. In one last gasp, the two planners submitted to Walsh and the Housing and Development Administration their comprehensive plan, “Forging a Future for the Lower East Side” in December of 1970. According to notes from the LENA housing division, groundwork for this plan was already being laid – to LENA’s surprise and consternation since it had been utterly parenthetical to the process – as early as October 1968.<sup>72</sup> This would constitute the most thorough and far-reaching plan for the Lower East Side produced by any organization, including MFY and LENA, in this era of urban renewal. And perhaps not surprisingly, it would never be implemented.

“Forging a Future for the Lower East Side” – later published by Praeger in 1972 under the title *Planning for the Lower East Side* – was a vision that borrowed heavily from the basic propositions MFY had stood behind for nearly a decade. It was also consistent with the growing energy of the advocacy planning movement, which had its roots in 1960s activism and with which both Abeles and Schwartz had long been associated. Advocacy planning, like Abeles’s and Schwartz’s approach on the Lower East Side, was, above all, community-focused and community-driven, reliant upon the input and ongoing commitment of residents who were brought together through a variety of local organizations. Personal interviews with residents –

called “clients” – and the public presentation of plans at every stage of the process were crucial to the advocacy planning strategy. So, too, was the emphasis both on neighborhoods, rather than entire cities, and social planning, as opposed only to physical planning. The latter considered the social welfare needs and resource allocation of the population in addition to the reconstruction of the built environment. As planner Marshall Kaplan would note, in most of the advocacy planning meetings he held with residents nationwide, most “treat the restructuring of the physical environment as of less import than job, income, and education issues” and “view urban renewal as nothing less than the American tragedy.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, while Abeles and Schwartz would claim in “Forging a Future for the Lower East Side” that “ideally, [the area’s] dilapidated housing and poor layout should be attacked by large-scale redevelopment – possibly the clearance of four to six blocks at a time,” they also agreed that vast demolition and reconstruction would disturb community ties too much to be realistically considered.<sup>74</sup> Social planning and small-scale renovation would reign.

Just as valuable to planning for the area was the preservation of the Lower East Side as a home for the city’s working class. The 153-page text began with the argument that the historical symbolism of the area as a gateway for new immigrants and as a working class enclave was fundamental to its character. The current economic, political, and social needs of the environment, which the report outlined in terms of jobs, education, and health, were factors that should mobilize the physical planning. They should not, however, be satisfied by the replacement of current residents with people of greater economic means. “The Lower East Side has served New York City, indeed served America, as a starting place for its immigrants, who did much to create the flourishing metropolis that the city is now,” wrote Schwartz, the primary author of the text.<sup>75</sup> “The capacity of this area and its people to absorb, to educate, to encourage

spiritual strength in the face of obstacles, earned for New York its coveted reputation for tolerance and progress. It is manifestly unjust that now, having served its purpose,” he continued, “the Lower East Side should be sacrificed to the giant system to which it gave in abundance life and strength.”<sup>76</sup>

Throughout the report, this emphasis on serving those who “are currently there” was key to the Abeles and Schwartz vision.<sup>77</sup> In one example, the report noted that a new street design that would allow auto traffic to more freely flow through the area should not interrupt the street life of the neighborhood. “A favorite weekend pastime on the Lower East Side...is repairing and washing cars. Cars are used as an extension of the house and street for conversation and beer drinking...Thus designs for rebuilding create reasonably sized precincts where street life and travel are not separated.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, the report explored the contents of the collections at the local libraries, suggesting that “currently, the books and other materials reflect the area’s older ethnic groups; they have not kept pace with changes on the Lower East Side, particularly the growth of the Spanish-speaking population.”<sup>79</sup> By the same token – and, again, highlighting the racial and ethnic battles that already influenced the tumultuous politics of the area – Abeles and Schwartz argued that the future inclusion of moderate- and high-income housing would do a disservice to the clients they sought to accommodate. Pointing to the moderate-income cooperatives, like the Amalgamated Dwellings and Seward Park Houses, which provided housing almost exclusively for “whites, many of them descended from the earlier immigrant groups, who seek to remake the rest of the community in an image consistent with their attainments,” the planners suggested that the area would benefit more from better and additional low-income housing for the “poorer newcomers, mainly Puerto Ricans, and Chinese.”<sup>80</sup> Once again, preservation of the Lower East Side as a home-base for the city’s working class – and

particularly for those considered to be ethnic minorities – was at the heart of the Abeles and Schwartz plan.

This framework, of course, exposed the same problematic biases about the Lower East Side’s population and future that had informed MFY’s perspective on the area. Indeed, the centerpiece of “Forging a Future for the Lower East Side” was exactly the nine-block area that had been the focus of MFY’s April 1967 proposal, which relied on demographic data that was distinctive to that defined section. While simultaneously confirming that the Lower East Side was already home to a long-term, white ethnic, middle-income population (declining though it was), Abeles and Schwartz proposed plans exclusively for the low-income, ethnic groups of color such as those it had studied in its nine-block region. Assumptions about the social requirements of Lower East Siders were based on the specific circumstances of the population suffering the indignities of poor housing, joblessness, and lack of educational opportunity. However, these assumptions denied the existence of a still-large and politically vocal constituency of residents who believed the Lower East Side needed modern apartment buildings, more shopping, wider boulevards, and controlled integration – in other words, a reinvestment in the middle class as LENA had envisioned it years before. This is not to say that Abeles and Schwartz simply extrapolated data from its nine-block proposal to account for the entire Lower East Side population, or that they offered no consideration at all for the needs of its white ethnic residents. Rather, Abeles’s and Schwartz’s blind spot toward the positions of these long-term Lower East Siders suggested that the comprehensive plan they sought to promote did not account for the devotion and place attachments the white ethnic population felt toward its communities and neighborhoods. While it was not the reason the plan failed, this inattention to the affective dynamics of the diverse populations of the Lower East Side hampered the impact of “Forging a

Future for the Lower East Side.” It would also presage many of the turf wars between ethnic and economic groups that would ignite again and again in coming years. Despite being accepted wholeheartedly by the Housing and Development Administration that had invited it, “Forging a Future for the Lower East Side,” in the end, went no further than the dusty shelves of city agencies.<sup>81</sup>

### **Dissolution and Disillusion**

By 1972, both LENA and MFY were no more. The Lower East Side Community Corporation, an antipoverty agency managed by the city’s Human Resources Administration and the Lower East Side’s Community Board 3, assumed financial responsibility for LENA in 1967 when the latter’s program areas were limited to health and education. After reviewing LENA’s programs, budget, and management, however, the Community Corporation voted finally to terminate funding for the nearly twenty-year-old organization.<sup>82</sup> This effectively shut down LENA for good.

Also partly for financial reasons, MFY hobbled along during the same years, losing government funding and finding that much of their work was becoming redundant with new city initiatives. After several of the more successful MFY programs were folded into municipal agencies, MFY finally elected to reduce its programming to manpower training and a legal clinic. MFY Legal Services (which exists today) became a non-profit, private law firm in 1968, offering representation to the city’s poor in cases involving civil rights discrimination, housing, and welfare assistance.<sup>83</sup> Particularly active on the Lower East Side where it was still located, MFY Legal Services intervened in one of the last of the area’s urban renewal battles when it represented a group of mostly Puerto Rican residents who were promised – and were later denied

– housing in the Seward Park Extension NYCHA projects. These residents had been the original tenants of the housing cleared for the Seward Park Extension, yet, as was so often the case, they were not judged to be appropriate for the new homes. After a series of court decisions, MFY Legal Services eventually won its case on behalf of the former residents. The paucity of housing on the site, however, left most of MFY’s clients out of the deal – an outcome that would continue to cast the Seward Park Extension Urban Renewal Area as a contentious territory for development for the next forty years.<sup>84</sup>

At the core of the conflict on the Seward Park Extension site, as well as in MFY’s and LENA’s broad schemes for planning and development on the Lower East Side, was, of course, interethnic tension. The long-standing and aging community of white ethnic Lower East Siders viewed the new, low-income population of Puerto Rican and African American residents as not only invaders – unsympathetic intruders to an area of the city that had been abandoned and mistreated by government, but fought-for and improved by its devoted, long-term residents – but also as outsiders. Through LENA, these rooted residents attended meetings, joined community boards and neighborhood councils, wrote letters to the editor, and pleaded for an investment in the Lower East Side that would promote economic and racial “balance.” Urban renewal for them meant the introduction of moderate-income housing, of new construction that would keep the communities they had built secure and anchored in the neighborhood in which they lived. That these Lower East Siders were also racially white, politically savvy, and often connected to established institutions such as the Henry Street Settlement, the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, and what Joel Schwartz called “pillars of liberalism” such as trade unions meant that their visions very often aligned with those of government officials. No longer alien inhabitants of an alien space on the city map, these long-term Lower East Siders finally had clout and were

not shy about using it, even if it meant accusing others – the Lower East Side’s newcomers – of their own alienness.

Yet, as Abeles and Schwartz would emphasize in every proposal they submitted on their own behalf or on behalf of MFY, the Lower East Side had a legacy to preserve. This legacy – as a tolerant home for new immigrants and migrants, as a working class haven, as a crucible of Americanness – was undeniable and worthy of celebration. Improvement of housing, more parklands, better schools, better roads – all of these were necessary and welcome. They had to be done, however, for the good of the working classes and in justice to the ethnic and racial minorities who were too often excluded from such opportunity elsewhere in the city. Put bluntly, the Lower East Side was, indeed, alien and different, but these very qualities made it invaluable to the city and to the newcomers who had begun to plant roots there.

Battle lines during urban renewal were thus drawn along ethnic turfs and contrasting visions for the future. At the same time, they were drawn along differing interpretations of what the legacy of the Lower East Side was and should be. Increasingly, community groups that would emerge from this era, like the Real Great Society, which represented a mostly Puerto Rican population, and the United Jewish Council of the East Side, which represented the Lower East Side’s Jewish residents, would turn toward heritage to bolster their political positions in conflicts over space. By the 1980s, 1990s, and the start of the new millennium, historic preservation became the latest arena in which the Lower East Side and its residents contended with its built environment. In many ways, it would be no less controversial than urban renewal had been.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Morris Meyerson, interviewed by John H. Petite, October 16, 1991, Box 152, Henry Street Settlement Papers (hereafter, "HSS"), Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup> Delmore Schwartz, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 51. Schwartz's family actually relocated from the Lower East Side to Brooklyn in the 1910s, but his fiction, written mostly in the late 1930s and 1940s, resonated just as well in the period under study.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent historiographical overview of recent work on urban renewal, see Eric Avila and Mark H. Rose, "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (March 2009): 335-347. The range of urban change that would have an impact on New York and the Lower East Side was felt elsewhere in the nation, as well. Some of the best literature on urban renewal in the U.S. and New York includes Jon Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach*; Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Less research has been done on citizen participation efforts such as LENA and MFY in this period. For two recent works, see Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) and Annelise Orleck and Lisa Hazijirain, eds., *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011.)

<sup>4</sup> Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 131-138. "White" included the Jews and Italians of the Lower East Side who had achieved official "whiteness" beginning with the 1940 census Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 60; Puerto Ricans could be counted as either White or Black, but most studies of population change in New York in this period still highlighted Puerto Rican ethnicity in addition to these racial categories.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

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<sup>6</sup> Rose Albert Porter, "Neighbors, Neighborhoods, and LENA: The Story of a Community Organization," circa 1961, Folder 5, Box. 77, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>7</sup> For the impact of demographic change and urban renewal on other parts of New York City, see Harold X. Connolly, *A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: New York University Press, 1977); Wendell E. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Virginia Sanchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Oscar Handlin, *The Newcomers: Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> Community Council of Greater New York, "Manhattan Communities: Summary Statements of Population Characteristics, Research Department of the Community Council of Greater New York, March 1955" (Pagination is inconsistent. Refer to sections titled "Lower East Side: Western Area" and "Lower East Side: Eastern Area.") Folder 6, Box 93, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>9</sup> The boundaries of the Lower East Side Walter Laidlaw used for his 1930 calculations correspond almost precisely with those of the Community Council of Greater New York in 1950. It is worth noting that the total population on the Lower East Side decreased between 1930 and 1950 as well. In 1930, it was 249,755; in 1950, it was 215, 962.

<sup>10</sup> Mele, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Community Council of Greater New York, *Characteristics of the Population of New York City. Health Areas: 1970, Vol. 4, Race and Ethnicity* (New York: Community Council of Greater New York, April 1974.) The highest concentration of "other" racial groups – neither Black nor White – existed on the southwestern edges of the Lower East Side's traditional boundaries. Presumably, this accounted for a growing Chinese population, particularly as these sections of the Lower East Side bordered the neighborhood known as Chinatown. Moreover, with the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which effectively eliminated many of the quotas that had limited immigration for the previous four decades, Chinese and other immigrants were increasingly making new homes in New York by 1970. See also Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.)

<sup>12</sup> Mele, 134. Note that when Mele refers to "today," he is referring to the year 2000. The demography of the area has changed even more dramatically since then.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Ballon, "Introduction" in eds., Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 65; Mele, 132-4. Mele writes that "Between 1953 and 1956, the number of Puerto Ricans living in public housing projects across the city increased 150 percent. On the Lower East Side, the number of Puerto Rican residents in the Wald and Riis Houses (as well as in other projects in the neighborhood's southern tier) increased rapidly." (132)

<sup>14</sup> "1,500 Getting Help in Moving from Seward Park Co-op Site," *New York Times*, April 27, 1958.

<sup>15</sup> Nilda Rivera, interviewed by Kara Becker, April 16, 2008, Seward Park Oral History Project, Good Old Lower East Side, New York, New York.

<sup>16</sup> Mitch Kupfer, interviewed by Kara Becke r, April 14, 2008, Seward Park Oral History Project, Good Old Lower East Side, New York, New York.

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<sup>17</sup> Victor Papa, interviewed by Kara Becker, March 5, 2008, Seward Park Oral History Project, Good Old Lower East Side, New York, New York.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Cloward quoted in Noel Cazenave, "Ironies of Urban Reform: Professional Turf Battles in the Planning of the Mobilization for Youth Program Precursor to the War on Poverty." *Journal of Urban History*, November 1999, 26: 29.

<sup>19</sup> Marci Reaven, *Citizen Participation in City Planning: New York City, 1945-1975* (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2009), 145-6.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Hall, *Unfinished Business: A firsthand account by the former director of the Henry Street Settlement* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 254-55.

<sup>21</sup> Noel Cazenave, "Ironies of Urban Reform: Professional Turf Battles in the Planning of Mobilization for Youth Program Precursor to the War on Poverty." In *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 26 No. 1, November 1999: 29.

<sup>22</sup> "LENA Workshops on Neighborhood Councils, March 27, 1963 Workshop II, Summarized Minutes," Folder "Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-3," Box 4, Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association Papers (Hereafter, "LENA"), Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>23</sup> Hall, 256.

<sup>24</sup> Rose Albert Porter, "Neighbors, Neighborhoods, and LENA: The Story of a Community Organization," circa 1961, Folder 5, Box 77, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, 256.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, 255. Hall explained that the Puerto Rican members were soon pulled into the functions of their own institutions and unable to continue leadership roles within LENA after the first year.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, 267.

<sup>28</sup> Helen Hall, interviewed by Frances Fox Piven, Sept. 12, 1962, Folder 5, Box 61, Frances Fox Piven Papers, quoted in Tamar Carroll, *Grassroots Feminism: Direct Action Organizing and Coalition Building for Social Change* (unpublished manuscript, under contract with UNC Press), 38.

<sup>29</sup> "Revised Budget for A Proposal for Community Organization and Planning for the Lower East Side," August 10, 1967, p. 10, Folder 48, Box 1, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>30</sup> Chino Garcia and Robert Nazario, members of the Real Great Society, which will be explored in Chapter 5 worked briefly for NENA in the early 1970s.

<sup>31</sup> *Public Health Reports*, Vol. 84, No. 8 (Aug., 1969), 689

<sup>32</sup> The CSURA was first sited in the mid-1950s and was comprised of 22 acres of the Lower East Side.

<sup>33</sup> See Reaven, 114 for her analysis of this specific situation.

<sup>34</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, "LENA Proposal for Community Organization Planning for the Lower Eastside," 1965/1966, Folder 50, Box 1, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. This document also includes a proposal to assist with concentrated antipoverty relief in the area of "Essex Street East," a grouping of nine blocks between Clinton, Delancey, Essex and Houston Streets. It appears this would have replaced part of the defunct Hamilton Fish Park Neighborhood Council.

<sup>35</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, "Minutes, Neighborhood Councils Workshop, March 27, 1963 (Workshops III and IV)," Folder "Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-

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3,” Box 4, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>36</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Minutes from LENA Workshops on Neighborhood Councils, March 27, 1963, Workshop I,” Folder “Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-3,” Box. 4, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>37</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Strengthening LENA’s Neighborhood Councils: Report to Executive Committee, April 2, 1963,” Folder “Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-3,” Box 4, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>38</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Minutes, Neighborhood Councils Workshop, March 27, 1963 (Workshops III and IV),” Folder “Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-3,” Box 4, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>39</sup> Mobilization for Youth, *Action on the Lower East Side: Progress Report and Proposal*, July 1962 to June 1964 (New York: Mobilization for Youth, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Minutes, Neighborhood Councils Workshop, March 27, 1963 (Workshops III and IV),” Folder “Committee on Neighborhood Councils, 1962-3,” Box 4, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Wood, *A New Look At: The Balanced Neighborhood: A Study and Recommendations* (New York: Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, 1960).

<sup>43</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Housing Committee Meeting, Minutes of May 7, 1956” Folder 6, Box 77, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>44</sup> Wood, 13-17.

<sup>45</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “The LENA Plan for Urban Living,” Folder 18, Box 68, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 68. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 194. Jacobs explores the greater phenomenon of “unslumming” in Chapter 15 of her book.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 49-72.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>50</sup> Hall Winslow for Community Board 3, “Minutes, October 26, 1965,” Folder 17, Box 114, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>51</sup> Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association, “Program: New Horizons in Urban Living: LENA’s Community Conference on Housing and Planning,” Folder 6, Box 77, HSS Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>52</sup> Hall Winslow for Community Board 3, “Minutes, October 26, 1965,” Folder 17, Box 114, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. It should also be noted that the Cooper Square Committee was simultaneously working on its “Alternative Plan” for the Cooper Square Urban Renewal Area and that the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, a member of LENA, had produced a plan a few years earlier for the

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Corlears Hook Urban Renewal Area. Moreover, LENA had worked briefly with the Cooper Square Committee to produce what ultimately became the LENA “Plan for Urban Living.” This project seemed to fall apart at the same time the CSC split off from LENA as a neighborhood council in 1960. See footnote 47 for reference to this split and Reaven’s analysis of the reasons for it.

<sup>53</sup> See health district map earlier in the chapter for the specific area. Note also that districts 63, 67, and 72 had the highest percentages of Puerto Rican residents in the entire Lower East Side.

<sup>54</sup> Mobilization for Youth, *Action on the Lower East Side: Progress Report and Proposal*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> The investigation into the accusation that MFY was a subterfuge for communist infiltration took place in 1964 mostly in response to this program.

<sup>56</sup> Other historians of MFY, including Joseph Helfgot and even Daniel Patrick Moynihan, have also focused more on the experimental and political machinations of MFY as a model for the Community Action Programs (CAPs) of the War on Poverty. Scholar Tamar Carroll, whose manuscript on MFY examines it as an avenue for activist feminism, also overlooks the limited definition of the Lower East Side that MFY proposed. See Joseph Helfgot, *Professional Reforming: Mobilization for Youth and the Failure of Social Science* (New York: Lexington Books, 1981), Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: The Free Press, 1969); and Tamar Carroll, *Grassroots Feminism: Direct Action Organizing and Coalition Building for Social Change* (unpublished manuscript, under contract with UNC Press)

<sup>57</sup> Mobilization for Youth, *A proposal for the prevention and control of delinquency by expanding opportunities a demonstration project*. (New York: Mobilization for Youth, 1962), 20; LENA, “Proposal for Community Organization Planning for the Lower Eastside, 1965 or 1966,” p. 19. Box 50, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>58</sup> “Manhattan Communities: Summary Statements of Population Characteristics, Research Department of the Community Council of Greater New York, March 1955,” p. 1, Folder 6, Box 93, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>59</sup> Mobilization for Youth, *Action on the Lower East Side: Progress Report and Proposal*, 1, 88.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Harold H. Weissman, ed., *Community Development: In the Mobilization for Youth Experience* (New York: Association Press, 1969).

<sup>62</sup> Charles F. Grosser, *Perceptions of Professionals, Indigenous Workers, and Lower-Class Clients* (D.S.W. thesis, Columbia University, School of Social Work, 1965).

<sup>63</sup> October 26, 1965 minutes for CB3, Folder 17, Box 114, HSS, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. While it is unclear whether Winslow’s understanding of the situation was accurate, the addition of Abeles and Schwartz to the staff did come at a time when MFY’s federal funding was in question. The previous year, damaging investigations into the organization’s political activism and subsequent accusations of Communist affiliation led to the resignations of MFY’s founding leadership – including chief administrator James McCarthy, research director Richard Cloward, and executive director George Brager. At the start of 1965, Brager was replaced by a more conservative Bertram Beck, a former director of the anti-delinquency project of the Children’s Bureau of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare who, two years later would simultaneously become head of Henry Street Settlement after Helen Hall’s retirement. The administration of Beck, as MFY board chair Winslow Carlton described it, returned MFY to more traditional

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moorings as “more of a social work institution than a ‘community-enabling’ institution.” (Cazenave) Even so, the addition of Abeles and Schwartz, who had already distinguished themselves as left-leaning “advocacy planners,” suggested that, if MFY was no longer a source of agitation, it was still a place for experimentation.

<sup>64</sup> Harold H. Weissman, “The Housing Program 1962-1967,” in ed., Harold H. Weissman, *Community Development: In the Mobilization for Youth Experience* (New York: Association Press, 1969), 68. See also ““The Community Organization Housing Program: Report to the ad-hoc committee on Community Organization,” January 7, 1964, Box 14, Mobilization for Youth Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

<sup>65</sup> This event did have one major result, however. It is often cited as the catalyst for the city’s investigations into MFY’s alleged Communism.

<sup>66</sup> Weissman, 61-70.

<sup>67</sup> Mobilization for Youth, “Housing Rehabilitation and the Economic Enhancement of the Poor,” p. 2, Box 14, Mobilization for Youth Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Columbia University, New York, New York.

<sup>68</sup> See Bloom, 207-219 for more on requirements for tenancy and the relaxation of tenant selection guidelines after 1968.

<sup>69</sup> *New York Times*, November 4, 1967.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, July 1, 1970

<sup>71</sup> “Nathan Quits Post Under Pressure of Reform Democrats Who Backed Lindsay,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1969.

<sup>72</sup> Lorraine Miller, Co-Chair LENA Housing Division to Honorable Jason Nathan, October 8, 1968; Nathan to Miller, November 4, 1968; Miller to Nathan, November 22, 1968, Folder “Housing and Redevelopment Board 1968,” Box 3, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>73</sup> Marshall Kaplan, *Urban Planning in the 1960s: A Design for Irrelevancy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 69. See the rest of Kaplan’s book in addition to Robert Alpern’s, *Pratt Guide to Planning and Renewal for New Yorkers* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973) for a good overview of advocacy planning nationally and in New York.

<sup>74</sup> Harry Schwartz with Peter Abeles, *Planning for the Lower East Side* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 34.

<sup>75</sup> Abeles, Schwartz, and Associates, “Forging a Future for the Lower East Side: A Plan for Action, A report prepared for the city of New York Housing and Development Administration, City Planning Commission, 1970,” p. 4, Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>77</sup> Schwartz and Abeles, *Planning for the Lower East Side*, 34.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> “A New Lower East Side Envisioned in City Report,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1971.

<sup>82</sup> “Analysis and Evaluation of LENA 1972 by the Community Corporation,” Folders 54 and 55, Box 1, LENA, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>83</sup> Mobilization for Youth, “MFY 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Booklet,” <http://www.mfy.org/>. Accessed January 13, 2013.

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<sup>84</sup> Because the city and Community Board 3 quite recently negotiated a deal to develop the site, the Seward Park Extension Urban Renewal Area has been in the news a great deal. For a thoughtful analysis of the site's history before the mid-1980s, see Joan A. Turner, "Building Boundaries: The Politics of Urban Renewal in Manhattan's Lower East Side (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1984). For a smart, collaborative student project completed at the New School in 2012, see Layered SPURA 2012 at <http://buscada.com/project/visualizing-spura/>.

## CHAPTER FIVE “Settling the Urban Frontier”

On October 15, 1988, the late-night comedy sketch show, *Saturday Night Live*, brought to life, as it so often did, the inherent absurdities of recent current events. Because this was the second show of the new 1988-1989 season, it not only covered the news of the week, but expanded its field to include events that had occurred during the show's summer hiatus. Both the summer and fall in New York had given *Saturday Night Live's* performers ample fodder for comedy, with the city's mayor Ed Koch acting as a special target for humor. During the show's *Weekend Update*, comedian Dennis Miller made Koch the butt of one discomfiting joke in which Miller displayed an image of police spraying the city's homeless with high-powered hoses to clear them from the streets: a sensitive Mayor Koch, he quipped, was proposing a new program to “wash the homeless who reside in ever-increasing numbers in our city.”<sup>1</sup> Related to the story and the topic of a sketch later in that evening's show was an event that took place in August of 1988. For one long night that month, homeless residents of the Lower East Side's Tompkins Square Park, as well as squatters and sympathetic neighbors, clashed with police over the right to occupy the park's two-acre green-space. What was later labeled the “Tompkins Square Riot” pitted unruly police, acting on behalf of a city that was committed to “cleaning up” the Lower East Side for those who hoped to reinvest in it, against a coalition of long-time and more recent residents, who believed the Lower East Side should be made available to those who did not benefit from the profit-making system of neighborhood reinvestment -- namely, poor New Yorkers.<sup>2</sup> In other words, as anthropologist Janet Abu-Lughod put it, the Tompkins Square riot and battles like it on the Lower East Side represented a “‘tug-of-war’ that has been taking place in many American cities between poor (and often minority) residents and what some urbanists

have characterized as the 'growth machine' that drives urban change in contemporary America.”<sup>3</sup>

When *Saturday Night Live* took up this volatile situation as the core joke in one of its sketches, it did so with stinging aplomb. Actor Phil Hartman, costumed in a military uniform and a bushy white beard, played the part of General Custer. Across from him sat actor Jon Lovitz, in the role of Crazy Horse in bright feathered head-dress and beaded apron. The topic of conversation was the civilizing conquest of the frontier from the savage and disorderly natives:

**General Custer:** [walks over to a map, points to a spot] My scouts tell me that several tribes of hostiles have congregated on the lower east side of the Little Bighorn!

**Crazy Horse:** Yeah, so? Some of the fellas got together for a little huntin' and fishin'! So what?

**General Custer:** That don't add up, Crazy! Since when are the Oglala pals-y with the Cheyenne and the Arapaho?

**Crazy Horse:** Just a little huntin' and fishin'! That's all!

**General Custer:** I ain't buyin' it.

....

**Crazy Horse:** [rests his feet up on the table] You know, George, you wide-eyes really slay me. You call me a liar...yet your tongue's so forked, I could tie it in a bow behind your back! [guffaws]

**General Custer:** [sits down] Spare me the wisecracks, Crazy...[Crazy continues laughing]...HEY! What's shapin' up on the lower east side?

**Crazy Horse:** All right, I'll level with ya. Some of the boys are pretty bent out of shape about that Fort Laramie treaty. One minute you promise sovereignty over the promise -- the *sacred* lands. And the next minute we got A THOUSAND MINERS BREATHIN' DOWN OUR NECKS!

**General Custer:** Nobody knew gold would be discovered in the Black Hills.

**Crazy Horse:** WHAT THE HELL DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? [hits the desk] A TREATY'S A TREATY!<sup>4</sup>

The scene, farcical though it was, captured a variety of details and themes that had emerged over the course of the long twentieth century and that would re-emerge as Lower East Siders and outside forces moved to determine the future of the area. As in the past, an image of the Lower East Side as an “urban frontier” and its residents as uncivilized, savage aliens threaded through the late-twentieth century discourse surrounding the neighborhood. So, too, did language about homesteaders improving the barren lands of the Lower East Side, of urban pioneers endowing the area with either an eloquent history or a secure investment, and of the meaning of citizenship when at least a third of the Lower East Side in 1970 was of Puerto Rican descent.<sup>5</sup> That “gold had been discovered” on the Lower East Side in the form of speculative real estate investment only intensified the language, particularly in the context of the city’s “treaty” with residents that was to allow them the chance to rehabilitate their own crumbling tenements. As the “Oglala,” “Cheyenne,” and “Arapaho” -- presumably Puerto Rican, Ukrainian, Jewish, and African American renters, along with anarchist and artist squatters -- gathered to protect their “sacred lands” from intruders, tensions flared and political camps were chosen. Which side of the frontier one was on made all the difference in whether one was considered an insider or an outsider on the Lower East Side.

. At the same time, one new term with, at times, competing meanings also joined the public conversation about the Lower East Side: preservation. While it was not included in the *Saturday Night Live* skit, a growing movement to slow neighborhood change -- in whatever form that change took -- was increasingly present in the way Lower East Siders spoke of the gentrification frontier. For some, preservation meant investment in the diverse communities of residents who had outlived the decades of experimentation, poverty, and ultimate abandonment that had characterized the area after the failures of the War on Poverty in the 1960s and the city’s

fiscal crisis of the 1970s. For others, preservation was a mission to save the buildings and institutions that had maintained the immigrant communities of yesteryear, to claim the Lower East Side as what historian Hasia Diner calls the “American Jewish Plymouth Rock.”<sup>6</sup> Against the gentrifying multitudes that would flock to the area starting in the late-1970s, these different preservation campaigns sought similar outcomes and viewed the protection of the area’s built environment as crucial to the defense of its social and cultural resources. Yet as real estate development proceeded apace and as each campaign experienced either the disadvantages or the benefits of the progressing gentrification frontier, preservation itself was transformed to fit different political agendas.

This chapter narrates the stories of two Lower East Side institutions -- CHARAS/El Bohio and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum -- as they navigated the intricacies of the urban frontier at the turn of the twenty-first century. Each institution grew from ethnic communities that embraced the Lower East Side as a homeland even as reformers, planners, and, by the 1970s, investors, worried over the area’s ability to ever escape slum conditions. Each also would eventually occupy a nineteenth-century building slated for city or national landmark status, a factor that was only possible after the mid-1960s with the establishment of the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission (1965) and the National Historic Preservation Act (1966).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, both CHARAS/El Bohio and the Tenement Museum saw themselves as having both hyper-local and national audiences, though to differing degrees. For CHARAS, its most important audience was its near-neighbors -- people who would restore the Lower East Side’s spaces with physical labor, such as tenement restoration through sweat equity and homesteading, and with cultural contributions, such as mural painting, poetry, dance, and education. However, CHARAS also hoped to demonstrate to a larger, non-Lower East Side audience that poor people

-- and particularly poor people of color, such as themselves -- could be self-governing citizens, innovative, and motivated to not only improve their own environment, but to develop a working system of participatory democracy in which each member had an equal voice in the functions of the organization. The Tenement Museum, on the other hand, counted its national audience as its primary focus, while gathering New York-based supporters primarily to the cause of preserving the Lower East Side's cultural treasures. For the Tenement Museum, the preservation of a diverse set of immigrant histories in a neighborhood that had once teemed with new Americans on the brink of cultural assimilation was tantamount to revising -- and improving -- the American national narrative. While the museum had originally emerged from efforts to restore iconic buildings of the Lower East Side's Jewish past, the museum leadership envisioned its project instead as a portal to a national history of multi-ethnic immigration and migration. Because the Lower East Side could still boast an array of immigrant and migrant residents, such local audiences were courted to enjoy and occasionally contribute to the museum's programs and exhibits. In general, though, the museum's mission rested on situating the Lower East Side not as a place valuable unto itself, but as a "gateway to America."<sup>8</sup>

When the Tompkins Square riot occurred in the late summer of 1988, CHARAS had been in existence for almost twenty years and had occupied its space, an abandoned public school building on East 9th Street near the northeast corner of Tompkins Square that it called El Bohio, for nearly a decade. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum opened the doors to its recently purchased, pre-law tenement at 97 Orchard Street only a month before the riots. While neither institution publicly chose sides when fallout from the riots ensued over the coming months, both would veer toward a position on the gentrification frontier as development and neighborhood change continued. By 2001, each institution would face an existential crisis that would

substantially determine its future viability in the neighborhood. These crises would also highlight the ways in which the Lower East Side's established identity as an alien, ethnic space had been transformed by the massive reinvestment of the 1980s and 1990s. No longer was it the problematic and unassimilable area of the past; instead, at the start of the twenty-first century, the Lower East Side's complex histories of poverty, ethnicity, and injustice proved its authenticity, its chic rough edges, and its desirability for the real estate market.

### **“Doing More with Less”: CHARAS/El Bohio**

Founded in 1968, CHARAS -- eponymously named for its five, young founders, Chino Garcia, Angelo Rodriguez, Roy Batiste, Anthony Figueroa, and Sal Becker -- grew out of an effort by mostly Puerto Rican Lower East Side residents to implement a multifaceted, community revitalization project based in the values of self-help, collaboration, and individual responsibility.<sup>9</sup> CHARAS's projects ranged from developing a recycling center for the area to rehabilitating abandoned lots and buildings to hosting mural painting and folk dance events that would immerse the local community in the creative cultures and mixed-race heritage of Puerto Rico. Its unofficial motto, “doing more with less,” gave Lower East Siders an outlet for creativity in the midst of poverty and other woes.<sup>10</sup> Throughout its existence, CHARAS -- later CHARAS/El Bohio -- was known by its neighbors as a vibrant and busy center of activity where people with ideas for uplifting the community could come together to find like-minded allies.

Such efforts were intended to instill hope and life in a neighborhood that was beginning to experience increasing disinvestment and poverty in 1968. The idealistic, planning visions that informed urban renewal on the Lower East Side had ended with a series of stalemates between the City Planning Commission and local organizations such as LENA and the Cooper Square

Committee. Even if LENA's plans had been accepted by the Housing and Redevelopment Board in the early 1960s and if the Cooper Square Committee's efforts to produce its own "balanced community" had paid off, little would have been done to reverse the slide into poverty that CHARAS' constituents were experiencing. MFY and Abeles and Schwartz had more comprehensive, social planning approaches to the issues facing desperately poor and chronically under- or un-employed Lower East Siders, but their proposals were mostly, as earlier noted, relegated to the limbo of the file cabinet.

With one of the highest poverty rates in New York City in the waning years of the 1960s and most Lower East Siders living in decades-old tenements seemingly on the verge of collapse, the area's decay and despair was deeply entrenched.<sup>11</sup> In the context of dwindling employment opportunities, including a 55% drop in citywide manufacturing jobs between 1960 and 1975, Lower East Side residents found themselves trapped in what 1970s sociologists termed the "underclass," a grouping that denoted separation from the mainstream of society, long-term poverty and unemployment, the likelihood of involvement in the criminal economy, and dependence on the welfare system.<sup>12</sup> For area property owners, the situation appeared equally dire as banks and other lending institutions "red lined" the Lower East Side – that is, cordoned it off with a metaphorical red line – as unworthy of receiving mortgage or improvement loans.<sup>13</sup> The result was greater abandonment not only of the poor who lived on the Lower East Side, but also the buildings in which they lived.

While "the residential segregation of the poor – compounded by persistent residential discrimination by race and class – replicate[d] and solidifie[d] unequal patterns of economic opportunity" throughout northern industrial cities in this period, as historian Thomas Sugrue has argued, the Lower East Side faced this concentration of inequality and racial and ethnic

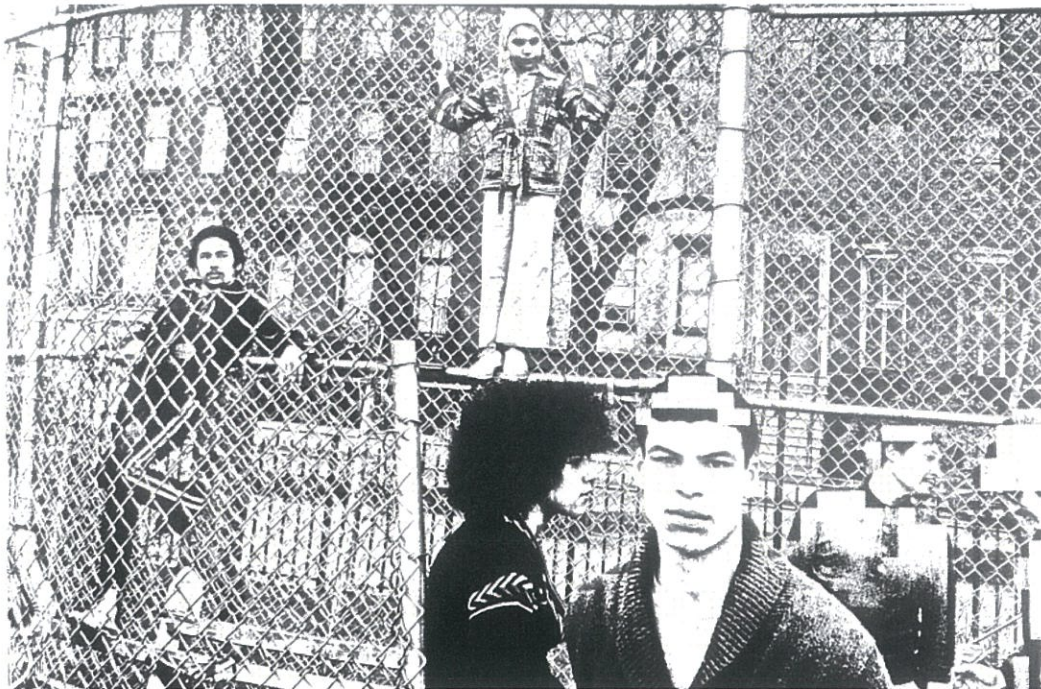


Fig. 21: Images of Loisaida, 1977-8. From Geoffrey Biddle, *Alphabet City*

segregation in a unique manner.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of CHARAS's first decade of existence, title to around 620 Lower East Side buildings was transferred from private ownership to city ownership through a process of landlord abandonment.<sup>15</sup> That is, when landlords stopped paying property taxes on their buildings, the city repossessed them. These properties, categorized by the city as "in rem," were, in some ways, fortunate because they survived total destruction.<sup>16</sup> In the ensuing years, the city would offer short- and long-term leases to what were called "homesteaders," current residents and other entrepreneurial visionaries who would rehabilitate and dwell in the decaying structures investing their own sweat equity. Homegrown groups such as Interfaith Adopt-A-Building and UHAB would mediate with the city to negotiate such leases.<sup>17</sup> Other buildings suffered not only the lack or cessation of maintenance, but – worse – a mysterious spate of arson, which often and conveniently led to the collection of insurance payouts by the property owners. As Interfaith Adopt-A-Building activists, Ruth Nazario and Sally Tully, described it in 1978, the destruction of both buildings and the communities they housed was so common on the Lower East Side by the end of the 1970s, it was almost prosaic: "In the process that leads to the kindling of buildings, landlords generally stop providing services which hastens the deterioration of the buildings and tenants move out...Eventually, the [abandoned] block is denuded of dwellings and residents, and the drug traffic lacking 'cover,' begins to move to another block. Such was the fate of East 11th, 10th and 6th Streets between Avenues B and C. These streets now contain less than half the houses that were there even two years ago."<sup>18</sup> Neighborhood resident Clover Swann recalled, "You go down Second Street between B and C, there's all those burned-out buildings, and people are living in them. People are shooting up in them...I guess this doesn't happen in other neighborhoods."<sup>19</sup> Thus, while poor Lower East Siders experienced the same residential segregation that other New Yorkers and

city-dwellers did, the rate at which their residential options declined was startling. To even the most hopeful resident, a sense that the neighborhood had been rejected and set apart from the rest of the city was pervasive.<sup>20</sup> CHARAS's message of self-sufficiency, self-governance, and cooperation rang true to a population that saw evidence of its own abandonment by the outside world on a daily basis.

Despite acknowledging and directly experiencing these grave circumstances, CHARAS's fundamental mission was to preserve the diverse, low-income character of the Lower East Side and try to maintain what remained of its built environment. Even as government officials, investors, and landowners turned away from the area, CHARAS saw it as worth protecting not only because it was their home, but because it symbolized a stand on behalf of poor, ethnic New Yorkers to, as historian Liz Sevckenko put it, "claim their rights to city land and resources."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as the charismatic Chino Garcia explained, CHARAS and similar groups "in a conscious manner" hoped to associate themselves with the "noble struggle, the rags part of the rags-to-riches story" that had characterized the Lower East Side for generations. In contrast to realtors and other "outsiders" who used terms such as "East Village" and "Alphabet City" to sugarcoat the destitution being endured in the section between Fourteenth and Houston Streets, the Bowery and the East River, Garcia noted that CHARAS and its supporters preferred to link the neighborhood to its histories of immigration, poverty, and inter-ethnic cooperation.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, they hoped to cultivate the decades-old roots the Puerto Rican community had planted on the Lower East Side. With the term "Loisaida" – a "Spanglish" word invented by poet Bimbo Rivas in collaboration with Chino Garcia to identify the northeastern section of the neighborhood – the Lower East Side's Puerto Rican heritage was further connected with the waves of poor immigrants who continued to settle there.<sup>23</sup> Writing in a local activist magazine,

Rivas made this connection clearer: “Children of Loisaída... sweep with tender love and care the perimeter of ‘La Plaza Cultural’ where proud edifices once stood built by immigrants of yesteryear who have passed on; immigrants whose children used the very same stones to climb away from the Lower East Side and into the voids of America the Dream.”<sup>24</sup> In essence, CHARAS (and the grassroots organizations with which it associated) viewed itself as the inheritor of the Lower East Side’s legacy as a space set apart – for better or for worse – for the city’s poor and ethnic others. And they intended to stay there. Embracing this legacy from the start -- even when real estate investors began to cast keen glances upon the area in the late 1970s – CHARAS set itself up as a counterpoint to the gentrification agenda.

CHARAS’s ethos derived not only from its desire to explicitly align itself with history and to rebuild its neighborhood, however much that neighborhood suffered. It also grew from a tradition of radicalism and a critique of outside involvement in community affairs. Four years before the founding of CHARAS, Chino Garcia and Angelo Rodriguez had established a similar organization called the Real Great Society (RGS), which the two developed along with a mixed group of community organizers, former government officials, academics, and, occasionally, members of the street-gang-turned-community-activist-organization, the Young Lords. As *LIFE* magazine writer Roger Vaughan patronizingly reported in a September 1967 article, RGS was mostly comprised of “a bunch of teen-age toughs who have turned solid citizens. Puerto Ricans mainly, they were not too long ago, the swaggering leaders of New York City street gangs with such names as the Assassins, the Dragons and the Untouchables.”<sup>25</sup> While this description underplayed the crucial involvement of white suburbanites such as brothers Mike and Fred Good, graduate students such as Frank and Sarah Ferguson, and Columbia Teachers’ College professor, Charles Slack, Garcia and Rodriguez were in fact former gang leaders whose turf had

incorporated portions of the Lower East Side.<sup>26</sup> It was partly this experience that animated their desire to rebuild their community. What most impressed Vaughan upon visiting with the RGS youth was that they had “no more going for them than guts, great desire and enormous hustle born of the necessity to survive, [and] break out of the frustrating cycle of big-city poverty.”<sup>27</sup> Run-ins with the police, including Rodriguez’s prison stint for murder, helped convince Garcia, Rodriguez, and their friends, that crime would not improve either their own circumstances or those of the people around them as much as would political and social activism.<sup>28</sup>

In 1964, Garcia explained, “We decided to take the role of organizers; developing and teaching ourselves and others how to be more self-sufficient; working to improve our lives as a people.”<sup>29</sup> From his perspective, as well as that of his diverse colleagues, the War on Poverty and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society had failed to ignite the democratic and social passions of Lower East Siders. Scholar and former RGS activist Luis Aponte-Pares has argued that RGS founders viewed federal government investments such as Mobilization for Youth and other community action programs as bureaucratic traps that only defused political energies by burying them under mountains of paperwork. Direct action became mired in the need to hold an endless string of meetings, produce detailed reports, and track budgets. The radicalism of hyper-local, participatory democracy was, therefore, tempered as the “voluntary work” that community organizations had relied upon for sustenance before the injection of federal dollars “was replaced by paid work.”<sup>30</sup> Garcia put it differently, labeling the local organizers of Great Society antipoverty programs as “poverty pimps.” “A lot of [them] are pure 100% thieves,” he explained a decade after the programs had dissolved. “I believe that a lot of people came to rob because the fucking structure was a joke. It was set up to fail.... They tell the community, we’ve got ten billion dollars to solve the problems of the poor and this is how you get it.”<sup>31</sup> This top-down

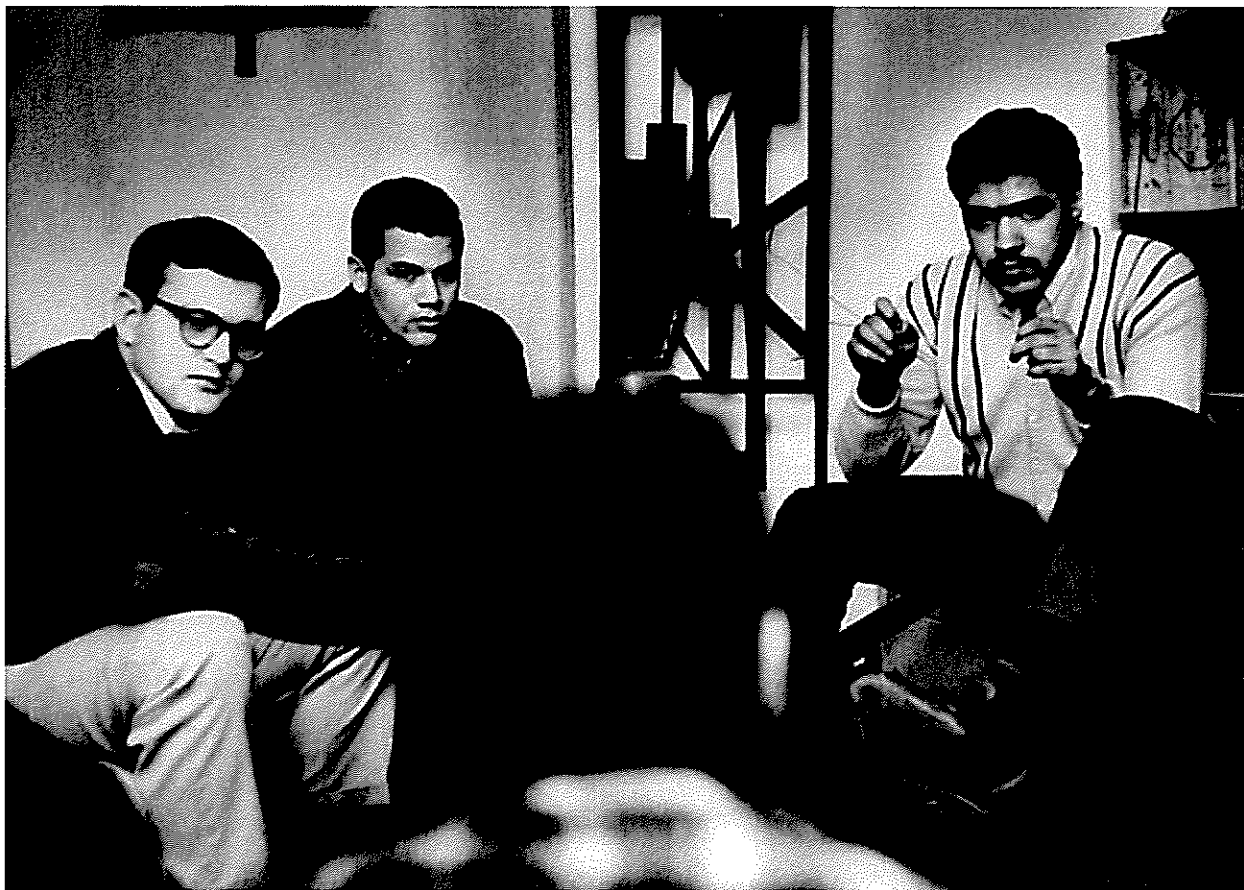


Fig. 22: From Roger Vaughan's *LIFE Magazine* article, "The Real Great Society." Pictured from left to right are Fred Good, Chino Garcia, and Angelo Rodriguez. Photo: Schapiro.

approach, Garcia believed, never truly pinpointed areas where financial investment might have been useful, but rather funneled money into the pockets of those willing to game the system.

When RGS's issues with the War on Poverty did not hover around corruption, they involved a lack of community involvement. Mobilization for Youth organizers acknowledged early that "internal and external pressures [were] brought to bear to dilute [the] impact" of what it called "indigenous persons in program roles" because funders worried that community members were incapable of leading substantive anti-poverty projects.<sup>32</sup> Garcia agreed: "There was no pre-planning with the people, the local community."<sup>33</sup> Part of the reason for this disconnect may have been what MFY worker Charles Grosser believed was a mismatch in perception. In his 1965 doctoral thesis, he found that "staff felt that the community was a worse place to live, its schools were poorer, and the life chances of its people were more hopeless than did the residents themselves."<sup>34</sup> With sixty-two percent of the MFY professional staff categorized as white, college-educated and from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, such perception may have been, as Grosser contended, due to a possible tendency to see "the clients and their neighborhood in essentially conventional middle-class terms."<sup>35</sup> Even the "indigenous" staff members – mostly Black and Puerto Rican – rose to the middle-class, according to Grosser, because of their salaries and occupational status. This, too, might have created distance between MFY and its client base.<sup>36</sup> Race and ethnicity was, however, as much a dividing line as class. From the point of view of RGS participants the question was whether, in Aponte Pares's words, "*los blanquitos liberales* would [ever] cross the line and attempt to disrupt the system" in partnership with the impoverished people of color they intended to help.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Real Great Society -- and later, CHARAS -- viewed their effort to "help their peers turn their lives around to become productive, active citizens" as a mission partly shaped by racial and class difference.<sup>38</sup>

Despite its early vigor and convincing adherence to the ethos of self-sufficiency and community-centeredness, RGS quickly encountered the same obstacles to which its organizers believed federal antipoverty workers had succumbed. While the group's members took construction and service jobs in the neighborhood to help fund its projects, they found themselves unable to implement larger enterprises without some outside financial assistance. A 1967 grant for \$15,000 from the Vincent Astor Foundation was followed a year later by another grant from the foundation for nearly double that amount. Meanwhile, as Fred Good explained, another substantial grant came to the Real Great Society through a proposal submitted to the federal Office of Economic Opportunity that had been favored by Senator Robert Kennedy.<sup>39</sup> With larger grants came the need for more paid staff and paperwork. This, in turn, led to disagreements about salary schedules, reporting, and control. Garcia found the new bureaucracy disheartening, lamenting that "the professional people and the paid staff wanted [the Real Great Society] to be like an institution," while, "the regular people" like himself "didn't want that." Another RGS participant, Edgard Rivera, echoed Garcia's assessment: "I would say that they are giving us rope enough to hang ourselves. If you have a good group they are falling all over themselves to give you money. Then they give you too much money, hoping to trip you up with your books or your hiring."<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, the bureaucratic wrangling turned off Garcia, Rivera, and other RGS leaders to the idea of major external funding. This discomfort presaged the beginning of the end of Garcia's and his allies' involvement with RGS, as well as CHARAS's future attitude toward outsiders. By 1969, after a series of internecine struggles between different factions of RGS over the degree to which the organization would be Puerto Rican-only going forward, Garcia and others broke completely from RGS to form CHARAS. Recognizing

diversity as one of the strengths of the Lower East Side, CHARAS committed itself to a multicultural audience.

Initially, the group determined its energies would be best spent cultivating small businesses and sponsoring projects that might bring income to CHARAS's Lower East Side neighbors. This approach, they hoped, would keep government involvement at a minimum. The first of these projects was the construction of geodesic domes, flexible and multi-use structures that were the signature design of architectural visionary, Buckminster Fuller. By 1970, the group was working with Fuller's protégé, Michael Ben Eli, and renting a loft space at 303 Cherry Street where its most mathematically inclined member, Roy Batiste, led the charge to learn dome construction. These inexpensive and versatile structures, which CHARAS hoped to manufacture en masse and construct for neighbors in need of temporary housing, gave CHARAS's early years a plucky character, particularly as members erected domes – hundreds of them – throughout the city between 1971 and 1972.<sup>41</sup> While many of the original domes lasted only briefly, either due to misuse or clearance to make way for other construction, they stood as a symbol of CHARAS's willingness to be innovative. In one of the first media mentions of CHARAS, the *New York Times* reported in 1972 on the set of domes at Jefferson Street on the Lower East Side: Roy Batiste explained they represented “a phase in plans leading to the ultimate development of an economically sound enterprise.” “All its profits,” he declared, would be used “to improve and economically develop not only the Lower East Side but other poor areas as well.”<sup>42</sup>

Like Batiste, many CHARAS leaders would continue to envision themselves environmental entrepreneurs and see dome-building as a potential goldmine for bringing the labor of Lower East Siders together with outside investors. For others, however, such as member James Echevarria, “CHARAS is not only about dome building... It's more about involvement of

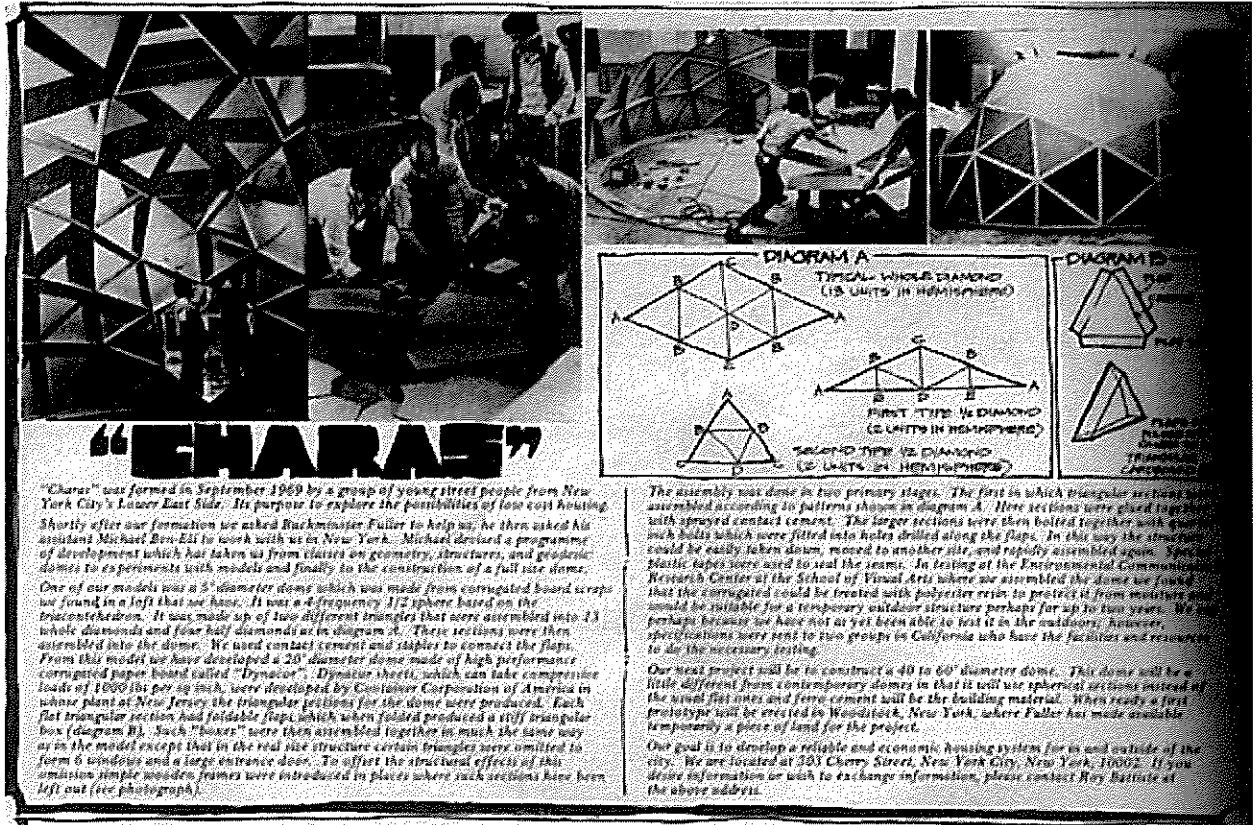


Fig. 23: Article outlining the design of the Buckminster Fuller-inspired, CHARAS domes. From the Just Seeds Artists' Cooperative:  
[http://www.justseeds.org/blog/2009/02/the\\_story\\_of\\_charas\\_and\\_r\\_buck.html](http://www.justseeds.org/blog/2009/02/the_story_of_charas_and_r_buck.html)

people who never thought they would be involved in anything or included into anything. Not just domes but in anything. What I have learned down at the loft hasn't been about domes and geodesics, its [sic] been more about people."<sup>43</sup> By 1979, this hope to inspire locals to "be involved" translated into greater attention to soft programming in the arts and culture, as well as more hands-on activity in tenement reconstruction. As anthropologist Daniel Chodorkoff, who studied CHARAS in the late 1970s argued, over the first decade of its existence, CHARAS's leaders saw their purpose as "not merely [about] a revitalized physical environment... Ultimately it is a cultural transformation in which the brothers and sisters of Charas are engaged. They are committed to fusing elements of traditional Puerto Rican culture with alternatives to the social, economic and political forms offered by the dominant culture of capitalism."<sup>44</sup> If the Lower East Side was to be set apart physically from the rest of the city, through abandonment, and spiritually, as an irredeemable ethnic slum, then CHARAS believed it could support a separate cultural and political economy as well.

In concrete terms, this meant that CHARAS's programs would emphasize cultural responses to the sociopolitical challenges its constituents faced. And although "traditional Puerto Rican culture" or *Puertorriquenidad* would be the centerpiece of these responses, what that meant was exceptionally mythologized. In the *Loisaida* definition, *Puertorriquenidad* was essentially multicultural and multiethnic, inclusive, as Puerto Rico itself was, of African, Native Indian, and European elements. As Sevchenko argues, it "promoted racial tolerance and could be used to mobilize a diverse group of Latin American, European, and other residents."<sup>45</sup> It was also anticolonial, not only in relation to Puerto Rico itself, which many understood as a nation usurped by American imperialism, but also in relation to urban spaces that were oppressed or targeted by a churning capitalist system of creative destruction, as, they argued, the Lower East

Side was. Bimbo Rivas identified “the colonial dependency state of mind” as “one of Loisaida’s greatest enemies.”<sup>46</sup> Even when the idea of culture was embedded in CHARAS’s dominant Puerto Rican identity, then, the goal was to create a sort of ethnically diverse, communal, working-class *Volkgeist* that would act in contrast to the rapacious forces of capitalism and development elsewhere in the city. CHARAS would not only encourage art and performance that sprouted from the many ethnic communities that called the Lower East Side home, but would celebrate any work that spotlighted the disinvestment and, later, gentrification that threatened Lower East Siders’ well-being.

This commitment, however utopian and inclusive it might have been, did not win CHARAS friends in political or real estate circles, as would be evident in the decades to come. Among the performances CHARAS staged in the following years were those by playwrights Tee Saralegui (“How Would You Handle a Rent Strike?”) and Emily Rubin and Luis Guzman (“We Don’t Want Cheese, We Want Apartments Please”). Less political art and performance would find eager support at CHARAS, such as Bimbo Rivas’s poetry and music from Ed Montgomery’s and Robbie McCauley’s Seditious Ensemble. The Living Theater and puppet plays, as well as courses in capoeira, folk dance, and cabaret were also on offer at CHARAS, as were workshops for young artists such as future celebrities John Leguizamo and Spike Lee.<sup>47</sup> Through its partnership with the Seven Loaves arts collective, CHARAS gained friends among diverse Lower East Side communities as well. Seven Loaves – comprised of CHARAS, The Fourth Street (a youth-run magazine from St. Brigid’s Church), CITYarts (mural painting), the Lower East Side Print Shop (posters and printing), the Children’s Arts Workshop (visual art), the Basement Workshop (Chinatown-based performance), and the Darkroom (photography) – gave CHARAS allies and resources that confirmed its place as a major, homegrown institution.<sup>48</sup>

Further, it spread CHARAS' name throughout the Lower East Side, as artists affiliated with the organization blanketed the neighborhood with their creative output. Later, when Seven Loaves would expand, calling itself the Lower East Side Arts Collective, and accepting at least five more arts-based groups into its fold, CHARAS would play a major part in hosting, exhibiting, and publicizing the work of its collaborators.<sup>49</sup> Culture in CHARAS's formulation was, once again, a multi-ethnic and shared enterprise.

In 1979, CHARAS members squatted an abandoned, nineteenth-century public school on East 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B, naming it El Bohio, or "the hut," a place where members could gather, plan, and stage programming. While accounts differ on how CHARAS was originally able to occupy the school, the organization was in legal contract with the city by the end of that year to lease the space for "community purposes."<sup>50</sup> CHARAS spent the next twenty years rehabilitating the building to include classrooms, an auditorium, and functional heating and electrical equipment. One local resident, Carmen Pabon, remembered cleaning the building and "doing whatever needed to be done" as soon as CHARAS opened its doors.<sup>51</sup> Even six years after it first occupied the building, locals and the greater arts community assisted with its upkeep: in 1985, an art auction featuring the works of Claes Oldenburg and Eric Fischl, among others, brought in thousands of dollars to fix the broken windows and pock-marked walls of the building.<sup>52</sup> With El Bohio as its headquarters, CHARAS's identity within the greater Lower East Side, as well as on its nearer *Loisaida* blocks took on a more established and broader meaning. CHARAS had been involved in the sweat equity movement in the past, but as squatters, CHARAS' members were further accepted as fellow travelers in the efforts by Interfaith Adopt-A-Building, UHAB, and unincorporated squatter groups to reclaim and rehabilitate the Lower East Side's buildings for its low-income population. Its lease with the city meant that it would



Fig. 24: Image of CHARAS/El Bohio in the late 1990s and La Plaza Cultural today. From the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space.

likely share the fate – whatever it may be – of the area’s other homesteaders and squatters. At the same time, a major part of CHARAS’s relationship with Seven Loaves and the Lower East Side Arts Collective, as well as others in the city’s arts community, was the fact that it had a large space from which to organize and display performances and exhibits. This would make CHARAS/El Bohio a hub of cultural activity on the Lower East Side rivaled in popularity only by the more commercial clubs and galleries that sprang up elsewhere in the new “East Village.”<sup>53</sup> El Bohio literally put CHARAS on the map.

CHARAS’s occupation of the school (also known as P.S. 64), of course, also placed it on the very brink of the gentrification frontier. Located near the northeast corner of Tompkins Square, El Bohio served as a perch from which to observe anti-gentrification protests in the park throughout the 1980s, including the infamous struggle in the summer of 1988. Just next door to El Bohio stood Christadora House, a former 1930s settlement that was sold to developers in 1983 for \$1.3 million, and became a lightning rod for protest throughout the decade. Within three years of its purchase, the renovated settlement featured 89 condominium apartments, some of which went on the market for around \$1 million each.<sup>54</sup> At a time when more than 20% of Manhattanites and almost 30% of Lower East Siders earned less than the poverty rate of \$6,280 per person per year, Christadora was read by the area’s current residents as an affront to their low-income status.<sup>55</sup> As one Loisaida resident said about the rise of real estate development in this period, “They fix these apartments up and they’re charging not even six hundred dollars, a thousand dollars [per month in rent.] That’s not for the black or the Puerto Rican.”<sup>56</sup> Christadora House -- once a hopeful beacon during Depression-era stagnation, and later a community resource center run by the Young Lords -- was now seen as a luxurious symbol of conquest. During the Tompkins Square melee, protestors broke the glass doors of the building

and turned over planters in the lobby.<sup>57</sup> The chant that day was “Gentrification is Class War.” Whether or not CHARAS/El Bohio members joined the chorus is unclear; its attitude toward the onslaught of gentrification, however, was.<sup>58</sup>

Just as location put CHARAS on the frontlines of the gentrification battle, so, too, did its control of urban space. Both its rehabilitation of El Bohio and its leadership in the clean-up and reclamation of an abandoned lot down the block at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue C, made CHARAS nominal landlords of thousands of square feet of Lower East Side land. The lot, which would be dubbed La Plaza Cultural, sat in the cross-hairs of redevelopment by the late 1980s; only a few years later, El Bohio, would face a similar threat. What ultimately determined the outcomes of both situations was not CHARAS’s value to its Lower East Side constituents, its long affiliation with the neighborhood, or its provision of services and cultural resources to an area long-afflicted with the sorrows of poverty and its attendant crimes. Rather, as with many urban spaces in the neoliberal, development-hungry political climate of the late-twentieth century, the fate of both spaces would come down to property value and political alliances. The media may not have identified CHARAS/El Bohio as a participant in the struggle against indiscriminate development, but the community certainly did.<sup>59</sup> Years later, lamenting the introduction of a new apartment complex where part of her community garden, El Bello Almencer Boriqueno, was located, Carmen Pabon traced her personal battle against development back to her involvement with CHARAS.<sup>60</sup>

La Plaza Cultural was first targeted in 1987 as part of a “cross-subsidy plan” that the Lower East Side’s Community Board 3 negotiated and re-negotiated with the city over the previous four years. The cross-subsidy deal had split the area’s city-owned properties evenly between the city itself, which hoped to sell the lots to real estate developers, and community-

based organizations, which planned to partner with charities and other non-profits to build more low-income housing for the area's current residents. Those properties and lots distributed to the community often represented spaces that had been abandoned and reclaimed by squatters, community gardeners, and organizations such as CHARAS more than a decade before. That is, while the city had repossessed such properties from their original landowners for lack of tax payments in the late-1970s and early-1980s, the city, under its Department of Housing Preservation and Development, had never done anything to improve them. But, under the cross-subsidy plan, the only way for either outside real estate developers or local non-profits to build on these lots was to evict the squatters, gardeners, and cultural producers who had been caring for them for years.<sup>61</sup> In the case of La Plaza Cultural, it was the Community Board, working on behalf of a local non-profit, the Lower East Side Coalition for Housing Development, which saw great potential in redeveloping the community-built space. The Coalition, directed by City Councilperson Antonio Pagan, who had also served on the Community Board at the time of the cross-subsidy deal, intended to build low-income housing for the elderly on the land.

The local squatters' movement, however, saw this plan as subterfuge for gentrification, noting that even housing units initially produced for low-income renters under the cross-subsidy plan could be rented at market rate after fifteen years.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Antonio Pagan, a conservative Democrat who had taken vocal positions against squatters, community gardens, and the homeless occupation of Tompkins Square, was seen by many in the community as untrustworthy, a "poverty pimp" whose primary goals were to gather greater power and cash in on the sale of Lower East Side lands.<sup>63</sup> Building on La Plaza Cultural also had symbolic meaning. Although the space was understood as a CHARAS entity, the broader squatters' movement of the 1980s also claimed it as "the center of [their] neighborhood" by the time Pagan

had sited it for development. Programs such as “The Struggle Continues/La Lucha Continua” at La Plaza, which featured twenty-five murals depicting and conflating political battles against South African apartheid, Central American dictatorship, and local luxury housing development, made clear that La Plaza Cultural was a space for multiculturalism and revolutionary discourse and that it stood against gentrification.<sup>64</sup> For anti-gentrification activists such as Father Frank Morales of St. Brigid’s Church on Avenue B, who supported both CHARAS and the squatters, La Plaza Cultural was an essential part of the neighborhood fabric that ought to be preserved. “People are fed up with being violated and want to fight back,” he argued.<sup>65</sup> Protest and community board skirmishes in support of Morales’s sentiment sprang up around La Plaza Cultural, ultimately helping to save it from the wrecking ball in 1990. That the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which had promised funding to Pagan’s group for his housing project, withdrew its support after determining that there was an excess of subsidized, low-income housing on the Lower East Side was also a factor.<sup>66</sup> Six years later, El Bohio was next on the auction block, this time at the behest of the city.

At play, in particular this time, was politics. Antonio Pagan, at that point a member of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s administration and his advisor, publicly castigated CHARAS, telling a local Spanish-language newspaper that “Yes, [CHARAS] is a cultural center, and I’m the clown in the parade.”<sup>67</sup> Its cultural activities, he said, were a “charade” and little they did was “valid.” Yet as one October 1996 article in the *Village Voice* noted, “The pol [Pagan] is surely settling a political score at the expense of community residents with Charas chairman ARMANDO PEREZ, a Democratic district leader who has often opposed Pagan.”<sup>68</sup> The anonymous author of the article declared that Pagan, boasting a “cozy relationship” with the mayor, might have been able to stop the sale of El Bohio if he would “lift a finger,” but his

personal dislike of Perez seemed to be the animating motivation behind his opposition to CHARAS. Two other Lower East Side cultural organizations that had squatted city-owned buildings – ABC No Rio on Rivington Street and the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center on Suffolk Street – garnered support from Pagan and neither suffered auction. Under a new city program called Community Works, ABC No Rio was even offered the chance to buy its building from the city for only \$1.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile CHARAS went up for sale at a price of \$1,125,000 – an amount even the judge who heard CHARAS’s injunction bid believed was “troubling” since CHARAS would never be able to raise such an amount to purchase the building on its own.<sup>70</sup> Despite delays that resulted from CHARAS’s and the Lower East Side community’s tenacious efforts through the courts and heated negotiations with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to save El Bohio, the final sale of the building took place in July of 1998 amid mass protest. (Expecting no bids to be made, those at the demonstration apparently released 10,000 crickets into the crowd at the auction.)<sup>71</sup> Developer Gregg Singer, who hoped to turn the school building into multi-million-dollar condominiums on par with those at Christadora House, purchased the lovingly rehabilitated structure for \$3.15 million.<sup>72</sup> CHARAS was able to rent space in the building until the end of 2001, at which point it was unceremoniously evicted. Never able to find a comparable site for its activities, CHARAS eventually dissolved.<sup>73</sup>

In his analysis of the downfall of CHARAS/El Bohio, Chino Garcia, as well as many of his supporters, concluded that the primary reason the city turned its back on the organization was because of its ethnic character. "The people that have names like Garcia, Perez, Rodriguez or Gomez are not being supported," he argued. City Councilwomen Kathryn Freed and Margarita Lopez, also of the Lower East Side, agreed: "This administration has totally abandoned Latino and Hispanic culture...The city is taking advantage of their money and their efforts and saying,

'Thank you very much, now get out of here so we can make a big profit.'"<sup>74</sup> Armando Perez, however, believed the reason for El Bohio's sale was, in fact, personal: so bitter was the antagonism between Antonio Pagan and Perez that Perez, along with six other Lower East Siders, had won a \$75,000 lawsuit against Pagan for character defamation in 1994. There was no love lost between Pagan and Perez in the following years either. That El Bohio was auctioned, while other properties gained favor was just as much a matter of politics, then, as culture. Moreover, El Bohio's location in the desirable "East Village" – in contrast to groups such as ABC No Rio and the Soto Velez Cultural Center on the "old" Lower East Side below Houston – meant that its financial value to the city was far greater. While El Bohio sold to Singer for just over \$3 million, the Soto Velez Cultural Center was sold to its board of directors for less than \$1 million.<sup>75</sup>

Yet the sale of El Bohio and the eventual crumbling of CHARAS held far more significance to the Lower East Side than politics, culture, or money could explain. Ultimately, the loss of El Bohio represented a statement about community preservation and the kind of citizenship the new Lower East Side valued. In essence, those Lower East Siders who had endured the decades of poverty, joblessness, blight, and disinvestment were able to survive the revival of the neighborhood best if they were property owners. Renters, who comprised an immense swath of the population, were able to preserve their homes primarily if they had obtained the benefits of rent control. However, as Christopher Mele explained in 1994, "In the East Village, many leaseholders of rent-regulated apartments are Latinos on fixed incomes or receiving some form of public assistance. Thus, many of them, paying very low rents, live side by side with higher-income whites who pay more for their recently-renovated apartments."<sup>76</sup> Residents were wary of the situation. "When the landlord in my building re-does an apartment,"

explained Clover Swann, “he puts in a high sink and a new stove and a new refrigerator...And it looks pretty spiffy...And the rent he’s gotten to jack up from like one hundred and fifty to seven hundred dollars.”<sup>77</sup> Richard Morales was more antagonistic: “Lately, I see a lot more white people in the neighborhood. I’m not gonna let them take over. Not my home.”<sup>78</sup> While the edginess and bohemian character of the area that CHARAS partly represented would continue to be a selling point for buyers and renters willing to pay a high price for renovated tenement apartments, the radical politics of self-help, collaboration, mutuality, and *Puertorriquenidad* were parenthetical to the Lower East Side’s appeal. So, too, were the residents who had fought to keep the neighborhood’s built environment functional. Citizenship on the new Lower East Side, then, had more to do with income level than sweat equity, a marketable avant-garde than a politically radical one. And community preservation on the Lower East Side, as it would soon become clear, was more a question of property than of people.

### **“A Gateway to America”: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum**

Just as CHARAS succumbed to its final eviction in December of 2001, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, located just a mile southwest from the former El Bohio was facing its own imminent battle over space and the right to occupy a building it did not own. Back in the fall of 2000, the museum’s most-valued artifact -- a pre-law tenement located at 97 Orchard Street -- suffered worrying damage as a result of construction taking place at a privately-owned tenement directly next door at 99 Orchard Street. Both 97 and 99 had been constructed by the same builder and landlord in 1863. The two were considered “sister” buildings and shared a party wall at 97’s northern side and 99’s southern side.<sup>79</sup> Whatever building work was done to one could not help but have an impact on the other. The damage to 97 Orchard Street, according

to a March 20, 2001 report from the New York City Buildings Department, consisted of a crack to the plaster in the cellar wall, as well as some bulging.<sup>80</sup> While no major structural damage was discovered, an engineer hired by the museum suggested that these issues may be a result of the building settling as construction continued (often without a permit) next door.<sup>81</sup> Such settling had the potential to irredeemably harm 97 Orchard Street and cost the museum tens of thousands in repairs.

The cost of repair, however, was not the museum's main concern. Rather, as the centerpiece of the museum's interpretation of the immigrant and migrant experience on the Lower East Side, as well as an icon of the major part immigration had played in American history, 97 Orchard Street had been declared both a National Historic Site by the National Park Service and a landmark site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1998. Damage to the tenement was not just damage to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum; it was officially considered a direct threat to the nation's heritage. Indeed, as founder and executive director, Ruth Abram, would state, whatever action the museum might take on behalf of protecting its tenement was in the interest of "safeguard[ing] a national landmark, an economic and cultural anchor for its area."<sup>82</sup> Any beneficial side effects to the museum's protection of the building were welcome, but not its primary objective. When, by the end of 2001, the museum began working with its allies in state government to have 99 Orchard Street condemned through the process of eminent domain, then, the critical need for preserving this unique national landmark was the major rallying cry.

How the Lower East Side Tenement Museum came to this moment of battle and how it rose to become a significant player in the neighborhood's spatial politics had much to do with forces that preceded and processes that evolved alongside the museum's creation. The first of

these was the growing association of the Lower East Side with the settlement and embrace of Jews in the United States. As historians of Jewish life in America such as Suzanne Wasserman, Hasia Diner, Deborah Dash Moore, and Moses Rischin have thoroughly argued, in the period after World War II, the Lower East Side was increasingly mythologized as the geographical origin of the Jewish American experience.<sup>83</sup> Whether or not one's ancestors ever passed through the Lower East Side – and even if the family never, in fact, lived there – the neighborhood and its iconography of tenements, pushcarts, and aging synagogues represented for American Jews an ethnic homeland, a place of authenticity, origins, and of belonging. The Tenement Museum, while it would be careful to market itself as a museum of immigration, rather than a Jewish museum, would nevertheless benefit from the association of the Lower East Side with Jewish heritage. In a similar fashion, the changing demography of the area during the period of urban renewal also cast the Lower East Side's Jewish heritage as an important, but disappearing, treasure.<sup>84</sup> Organizations such as the United Jewish Council of the East Side, Inc., founded in 1971, and the Friends of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, formed in 1979, would help to lay the foundations of a heritage preservation campaign in the area. The Tenement Museum, for its part, could trace its genealogy directly to the latter organization, while earning public support from the former.

The other major force that influenced the museum's stature in contestations over space on the Lower East Side was, of course, the gentrification frontier. CHARAS's leaders were forthright from the start about which side it would take in the years of gentrification-fueled reinvestment on the Lower East Side, the Tenement Museum's Ruth Abram, and its board, took a far more pragmatic and calculated approach. Ideologically, the museum was both a leader and supporter in efforts to preserve the neighborhood's built environment and defy developers who

saw greater financial gain in the process of demolition and new construction than in the careful restoration of historical structures. In later years, the museum would spearhead the proposal of a Lower East Side Historic District to be designated by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, however, the Museum benefitted directly from the introduction of a new middle- and upper-class on the Lower East Side. The cafes, restaurants, boutiques, and galleries, that replaced shuttered storefronts and aged retailers drew tourist dollars and real estate hounds to the museum's surrounding blocks, enhancing the nearby leisure options for visitors interested in exploring the area. Financial reinvestment also meant an investment in safety, as policing increased and crime – already falling throughout the city – decreased dramatically on the Lower East Side.<sup>86</sup> One local Orchard Street retailer, Joe Cohen, owner of Joe's Fabric Warehouse, even credited the museum for the revival of the Lower East Side: "Since they [the Tenement Museum] came to the neighborhood, the area has new life." Similarly, Buddy Fishkin of Fishkin Knitwear Co. Inc., argued that "the LES Tenement Museum has had only a positive effect on my business. Over half of my customers remark that they've either just taken a tour or are due to join one. They have done a great deal for this neighborhood."<sup>87</sup> With friends in the business community and government, as well as among preservationists, the Museum very often trod lightly – at least publicly -- on the question of gentrification. The only oblique reference to it in its tours was through the acknowledgement of neighborhood change and the frequent need for new populations to repurpose older structures for more immediate needs.

While ambivalent about the gentrification frontier, the museum was forthright about the idea of an "urban frontier," complete with "urban pioneers." The origins of this language were not in gentrification, but rather in the stories of immigration the museum sought to tell. In its



Fig. 26: Sign outside 97 Orchard Street noting its status as a landmark on the National Register of Historic Places and Interior of an interpreted apartment at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. This tells the story of the Levine family, Eastern European Jews who operate a sweatshop out of their apartment. Courtesy Lower East Side Tenement Museum.



inimitable way, the museum rewrote the established narrative of the Lower East Side as an alien – and thus problematic -- space by embracing its inhabitants as Americans-in-the-making and its environment as a totemic backdrop to the Americanization process. Indeed, in Abram’s words, “The pioneer spirit that built this country, its cities, its businesses, its schools...was alive and well at 97 Orchard Street” and its immigrant residents ought rightly to be seen as “urban pioneers on the municipal frontier.”<sup>88</sup> In this way, Abram hoped, the nation’s immigrant forebears might be included among the wagon trains and overland explorers that were so embraced in the American national mythology. The Lower East Side, as the alien space these urban pioneers first settled, could also be reclaimed not as an area separate from the rest of New York or the nation, but as a “gateway to America.” In other words, what made the Lower East Side alien and unacceptable for the previous century made it sacred and respectable for the next.

The immigrants to whom Abram referred, however, were themselves a select group. Soon after its purchase of 97 Orchard Street, which had been sealed for residential use since 1935 because of the Multiple Dwellings Law of 1929 [See Ch. 3], the Tenement Museum’s leadership made the decision to interpret the lives and experiences only of the immigrant families who had once lived in the building. This would allow the museum to be “specific, detailed, convincing and clear – rather than generalized, or ‘generic,’” but it also effectively cut off significant exploration of the Chinese, Latin American, and Ukrainian immigration, as well as the Puerto Rican and African American migration, that characterized the Lower East Side after World War II.<sup>89</sup> Over the years, the museum’s long-term planning vision made the preservation and interpretation of 97 Orchard Street its main priority, with temporary and supplementary programming addressing more recent immigration.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the stories of four, notably “white ethnic” families – the Gumpertz’s (German Jewish), the Rogarshevsky’s (Eastern

European Jewish), the Confino's (Sephardic Jewish from Turkey), and the Baldizzi's (Italians) – would form the core of the permanent exhibits.<sup>91</sup>

Significantly and in keeping with the pioneer spirit, each of the family stories revealed a version of pluck and determination that eventually led to an exodus from the Lower East Side, assimilation, and a shift into the rising middle-class. The German-Jewish Gumpertz's moved to the more salubrious Yorkville in the 1880s, while the Sephardic Jewish Confino's changed their first names and relocated to the new, more spacious residences of East Harlem in the 1910s. The Rogarshevsky's became the Rosenthal's, with all but the matriarch finding homes outside the Lower East Side by the start of World War II, and the Baldizzi's found reliable jobs after the Great Depression, eventually moving to Brooklyn.<sup>92</sup> This winning storyline highlighted the argument Abram would make again and again that more contemporary Americans could trace their origins to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigration than to the log cabins and colonial manses of traditional American lore. Through assimilation, as well as the established route of hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit that were the pillars of the “American dream,” immigrants like those at 97 Orchard Street conquered the urban frontier. Whatever poverty or uneasiness one suffered along the way were merely a consequence of growing pains and dues-paying, never a long-term sentence. And anyway, the narrative went on, the struggle was worthwhile because the rewards of American citizenship lay at the end of the journey.

While perhaps unintentional, such descriptions of exalted and temporary poverty and upwardly mobile, assimilating immigrants contrasted with the entrenched poverty and increasing segregation of the Lower East Side's contemporary ethnic and immigrant poor. That these more recent residents of the Lower East Side were included in the museum's narrative in mostly

parenthetical ways only heightened the dissonance. Puerto Rican leaders such as Chino Garcia had long been wary of this kind of comparison. As historian Liz Sevckenko noted, with “an explosion of writing by social scientists and political commentators condemning the failure of the new immigrants to assimilate and advance in comparison to their European predecessors” in the 1970s and 1980s, linkages between past immigration and present ethnic groups were rarely complimentary.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Garcia and poet Bimbo Rivas invented the term *Loisaida* to both embrace and revise the Lower East Side’s immigrant heritage. Still claiming themselves and other ethnic immigrants and migrants as inheritors of this legacy, *Loisaida* activists offered a narrative counter to the one represented at the Tenement Museum. To them, as CHARAS demonstrated time and again, poverty was the result of a voracious and possibly racist capitalist system, not a measure of personal determination. Poor immigrants, who were rarely singled out in CHARAS’s discourse, were simply pawns in the same political economy. Therefore, while “a belief in the past, present, and future probability of upward mobility underlies a sense of common destiny [at the Tenement Museum],” as anthropologist Jack Kugelmass argued, upward mobility was not necessarily within reach of all its neighbors, particularly the ethnic poor of color.<sup>94</sup> American character and citizenship, according to this counter-narrative, could not be defined by hard work, desire, and personal integrity so much as by economic and political opportunity.

Acknowledgement and discussion of such critiques, however, were not within the scope of the museum’s mission. Nor was it inclined to challenge the political status quo. As Jack Kugelmass observed, any political radicalism on the part of the museum had the potential to undermine funding, particularly from government supporters.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, with real estate and financial executives, such as Peter B. Madoff and Raymond O’Keefe on its board, the museum’s

leadership was not in a position to question, as CHARAS did, the underpinnings of the city's power structure.<sup>96</sup> Even if, in Abram's words, the museum's premise was to "[preserve] the past as a road map to our future" because "a successful future requires an appreciation of diversity in all its forms and a commitment to democracy," the museum's execution of this goal was primarily a sentimental one.<sup>97</sup> Less interested in citizenship as a set of political, economic, and social rights, as CHARAS was, the Tenement Museum viewed its work as a step toward cultural citizenship for its immigrant heroes and heroines. As Abram put it, "The intimate stories of the people who rerooted themselves in America...together form our collective memory. To understand this history is to understand ourselves...as individuals, as members of communities, and as a Nation."<sup>98</sup> The immigration stories, humble and compelling, were, therefore, a key to connecting a more diverse set of Americans to their fore-fathers and -mothers. Through a sense of shared history – particularly one that merged the pioneers of the Western frontier with those of the nation's cities – Americans might renew a sense of common purpose.

To enhance this interpretation of cultural citizenship, Abram borrowed from historians such as Daniel Boorstin and Arthur Bestor, whose aphoristic writing she often quoted in articles and speeches. Boorstin, who taught history at the University of Chicago for twenty-five years and then served as Librarian of Congress, was prolific in his analysis of American national character and was influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. His neoconservative politics made him notorious with the Left, but his agility in producing a grand narrative of American history through the three-volume opus, *The Americans* (1959-1974), elevated his public stature. Abram found his faith in history particularly appealing, quoting Boorstin as saying, "Planning for the future without a sense of history is like planting cut flowers." "Planting Cut Flowers" would serve as the title of at least one article Abram wrote and the

quotation would appear in a handful of Abram's public addresses.<sup>99</sup> In the same vein, she would turn to Bestor, a constitutional historian who wrote about citizenship and social studies education, to support her claim that inclusion in the national narrative was key to democratic strength. Bestor's uncited quotation "Deprive me of my historical consciousness, and in the most literal sense, I do not know who I am" would appear in remarks Abram gave at the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1997, her 2000 article for the American Association for State and Local History, and a 2008 Japan Society symposium on preservation campaigns in Kyoto in which she participated.<sup>100</sup> Through quotes like these, Abram sought to affirm that historical understanding was a requisite for national membership. Thus, cultural citizenship, in the form of inclusive national history, was attainable through the kind preservation and storytelling the Tenement Museum represented.

Yet Abram's idea of cultural citizenship was not in scholarly dialogue with other public historians such as John Kuo Wei Tchen and Rina Benmayor, whose definition of the term had a far more radical agenda. Tchen and Benmayor defined cultural citizenship as "an identity that is formed not out of legal membership but out of a sense of cultural belonging" that was linked to greater political agency.<sup>101</sup> This kind of citizenship was a two-way street, with history perhaps providing roots for contemporary experience, but with contemporary experience highlighting the limitations of historical lessons as well. As both scholars and their fellow collaborators in the Inter-University Program for Latino Research would assert "the key element of cultural citizenship is the process of 'affirmation,' as the community itself defines its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership – who is and who is not part of its 'citizenry.'"<sup>102</sup> For Benmayor, Tchen, and other scholars working in the public humanities, then, cultural citizenship was not only about finding a secure place in the established American

mythology, as Abram's immigrant story tended to do, but also about challenging that mythology by claiming political agency and defending separate cultural territories. In other words, Benmayor's and Tchen's were not stories of linear assimilation so much as claims to alternative spaces for the critique of the dominant (read: white) culture. Such a definition was far more reminiscent of CHARAS's project than the Tenement Museum's.<sup>103</sup>

Despite this lack of a more political consciousness and its somewhat narrow interpretation of the immigration experience, Abram and the rest of the museum's leadership were, in fact, radical in their preservation of 97 Orchard Street. Not only did the museum aggressively pursue the preservation of a kind of vernacular building that, for the previous hundred years, nearly every planner and reformer sought to destroy, it also hoped to maintain the building against the threat of the gentrification onslaught. Indeed, halting the destruction of the material remnants of immigration was one of the driving forces behind its mission: "When, even with the best intentions, we destroy every shred of physical evidence of a widely shared cultural memory, we suggest that neither that memory nor the people who experienced it are worthy of inclusion in the historical record."<sup>104</sup> Preservation of the tenement was, therefore, tantamount to the preservation of the contribution of immigrants to American life – if not the democracy that sustained it.

This agenda to preserve the vernacular architecture on the Lower East Side did not begin, of course, with the Tenement Museum. Rather, its origins lay in the movement to protect and restore the architectural heritage of the area's Jewish population. Both Bialystoker Synagogue and Henry Street Settlement, for example, were landmarked in 1966 by the city's newly-minted Landmarks Preservation Commission just as the blocks on which they stood were slated for redevelopment under urban renewal. Each was lauded for its service to the

community, particularly its Jewish immigrants, and each was honored for its “special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York.”<sup>105</sup> Other nearby buildings linked to Jewish heritage earned landmark status in the following years: Beth Hamedrash Hagadol (1967), K’Hal Adath Jerushun with Anshe Lubz synagogue, also known as the Eldridge Street Synagogue (1980), the Jewish Daily *Forward* building (1986), Anshe Slonim Synagogue (1987), and S. Jarmulowsky Bank Building (2009), among others.<sup>106</sup> Buildings like First Houses also were designated during this period but they were substantially outnumbered by those with a more direct connection to Jewish heritage. Partly due to outside interest by preservationists such as Abram herself, as well as architectural critics such as the *New York Times*’ Paul Goldberger, and partly because of the efforts of locals, such as the United Jewish Council of the East Side, which hired its own preservation planner in 1982, the movement to protect the architectural treasures of Jewish life on the Lower East Side was intense.<sup>107</sup> Fueling this energy, as historian Hasia Diner has argued, was the desire of American Jewry in the post-Holocaust era to lay claim to a geographical homeland – a role the alien and abandoned Lower East Side was ready and able to play.<sup>108</sup>

Even 97 Orchard Street could trace its conception to this pattern of Jewish heritage preservation, despite the Tenement Museum’s insistence that its story was essentially a multi-ethnic one.<sup>109</sup> In 1985, before Abram founded the Tenement Museum with collaborator Anita Jacobson, she was working with planner and preservationist, Roberta Brandes Gratz, to lead the Eldridge Street Project. Functioning out of the recently landmarked Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Project’s mission was to “develop and maintain a historic Jewish area and to explore and interpret the American Jewish experience on the Lower East Side.”<sup>110</sup> In practice, this meant that it would cultivate “the presence of Jewish-oriented commercial and ritual establishments in

the area – bookstores, food shops, Tallith manufacturers and Torah scribes, to name a few” through further preservation, historical interpretation, and landmarking campaigns. The primary audience for these activities, as Abram and Gratz made clear, would be “Jews eager to rediscover their origins in this astonishing community.”<sup>111</sup> Reporting on the project, the local Jewish media such as the *Lower East Side Voice* (operated by the United Jewish Council of the East Side) and *Jewish Week*, applauded the effort. The former found the “most ambitious and imaginary proposal” to be one for a “Tenement Museum, which would restore part of the Lower East Side to its late 19<sup>th</sup>-century existence while presenting a series of ‘Living History’ [exhibits] on such areas as the Yiddish press and theater and daily social, religious, cultural and educational life.”<sup>112</sup> The latter, meanwhile, envisioned a “Jewish Colonial Williamsburg,” but feared that “escalating real estate values and the growth of neighboring Chinatown have made not only housing more expensive, but are tempting dwindling congregations – particularly the storefront *shtieblach* [rooms for communal prayer] – to consider selling their buildings.”<sup>113</sup> The kind of landmarking and other preservation efforts the Eldridge Street Project and others initiated, suggested the author of the *Jewish Week* article, was perhaps the best way to maintain a Jewish presence on the Lower East Side. “Otherwise,” as the article went on to quote synagogue researcher Gerard Wolfe, “15 years from now, little will remain of the Jewish Lower East Side...the neighborhood will give way to urban renewal.”<sup>114</sup>

Yet, after working with consultants from the American History Workshop to write a planning document for this large-scale preservation campaign, Gratz and Abram recognized that “Even if it were advisable to create an ‘immigrant [Colonial] Williamsburg living history museum on the Lower East Side, that is plainly impossible.”<sup>115</sup> The rising tide of gentrification, coupled with the diverse demography of the Lower East Side meant that the Eldridge Street

Project would have to “work closely with community residents, including associations of Asian and Hispanic populations, local merchants, Jewish religious schools and synagogues, settlement houses, local planning and development agencies, as well as the relevant agencies of the City of New York” to make its plan work. Just as importantly, both Gratz and Abram hoped the project would not be viewed as an intrusion of 'uptown' interests on the Lower East Side, a historical phenomenon well-known and disliked in this area.”<sup>116</sup> Whether due to the challenges of such a multi-locational project or because finding allies for a solely Jewish-focused heritage project among the neighborhood’s diverse groups proved to be too difficult – or for other untraceable reasons -- Abram split from both Brandes Gratz and the Eldridge Street Project in 1986.<sup>117</sup> By the end of that year, she was already working with the American History Workshop and friend Anita Jacobson to weave a narrative of multicultural immigration through the interpretation of a single, pedagogically dynamic tenement. It would take just over another year before Abram and Jacobson had found their dream building at 97 Orchard Street.<sup>118</sup> From that moment on, the museum’s intimate early relationship with the Jewish heritage campaign surrounding it would be either downplayed or unspoken.<sup>119</sup>

Against this complex and layered backdrop of encroaching gentrification, narrative distance between the stories of immigration the museum would tell and those of the surrounding community, as well as competing commitments toward the preservation of the Lower East Side’s ethnic heritage, a series of cracks – both literal and figurative -- began to appear in the party wall between the tenements at 97 and 99 Orchard Street. While the height of the battle would take place toward the end of 2001 and into early 2002, the tense relationship between the Tenement Museum and the owners of 99 Orchard Street could be traced back years earlier, when the museum began to work on expanding its programming and purchasing another building. In

some ways, expansion held the promise of a more in-depth examination of the contemporary immigrant and migrant experience. If the museum hoped to stay committed to the idea of interpreting only the stories of those who had dwelled in its buildings, then the addition of a new tenement that had housed residents *after* the Great Depression could connect the museum to the histories of the Lower East Side's more recent immigrants. In addition, expansion would allow for more classroom and office space, as well as a better opportunity for the proper preservation of its growing collections. After 97 Orchard Street was designated a national landmark by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in October 1998, and declared an affiliated site of the National Park Service in November, expansion would also satisfy the federal requirements for a General Management Plan detailing the museum's future growth.<sup>120</sup> The potential for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act through the construction of ramps and elevators in a new, un-landmarked building, as well as more space for the tens of thousands of additional visitors the museum expected were also desirable.

Before 97 Orchard Street was ever designated, however, Abram and the museum's board functioned in accordance with a "grow or die" ethic. Keen though it was on protecting its tenement, which made the bordering tenements particularly attractive, the museum's leadership also simply viewed expansion as a necessary and inevitable long-term objective. The first attempts to buy 99 Orchard Street, then, took place in the fall of 1997 -- a year before 97 Orchard Street earned its landmark designation. In a memo addressed to board member John Samuelson from October of that year, Abram was direct: "I believe we should try our best to obtain this building. We don't need space (except storage space) immediately, so, we can take our time as long as we have an agreement."<sup>121</sup> Two-and-a-half months later, in January of 1998, the museum's Real Estate Committee began to formulate an offer to the owners of 99 Orchard

Street, one of whom, Rita Eckhaus, a 70-year-old retiree, demonstrated interest in selling. By June, the museum was ready to acquire the building for an estimated cost of \$600,000 to be paid out over seven years. During the seven-year stretch, the museum planned to rent out the ground floor of the tenement for its own needs and allow Eckhaus to remain as a renter in the upper floors for a term of eighteen months.<sup>122</sup> 99 Orchard Street had been Eckhaus' primary residence for years and the building had been in her family for almost a century. This last detail alone would cast a long shadow on the Tenement Museum's expansion goals.

But 99 Orchard Street was not the only building the museum was eyeing. 95 Orchard Street, located to the south of the museum's landmark, was also tempting. The building, owned by the Belov family since the 1890s, was not for sale, but the museum's Real Estate Committee believed "Mrs. Belov" (or "Beloff") might be willing to reconsider her position after she began to receive violation summonses for renting her space to a welding company in November of 1998. "It might be an opportune time to discuss the sale of 95 with Mrs. Belov," the committee's minutes detailed, "after the various NYC departments had completed their inspections of the property." Belov stood her ground, however, even accusing the museum of drumming up the inspections for its own benefit.<sup>123</sup> No sale was in the offing. Other nearby owners also felt the museum's aims were not in step with those of property holders. Randy Settenbrino, owner of 100 Orchard Street, considered selling his property to the museum in November of 2000, but felt the museum was under-valuing the market price. "I was dismayed by the content and tone of your letter," wrote Settenbrino to the museum's leaders. "It is not my priority to sell the building to the museum or anyone else for that matter."<sup>124</sup> Meanwhile, ambitious attempts to expand to the southern section of the Essex Street Market on the former Seward Park Extension Urban Renewal Site through a city-run RFP process were also rebuffed

that year.<sup>125</sup> It was evident by 2000 that 99 Orchard Street was the museum's best bet for expansion.

Rita Eckhaus, however, could not sell the building alone. She shared ownership of 99 Orchard Street with her nephew, Lou Holtzman. Eckhaus' father (Holtzman's grandfather) had purchased the building in 1910, and four generations of the family had continued to live there, including Eckhaus and her sons, as well as Holtzman and his wife, Mimi, through the 1990s.<sup>126</sup> Holtzman also operated a sound studio out of the building starting in 1972, just as the spate of tenement abandonments throughout the Lower East Side began. Notably, despite the blight surrounding them, the Eckhaus/Holtzman clan never completely left their property. As Holtzman's personal web site highlighted, his son Joel went to the same public school – P.S. 42 on Hester Street -- that his mother had attended years before. His mother, for her part, worked in a shop in 99 Orchard Street through the 1980s.<sup>127</sup> In Holtzman's narrative – embellished, perhaps, just as much as the museum's was – his family had worked to maintain businesses on the Lower East Side for decades, particularly, as he put it, “when the Lower East Side wasn't the most popular neighborhood.”<sup>128</sup> His grandfather had owned a dairy restaurant on Delancey; his parents had met at the Loews Delancey movie theater in the 1940s.<sup>129</sup> Family portraits taken in front of the tenement – his mother, grandmother, grandfather, and aunts – captured scenes similar to those the Tenement Museum would show of its own alumni.<sup>130</sup>

This shared history initially built a sort of kinship between Holtzman and the museum. In 1988, when the museum opened next door, Holtzman “compiled an exciting montage of sounds: the clopping of horse hooves, the cries of street vendors and the singing of his father, a Cantor who had lived on Orchard Street his entire life” for its inaugural ceremonies.<sup>131</sup> By 1997, however, the relationship turned cold. Even if Eckhaus was ready to sell her share of 99 Orchard



Fig. 26: Left, Harris and Jennie Levine, who lived at 97 Orchard Street. Right, Frances Holtzman, Lou's mother, in front of 99 Orchard Street. Courtesy of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and Lou Holtzman.

Street to the museum, Holtzman was not. Offers from the museum culminated in a final attempt in late 1999 to buy out Holtzman for \$1 million cash. This offer, too, was rejected.<sup>132</sup> Soon after, however, Holtzman partnered with local businessman Peter Liang who presumably purchased Eckhaus' shares. Their plan was to renovate 99 Orchard Street through Liang's own construction company, Sun Sun Construction. On the ground floor, they would open an extension of the small Chinese restaurant next door at 101 Orchard Street and, on the upper floors, they would rent out apartments at market rate. Sun Sun began work in the fall of 2000 and finished in July of 2001. That summer, Congee Village restaurant, which was immigrant-owned and immigrant-staffed, opened at the Allen Street entrance of 99; in the renovated, 325-square-foot apartments above, fifteen tenants moved in, paying a then-exorbitant rent of more than \$1600 per month.<sup>133</sup>

What damages were made and the extent to which they threatened 97 Orchard Street remain a matter of debate. Four "stop work" orders were issued over the months of construction at 99 Orchard Street, but, the museum contended that construction continued in violation of each one.<sup>134</sup> Both the architect in charge at 99 Orchard Street and the engineer hired by the Tenement Museum to examine the damage agreed that cracks had appeared in the party wall by December of 2000, but neither was able to determine the degree of harm 97 Orchard Street sustained.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, as the museum, the National Trust, and the National Park Service would soon point out, any damage at all was alarming for a landmarked building. Abram, in the meantime, reached out to Community Board 3, as well as local political supporters, to both enforce the stop work orders and identify a plan of action for the acquisition of 99 Orchard Street. "We fear if we do not," wrote Abram to Martha Danziger of Community Board 3, "the Museum will have

constant difficulty insuring the safety and enjoyment of its visitors as well as the physical integrity of its land marked tenement.”<sup>136</sup>

Despite efforts from the Community Board, local Council members, and State Senators to broker a fair mediation between the museum and the owners of 99 Orchard Street, the bad blood continued. “As a last gasp effort,” Abram explained in a public statement, “the Museum appealed to the State. It responded through the Empire State Development arm,” eventually voting “to initiate eminent domain proceedings” against 99 Orchard Street.<sup>137</sup> Holtzman and Liang were furious, of course, but they were not alone. By the time the museum and its supporters, as well as Holtzman, Liang, and their supporters, appeared before the Lower East Side’s Community Board 3 for a condemnation hearing on January 9, 2002, the entire skirmish had become another touch-point on the gentrification frontier. What the museum’s leadership learned at that hearing, however, was perhaps unanticipated: *they* were considered the gentrifiers, while Holtzman and Liang were embraced as humble and bullied Lower East Side loyalists.

Buoying this configuration was not the legality or the ethical scaffolding behind either side’s behavior. With smear campaigns emerging from both Holtzman (through a web site, newspaper interviews, damning signage that could be seen by museum visitors, and conversation with then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani on a call-in radio show) and the museum (through fierce accusations about Holtzman’s improper use of permits, licensing, and residency requirements at 99 since the 1970s) neither side was angelic in this contest. Rather, the most vicious obstacle the museum faced was its long, lingering inattention to its surrounding community. So determined had the museum’s leadership been to secure the cultural citizenship of long-ago immigrants, to create a more diverse and inclusive national narrative that recreated the Lower East Side as a “gateway to America,” that the museum neglected its own neighbors. Misdiagnosing the

battlelines on the gentrification frontier, the museum found itself with few local allies as it lumped in Holtzman and Liang with the rent-gouging developers elsewhere in the area. More importantly, the museum lost control of the narrative of the Lower East Side. Perhaps it could now be honored for its ethnic and alien past, as the museum did so well, but it could not be “set in amber” as a space set apart from the burgeoning and wealth-producing city, as Holtzman insisted. “I want to be the first in four generations of my family,” Holtzman declared, “to make money out of this building.”<sup>138</sup> Sociologist Christopher Mele, who had studied the century-long history of real estate on the Lower East Side, summarized the situation well when he was interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* about the controversy: “It’s easy to sympathize with the two sides, so the question is, which view of the Lower East Side do you embrace? Is this area a gold mine of immigrant history that should be preserved? Or is it a living, breathing place filled with new and older immigrants who should be protected?”<sup>139</sup>

At the January 2002 hearing, the crux of the museum’s argument had been that “97 Orchard Street symbolizes our nation’s debt to immigrants past and present and our appreciation that our diversity made us great.”<sup>140</sup> To follow, Abram listed a series of reasons why acquisition of 99 Orchard Street would serve this larger purpose: the museum needed 99 to protect 97; 99 Orchard would allow for an interpretation of contemporary immigrant experiences, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, more classroom space, additional exhibition space, and “community meeting spaces”; and the museum would be able to accommodate an estimated 200,000 more visitors.<sup>141</sup> The museum’s supporters, too, spoke of the importance of nineteenth century immigration to the nation’s history, the desirability of tourism in Lower Manhattan (particularly after the attacks of September 11, 2001), the need for more programming at the museum, and the necessity for building “tolerance through history.”<sup>142</sup> All of these criteria were

also cited in the resolution of the Empire State Development Corporation, New York State's economic development agency, to condemn 99 Orchard Street as a "civic project" on behalf of the Tenement Museum.<sup>143</sup>

None of this reasoning, of course, addressed what condemnation through the state's use of eminent domain would do for the Lower East Side community. Writers for *Tenant/Inquilino*, a newsletter published by the tenants' rights organization the Metropolitan Council on Housing, asserted that "eminent domain abuse" of this kind was one strategy behind "both primary and secondary displacement...often disguised by schemes to 'revitalize' or 'restore' neighborhood through tourism, arts, sports and economic development." Though the newsletter's authors acknowledged the "good work" the museum had done in its historical interpretation, they also argued that use of eminent domain "would hurt the very neighborhood whose values it seeks to extol."<sup>144</sup> In other words, the authors suggested, eminent domain condemnation "for the public good" – a favorite method of Robert Moses during the urban renewal era fifty years before – was only another way to develop and gentrify a neighborhood.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, Martha Danziger of Community Board 3, to whom Abram had written for support two years before, was offended by the introduction of the Empire State Development Corporation in this neighborhood battle. "The irony just smacks you in the face," she told the *Los Angeles Times*, "They want to create a virtual tenement museum in a neighborhood that already has tenements."<sup>146</sup> Danziger's colleague on the board, Harry Wieder, agreed. An advocate for the disabled himself, he argued, "The museum needs to deal with its access issues themselves," rather than expanding through the antagonistic process of state condemnation.<sup>147</sup> Barden Prisant, another board member concurred: "I think there's a certain unseemliness about bringing in the bully of the state to solve this construction problem."<sup>148</sup> Moreover, as Holtzman and his supporters would underline again and again,

condemnation of 99 Orchard Street in early 2002 would result in the eviction of tenants, as well as the elimination of immigrant jobs. Eric Li, the new manager of Congee Village and an immigrant from China who had recently earned his citizenship noted, “Everybody is really scared. Restaurant jobs are really hard to find now, especially downtown and especially for immigrants.” Li himself had lost his previous job at Windows on the World after the World Trade Center towers fell.<sup>149</sup> Other workers had endured months of unemployment before finding jobs at Congee Village.

Such local public relations snafus for the Tenement Museum finally resulted in loss of support elsewhere. By March of 2002, a mortgage from Amalgamated Bank, which was supposed to help finance the museum’s purchase of 99 from the Empire State Development Corporation after condemnation took place, was withdrawn. The city, which had promised \$2 million to help the museum purchase 99, also began to hesitate on its disbursement of funds because of its own budget constraints. That month, as well, Empire State Development Corporation Chair Charles A. Gargano voted against the condemnation he had previously approved. At the same time, City Councilmember Sheldon Silver, Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, State Senator Thomas Duane, City Councilmember Alan Gerson, and Community Board 3 all publicly opposed the condemnation.<sup>150</sup> A rally outside 99 (and, therefore, 97) Orchard Street took place in April of 2002, where reference was made to a petition against the museum signed by 1,500 protestors.<sup>151</sup> Within months, the entire deal had disintegrated. The Tenement Museum staggered on, publicly wounded and bereft, at least in 2002, of a new building. Later, it would take a more traditional route by purchasing buildings that were already for sale. These off-set the museum’s legitimate expansion needs, but did not fully repair its reputation amongst its neighbors.



Fig. 27: Protest outside 99 Orchard Street, Courtesy of Lou Holtzman.

## Conclusion

In the heat of the battle between the Tenement Museum and Lou Holtzman, the *New York Daily News* shared one unnamed Lower East Sider's straightforward analysis: "It's the immigrant museum vs. the immigrants, the newcomers vs. the old-timers."<sup>152</sup> Though never invoked in the article, this resident could just as well have added "outsiders vs. insiders" to the list. As the situation unfolded, it became evident that despite Ruth Abram's efforts to avoid being viewed as an "intrusion of 'uptown' interests on the Lower East Side," as she phrased it at the Eldridge Street Project, she and her museum were still considered outsiders with a mission of conquest. The homemade signs Lou Holtzman posted outside his building and at the April 2002 protest he organized blasted slogans such as "Eminent Domain Abuse," "Hell No We Won't Go," "Don't Replace Living History With Artificial History," and "The Museum Will Not Take My Home."<sup>153</sup> For anyone who had been following the spatial politics of the Lower East Side for the previous two decades, such sentiments were eerily similar to those of the squatters and community activists who had battled around Tompkins Square in the late-1980s. "This Land is Our Land" was plastered across the Lower East Side in those years, as was "Viva Loisaida," an antonym – and intended antithesis -- to the new, gentrified, and artificially-fabricated "East Village."<sup>154</sup>

The frontiers along which these contests were fought, though, were moving targets that bobbed in and out of both metaphor and the physical world. Geographer Neil Smith argued that he could identify the gentrification frontier by locating when and how a building fell into tax arrears between the late-1970s and mid-1980s.<sup>155</sup> These boundaries were physical ones that closed in from the historical corners of the Lower East Side – down from Fourteenth Street, up from the Brooklyn Bridge, east from the Bowery, and so on. Community leaders also believed

they could pinpoint the frontier in the built environment. Red Square, a condominium complex that rose above Houston Street in 1989 was on the brink of one part of the frontier, while Christadora House stood at another part.<sup>156</sup> The sale of city-owned properties like El Bohio to condominium developers signified another set of outsider conquests, while the closures of well-loved, ethnic businesses such as Ratner's Dairy and Leshko's Coffee Shop marked the decline of the Lower East Side's working-class, ethnic character.<sup>157</sup>

Yet it was also apparent that the frontier in question was a metaphorical one, set up somewhere between those who wished to sustain the social ecology of the neighborhood and those who ached for change. CHARAS/El Bohio, working to cultivate a sense of community and invest in the social and cultural capital of its neighbors, was committed to preserving the *Loisaida* as a working-class and ethnically diverse sanctuary set apart from the greed impinging on its neighborhood boundaries. This did not mean that CHARAS was opposed to change. In many ways, the organization invited change, as long as it celebrated, rather than defeated, the efforts of the noble, ethnic poor. However, CHARAS did stand against the destruction of the Lower East Side's social fabric through tenement abandonment, community garden redevelopment, and gentrification. It positioned itself undeniably on the "insider" side of the frontier, vocally defending its right and the right of its neighborhood to self-determination. The Tenement Museum, on the other hand, which also dedicated its mission to these self-same noble and ethnic poor, understood its position in the social ecology of the Lower East Side quite differently. Neither supportive of nor alarmed by the neighborhood change wrought by development and gentrification – that is, unless it threatened the historic and physical landscape of the area -- the Tenement Museum seemed to exist on the other side – the "outsider" side – of the frontier. While its mission could not be divorced from the preservation of the Lower East

Side and stories of the immigrants who had lived there, the museum had aspirations that were unbounded by the geographies of Fourteenth Street to the Brooklyn Bridge, the Bowery to the East River. The Tenement Museum's "urban pioneers" were crossing national frontiers, not local ones. Their Americanness was earned once they left the Lower East Side, not while it was their home.

The stories of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and CHARAS/El Bohio at the turn of the twenty-first century, therefore, offer revealing twists on Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis just over a century after it was first argued. Ruth Abram reformulated the frontier not as a dividing line between the enlightened and the savage, civilization and the wilderness (though that interpretation was not explicitly abandoned) but rather as a fecund, if urban, landscape that produced patriotic, resilient Americans. Like Turner's frontier-taught pioneers, the immigrants introduced at the Tenement Museum would shed the stale values of the past, while keeping sacred the traditions worthy of preservation. They would welcome the energy and freshness of the new world, while injecting their own ingenuity into those institutions and national rituals that required revision. Just as Turner's frontier "promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the people" and allowed the earliest American immigrants -- the English -- to become "Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race," so, too, did the Lower East Side's turn-of-the-twentieth century immigrants create a new brew of modern American citizenship.<sup>158</sup> As Abram would declare in a public speech delivered in November of 1992, "At a time when new waves of immigrants test the nation's sense of itself as a haven for all comers, our alumni remind us that America, as we know it, is really an amalgam."<sup>159</sup> Reminding museum visitors of former immigrants' success in negotiating the passage between alien and

American, then, the museum's landmark tenement would signify the never-ending frontier that all immigrants, following the path to American citizenship, would travel.

CHARAS/El Bohio, meanwhile, reminded its audience of what was lost when Turner's West was conquered. Turner had never been a defender of the natives whose lands were seized by the ever-thirsty frontier settlers. To him, the natives had primitive ways and were surrounded by a rich wilderness that they themselves were unable to fully appreciate. Certainly, the "Indian trade pioneered the way for civilization" through geographical through-ways and trading posts, but the native presence was merely a matter to be overcome, rather than endorsed.<sup>160</sup> Still, Turner could not help but valorize the energizing power of the wilderness, the grace of landscapes that had not been "exploited" by the brutal insatiability of "civilization."<sup>161</sup> It was in conversation with the undeveloped land and its inhabitants that the "stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman" were conceived.<sup>162</sup> The wilderness of Turner's frontier kept civilization fresh and honest; it forced Americans to face who they were as both individuals and a nation. Thus, the conquest of what Turner called "wilderness freedom" was congruent with the bureaucracy and consumerism of civilization – a consequence to be mourned as much as celebrated.<sup>163</sup>

This was a lesson CHARAS had learned all too well. As El Bohio closed its doors for the final time in December of 2001, the Lower East Side it left behind was one that neither CHARAS' leaders nor its enduring neighbors had ever seen before. As the New Year started, "ragtag chic" took the place of the alien Lower East Side. Champagne glasses clinked, modern "Members Only" speakeasies shooed away the neighborhood riff-raff, and the "preening jewelry shops" of the future sparkled behind the century-old facades that framed them.<sup>164</sup> Outside, the neighborhood's long-time insiders could only watch and wonder.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hollywood Salute,” *Saturday Night Live* Transcripts, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/88/88bsalute.phtml>

<sup>2</sup> For more on the 1988 Tompkins Square riot, see Neil Smith, “Tompkins Square Park Time Line,” *New York City Tableaux: Tompkins Square*. The Homeless Vehicle Project, New York, Exit Art, 1990, pp. 14-20; Neil Smith, “Tompkins Square: riots, rents and redskins,” in ed. Kurt Hollander, *The Portable Lower East Side, Volume 6* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 1-36.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, ed., *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York’s Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 4. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey attributes the 1980s-style “growth machine” to a global shift away from publicly-funded social democratic institutions and toward the privatization of public resources, such as public space, healthcare, and environmental safety. Historian Jonathan Soffer has argued that Mayor Ed Koch’s policies were driven by a similar neoliberal agenda and that, in fact, he “pioneered the Democratic party version of neoliberalism.” Subsidies for private enterprise, including housing production for mostly middle-class New Yorkers and office building construction, was one element of Koch’s economic approach to reviving the post-fiscal crisis city. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Saturday Night Live* Transcripts, <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/88/88bsalute.phtml>, Accessed May 10, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Community Council of Greater New York, *Characteristics of the Population in New York City. Health Areas: 1970. Vol. 4, Race and Ethnicity, April 1974*, (Community Council of Greater New York, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>7</sup> P.S. 64, the building that housed CHARAS/El Bohio was designated a city landmark in June of 2006. The designation report notes that El Bohío “served as an area focal point for the broad-based, citizen’s movement to preserve the buildings and the community of a poor and minority neighborhood despite its deterioration and the city’s fiscal crisis of the late 1970s and 80s.” (Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 377, LP-2189, p. 2) It is worth noting that federal laws and local energies were in place for historic preservation long before the mid-1960s, but, as historian Randall Mason has pointed out, “The 1960s and 1970s notion of preservation as a means of democratic, grassroots social change had barely begun to gel” in an earlier period. For a public school and a tenement to be preserved as historic treasures would have been unthinkable prior to the late-twentieth century. See Randall Mason, “Historic Preservation, Public Memory, and the Making of New York City” in eds., Max Page and Randall Mason, *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 131-161.

<sup>8</sup> The Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s original mission statement, which was revised in 2012, explicitly stated that the Lower East Side was “a gateway to America.” See Ruth J. Abram, “History is as History Does: The Evolution of a Mission-Driven Museum,” in Robert R. Janes and Gerald Thomas Conaty, *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility* (Calgary, Alberta, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 19, as well as Kathleen O’Hara to author, E-mail correspondence, March 1, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Syeus Mottel, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders* (New York: Drake Publishers, Inc., 1973), 22.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Chodorkoff, "Un Milagro de Loisaida: Alternative Technology and Grassroots Efforts for Neighborhood Reconstruction on New York's Lower East Side" (Ph.D., dissertation, New School, 1980), 126.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of health areas on the Lower East Side in 1969 had between 1,000 and 1,999 families earning less than the poverty level of \$4,000 for a family of four per year. One health area had between 2,000 and 2,999 at this level, while two others had between 500 and 999 living below the poverty line. *Characteristics of the Population in New York City Health Areas: 1970, No. 2: Family Income, 1970.*

<sup>12</sup> Joan Turner, "Building Boundaries: The Politics of Urban Renewal in Manhattan's Lower East Side" (Dissertation, City University of New York, 1984), 107. See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Katz, ed. *The Underclass Debate: Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.) See page 253 of the latter for a definition of "underclass."

<sup>13</sup> Turner, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Sugrue, "The Structure of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History in Katz, *The Underclass Debate*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, 110.

<sup>16</sup> See Neil Smith, "New City, New Frontier: The Lower East Side as Wild, Wild West," in ed. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992); "From Disinvestment to Reinvestment: Mapping the Urban 'Frontier' in the Lower East Side" by Neil Smith, Betsy Duncan, and Laura Reid in ed., Janet Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*; and Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> For more on homesteading on the Lower East Side, see Malve von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1996.)

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Nazario and Sally Tully, eds., *A Portrait of Loisaida*. (New York: Interfaith Adopt-A-Building, 1978), quoted in "The Process of Gentrification in Alphabet City" by Christopher Mele in Abu-Lughod, 171. The Lower East Side was not the only neighborhood in 1970s New York that was experiencing abandonment and destruction. The South Bronx famously suffered this fate, as well. See James L. Wunsch, "From burning to building: The revival of the South Bronx 1970-1999," *Bronx County Historical Society Journal* 38, no. 1 (2001): 4-22 and Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.)

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Biddle, *Alphabet City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.) Interview with Clover Swann. Biddle collected the majority of his materials in 1977 and 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Among the more politically inclined residents of the neighborhood, the combination of the city's Housing and Development Administrator Roger Starr's solution of "planned shrinkage" – disinvestment in social programs – to address New York's fiscal woes with the concept of "spatial deconcentration" of the slums to combat urban racial tension suggested a government conspiracy to eliminate low-income residential neighborhoods. See Andrew Von Kleunen, "The Squatters: A Chorus of Voices...But is Anyone Listening?" in Abu-Lughod and Ken Auletta, *The Streets Were Paved with Gold* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980.)

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- <sup>21</sup> Liz Sevcenko, "Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriquenidad in Lower Manhattan," in eds. Agustin Lao-Motes and Arlene Davila, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 293.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 298-300.
- <sup>24</sup> Bimbo Rivas, "Loisaida: The Reality Stage," *WIN*, December 20, 1979.
- <sup>25</sup> Roger Vaughan, "The Real Great Society," *Life*, September 15, 1967, 76.
- <sup>26</sup> Fred Good, "The Origins of Loisaida," in ed., Clayton Patterson, *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007).
- <sup>27</sup> Vaughan, 76.
- <sup>28</sup> Chodorkoff 131; Vaughan 78.
- <sup>29</sup> Chodorkoff, 136.
- <sup>30</sup> Carlos Rodriguez-Fraticelli and Amilcar Tirado, "Notes Toward a History of Puerto Rican Community Organizations in New York City," *Centro IV*: 1 (1991), quoted in Luis Aponte-Pares, "Lessons from El Barrio – The East Harlem Real Great Society/Urban Planning Studio: A Puerto Rican Chapter in the Fight for Urban Self-Determination," *New Political Science*, Volume 20, Number 4, 1998: 401.
- <sup>31</sup> Chodorkoff, 144.
- <sup>32</sup> Mobilization for Youth, *Action on the Lower East Side: Progress Report and Proposal*, 155.
- <sup>33</sup> Chodorkoff, 144.
- <sup>34</sup> Charles F. Grosser, "Perceptions of Professionals, Indigenous Workers, and Lower-Class Clients," (D.S.W. Thesis., Columbia University, School of Social Work, 1965), 3.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 53.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. 40 out of 180 MFY staff members were "indigenous."
- <sup>37</sup> Aponte Pares, 411.
- <sup>38</sup> Good in Patterson, 25.
- <sup>39</sup> Good in Patterson, 28.
- <sup>40</sup> Chodorkoff, 198.
- <sup>41</sup> Mottel, 25; Chodorkoff, 148.
- <sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, November 4, 1972.
- <sup>43</sup> Mottel, 73.
- <sup>44</sup> Chodorkoff, 148.
- <sup>45</sup> Sevcenko, 306.
- <sup>46</sup> Rivas, 8.
- <sup>47</sup> Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 31.
- <sup>48</sup> Good in Patterson, 35.
- <sup>49</sup> One of the organizations that would join with CHARAS in the Lower East Side Arts Collective was Kenkeleba House, a gallery space dedicated to exhibiting the works of African-, Latino-, Asian-, and Native American artists. Interestingly, the lot on which Kenkeleba House was – and is still – located, was occupied by an abandoned tenement in the 1970s that was documented in artist Hans Haacke's controversial installation, *Shapolsky Et. Al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, As of May, 1971*. The piece investigates the contrast between the need for housing and the lucrative investment tenements provided for their owners. It was scheduled to be shown at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971, but was excised from the program because of its controversial statement against wealth accumulation. For more

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on this, see Rosalyn Deutsche “Hans Haacke, Real Estate and the Museum,” in ed. Brian Wallis, *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (Cambridge, Mass. and New York: The MIT Press and The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> The most detailed and reliable account comes from Place Matters (<http://placematters.net/node/1432>), a project of City Lore, a New York-based organization with headquarters on the Lower East Side. Their research is cited in the Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, as well. However, both Fred Good and Sarah Ferguson, former RGS members who severed ties with CHARAS over personal disagreements, suggest that CHARAS was given management responsibilities of the space by the organization Interfaith Adopt-A-Building, which was led by former RGS founder, Robert “Rabbit” Nazario.

<sup>51</sup> Hilary Russ, “Back to the Old Neighborhood: The Grandmother of Loisaaida Fights to Keep Her Title, 1991,” *City Limits*, November 1, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas C. McGill, “Hispanic Arts Center Holds Benefit Art Auction,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1985.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the arrival of a new arts “scene” in the northern portion of the Lower East Side (known as the “East Village”), see Rosalyn Deutsche with Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October*, 31 (1984): 91-111.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, September 2, 1984.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ezstate/NY.pdf> (1990 poverty data) and [http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/trt1990/st36\\_NewYork/36061\\_NewYork/90T36061\\_004.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/trt1990/st36_NewYork/36061_NewYork/90T36061_004.pdf) (1990 census tract map) and <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/figures-fed-reg.cfm> (poverty income levels)

<sup>56</sup> Biddle, *Alphabet City*. Interview with Evalene Claudio.

<sup>57</sup> Todd S. Purdum, Howard W. French, and Michael Wines, “Melee in Tompkins Sq. Park: Violence and its Provocation,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1988.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Wines, “Class Struggle Erupts Along Avenue B,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> According to many of the Tompkins Square protestors, planning for the 1988 demonstration began at a La Plaza Cultural meeting. See *New York Times*, August 10, 1988

<sup>60</sup> Russ, “Back to the Old Neighborhood.”

<sup>61</sup> For more on the cross-subsidy plan, see Janet Abu-Lughod, “Defending the Cross-Subsidy Plan: The Tortoise Wins Again” and Andrew von Kleunen. “The Squatters: A Chorus of Voices...But Is Anyone Listening” in Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*. See also von Hassel, *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993*.

<sup>62</sup> See Abu-Lughod in Abu-Lughod, 320.

<sup>63</sup> Lincoln Anderson, “A Complex Legacy: Friends and Foes Reflect on Pagan,” *The Villager*, Vol 78, No. 37, February 11-17, 2009. See Abu-Lughod, “Defending the Cross-Subsidy Plan” and “Conclusions and Implications” in Abu-Lughod.

<sup>64</sup> Mo Bates, “Communitising Community Art,” *Circa*, January 1, 1986.

<sup>65</sup> *New York Times*, August 10, 1988; Steven A. Holmes, “A Neighborhood Battle: Apartments or a Park?” *New York Times*, December 18, 1989.

<sup>66</sup> The battle that eventually led to the dismissal of the project also involved internal politics and scandal within HUD. See Michael Winerip, “H.U.D. Scandal Lesson: It’s a Long Road from Revelation to Resolution,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1990; Eric V. Copage, “La Plaza: 1 Life Used, 8 to Go,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Maritere Arce, “Pronto a subastarse dos centros culturales,” *El Diario/La Prensa*, 1 October 1996. The literal translation is “Yes, that’s a cultural center and I’m the ‘stilt walker to the

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buoy!” The latter is a direct translation of “vejigante a la boya,” which refers to the masked stilt walkers in a traditional Puerto Rican festival. Many thanks to Gabriel Soto for the translation.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, “Runnin’ Scared: Snapshots,” *Village Voice*, October 8, 1996.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “Neighborhood Report: Lower East Side; Arts Group Wins Eviction Battle,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Robin Shulman, “No Bids for El Bohio,” *Village Voice*, April 8, 1997.

<sup>71</sup> *New York Times*, July 30, 2001.

<sup>72</sup> Eric V. Copage, “Neighborhood Report: East Village/Lower East Side; One Cultural Center Stays, Another To Go,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Another catalyst for the dissolution of CHARAS/El Bohio was the mysterious murder of its Executive Director, Armando Perez, in April of 1999. See Juan Gonzalez, “Death Breaks Up East Side Activist Team,” *New York Daily News*, April 13, 1999.

<sup>74</sup> *New York Times*, July 12, 1998.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* The main similarity between the Soto Velez Center and ABC No Rio was that they were both located on the Lower East Side below Houston, an area that was not associated at this time with the gentrification of the “East Village,” which extended above Houston within the boundaries of the traditional Lower East Side. The Soto Velez Center, led by writer and community activist Ed Vega, was and is a more mainstream institution devoted to the promotion of Puerto Rican and Latino arts and culture. ABC No Rio, a more fringe institution that was involved in the anti-gentrification struggle of the 1980s, is now a center for anti-authoritarian arts and activism. As its mission states: “Our community includes artists and activists whose work promotes critical analysis and an expanded vision of possibility for our lives and the lives of our neighborhoods, cities, and societies. It includes punks who embrace the Do-It-Yourself ethos, express positive outrage, and reject corporate commercialism. It includes nomads, squatters, fringe dwellers, and those among society’s disenfranchised who find at ABC No Rio a place to be heard and valued.” See [www.csvcenter.org/](http://www.csvcenter.org/) and <http://www.abcnorio.org/>

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Mele, “The Process of Gentrification in Alphabet City” in Abu-Lughod, 180-1.

<sup>77</sup> Biddle, *Alphabet City*. Interview with Clover Swann.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, Interview with Richard Morales.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Dolkart, *Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street* (New York: Center for American Places, 2008), 17.

<sup>80</sup> Department of Buildings, New York City, “Memo from Engineers to Department of Buildings Executive Offices re: 97-99 Orchard Street, March 20, 2001, Folder 2, Box 1, RG 2.10, Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archives, New York, New York. (Hereafter, “LESTM.”)

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Guidice to Judith Saltzman of Li/Saltzman Architects PC, December 4, 2000, Folder 3, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Abram to Community Board 3, Public Statement, “A National Treasure,” January 9, 2002, Folder 3, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>83</sup> See Suzanne Wasserman, “The Good Old Days of Poverty: The Battle Over the Fate of New York’s Lower East Side During the Depression” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1990); Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Beth S. Wenger, Jeffrey Shandler, and Hasia R. Diner, eds., *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Beth S. Wenger, “Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side.” *American Jewish History* 85.1, (1997): 3-27; and Deborah

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Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). Wasserman and Wenger trace this revival of Jewish heritage on the Lower East Side to the two decades before the start of World War II.

<sup>84</sup> See Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Living City* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), especially “Epilogue,” and Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (New York: Nation Books, 2011.)

<sup>85</sup> Alyssa Giachino, “Back the Future of L.E.S.; District Plan Revives,” *The Villager*, Volume 76, Number 51, May 16-22, 2007; Max Page, “The Gerrymandered Lower East Side Historic District,” Op-Ed in the *New York Daily News*, April 26, 2001. For more on the recently proposed East Village/Lower East Side Historic District, see the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation web site at:

[http://www.gvshp.org/\\_gvshp/preservation/east\\_village/east\\_village-main.htm](http://www.gvshp.org/_gvshp/preservation/east_village/east_village-main.htm)

<sup>86</sup> Amy Ellen Schwartz, Scott Susin, and Ioan Voicu, “Has Falling Crime Driven New York City’s Real Estate Boom?,” *Journal of Housing Research*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 2003: 101-135.

<sup>87</sup> Remarks made by Ruth Abram re: 99 Orchard Street; Statements made at Public Hearing (ESDC), Folder 5, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>88</sup> Ruth J. Abram, “Urban Pioneers” speech, November 9, 1992, Folder 11, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>89</sup> American History Workshop, AHW Conceptual Plan, Box 1, RG 1.4.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>90</sup> Board of Trustees, Long Range Planning Committee Presentation, December 4, 2003, Box labeled “RG 1.1.14 Real Estate Committee,” LESTM, New York, New York. Of “low priority” were “participation in community fairs/events” and “establish platforms for contemporary immigrant/migrant voices.”

<sup>91</sup> This was the case until 2002, when the Levine family apartment also opened. The Levine’s were also of Eastern European Jewish origin. By 2008, the Moore family apartment – Irish Catholic immigrants who lived at 97 Orchard Street in the 1860s – opened.

<sup>92</sup> Dolkart, 15, 64, 65, 68; Josephine Baldizzi Esposito Interview for WCBS-TV (?), LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>93</sup> Sevchenko, 297.

<sup>94</sup> Jack Kugelmass, “Turfig the Slum: New York City’s Tenement Museum and the Politics of Heritage” in eds., Wenger, Shandler, Diner, *Remembering the Lower East Side*, 197. With its recent purchase of a building at 103 Orchard Street, the Museum intends to interpret the experiences of post-WWII residents on the Lower East Side, including its Puerto Rican and Asian neighbors.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>96</sup> Peter B. Madoff is the brother of Bernard Madoff, principal of Bernard L. Madoff Securities. Both brothers were investigated and convicted of running the largest Ponzi scheme in history. Raymond O’Keefe was a member of the board of directors for Cushman and Wakefield, a commercial real estate firm, as well as former president of Grubb and Ellis NY, also a major player in commercial real estate.

<sup>97</sup> Ruth J. Abram, “Remarks to National Trust for Historic Preservation,” March 6, 1997, Folder 27, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York. In the fall of 2004, the museum would introduce a radical new program to begin this kind of democratic exchange of ideas, particularly about race, ethnicity, and immigration. The program, “Kitchen Conversations” is detailed in

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Ruth J. Abram, "Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 2007): 59-76.

<sup>98</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Founding Day Speech," July, 1988, Folder 1, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>99</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Planting Cut Flowers," *History News: The Magazine of the American Association for State and Local History*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 2000): 4-10.

<sup>100</sup> Abram, "Planting Cut Flowers;" Abram to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, March 6, 1997, Folder 27, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York; Machiya Preservation Project, November 5, 2008 Symposium, Japan Society, New York, NY.

<sup>101</sup> Inter-University Project for Latino Research, Hunter College, Working Group, Concept Paper, 1988, quoted in Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 8-9. It is worth noting that the Chinatown History Project – later the Museum of Chinese in America in New York – was co-developed by Tchen in 1980 and grew out of The Basement, an arts organization partnered with CHARAS through the Seven Loaves coalition. See Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> Rina Benmayor and William V. Flores, eds. *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 13.

<sup>103</sup> Note that the Tenement Museum and CHARAS were, in fact, aware of each other's goals on the Lower East Side. Long-time museum staff member, Liz Sevchenko, worked regularly with Chino Garcia and other CHARAS members in her doctoral research on *The Real Great Society*.

<sup>104</sup> Abram, "Urban Pioneers" Speech, November 9, 1992, p. 16, Folder 11, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>105</sup> New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Designation Report, LP-0181: Bialystoker Synagogue, 7-13, Willett Street, Borough of Manhattan. 1826," April 19, 1966; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Designation Report, LP-0095: 263 Henry Street Building (a part of Henry Street Settlement), Borough of Manhattan. 1827; architect unknown," January 18, 1966.

<sup>106</sup> For a full list of New York City landmarks, including the dates of designation and reports, see the Neighborhood Preservation Center, Designation Database at [http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/designation\\_reports/](http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/designation_reports/)

<sup>107</sup> Paul Goldberger, "Design Notebook," *New York Times*, September 15, 1977; "Historic Preservation-Urban Design Program for Jewish Lower East Side," clipping from *Lower East Side Voice*, Fall 1985, Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library, New York, New York; United Jewish Council of the East Side, *Newsletter* (Volume VI, No. 5), November 1982, Lower East Side Heritage Collection, Seward Park Library, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

<sup>108</sup> Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 165-169.

<sup>109</sup> In her remarks to the National Trust of Historic Preservation on March 6, 1997, Abram rewrote the origins story of the Tenement Museum, disengaging it from its relationship to the Eldridge Street Project and its mission. She recounted that "in the early 1980s, I set out to establish a memorial to the vast majority of citizens who lived neither in a log cabin or mansion. But rather a room or two in a city tenement; a memorial to immigrant and migrant people who lived modest, unassuming lives in the city, a memorial to the nation's urban pioneers." RJA Remarks to NTHP, March 6, 1997, Folder 27, Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>110</sup> American History Workshop, AASLH Consultant Service Report, November 15, 1985, p. 2, Folder 1, Box 1, RG 4.3, LESTM, New York, New York.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Eldridge Street Synagogue,” *Lower East Side Voice*, Summer 1985, Folder 1, Box 1, RG 6.2 LESTM Publicity, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>113</sup> Edward R. Silverman, “More than just another neighborhood,” *Jewish Week*, February 7, 1986, Folder 1, Box 1, RG 6.2 LESTM Publicity, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> American History Workshop, AASLH Consultant Service Report, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>117</sup> Ruth J. Abram, “A Museum Grew Within Me,” (New York: Horizons of Culture and Life, 1991); Also see Folder 2, Box 1, RG 4.3, American History Workshop: ‘The Tenement’ Interpretive Planning Correspondence with Rabinowitz, which details through a series of memos and other ephemera Abram’s separation from Gratz. On one memo from Abram to Rabinowitz dated September 17, 1987, Abram has begun to manually “white out” Gratz’s name from the letterhead of their co-directed organization.

<sup>118</sup> For more on this “origins story,” see Even Kahn, “A Museum of Urban Living,” *Metropolis Magazine*, May 1989.

<sup>119</sup> Many who were committed to Jewish heritage were troubled by this fact. Kugelmass quotes a letter from Joel Kaplan of the United Jewish Council of the East Side, Inc. to Ruth Abram suggesting that his organization would be pleased to “assist the museum in a ‘proactive way, if and when you make the decisions to commit the necessary resources to chronicle the predominant ‘culture’ of the Lower East Side -- the orthodox Jewish community and its myriad synagogues, shtiebels, charitable and ‘self-help’ organizations.” (Kugelmass in Wenger, Shandler, and Diner, 193) Similarly, an exchange between writer Estelle Gilson and Ruth Abram in the American Jewish Congress newsletter in the summer of 1991 about the museum’s emphasis on immigration, rather than Jewish heritage, revealed tensions of this sort as well. (See Estelle Gilson, “A Ghetto with a Difference,” *Congress Monthly*, May/June 1991, and Ruth J. Abram, “Letter to the Editor: Tenement Museum,” *Congress Monthly*, July/August 1991.) Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest Abram adamantly did not want the museum to be associated exclusively with the Jewish heritage of the area.

<sup>120</sup> The details of the proposed relationship between the National Park Service and the museum are outlined in Ruth J. Abram to Capital Campaign Planning Committee, Memo re: “Our Relationship with The National Park Service,” Folder labeled “Board of Trustees: Real Estate Committee Minutes, November 9, 1998,” RG 1.1.14 Real Estate Committee, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>121</sup> Ruth J. Abram to John Samuelson, October 15, 1997, Folder 1, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth J. Abram to Lou Holtzman and Rita Eckhaus, 99 Orchard Street, June 16, 1998 (Draft), Folder 1: Correspondence Possible Purchase of 99 Orchard Street, 1998, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>123</sup> Handwritten note, August 10, 1999 and Minutes, November 9, 1998, Folder: Board of Trustees: Real Estate Committee Minutes, RG 1.1.14, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>124</sup> Randy Settenbrino to Renee Epps, November 8, 2000, Reposted at <http://www.tenementnauseum.com/99orchard/Randy-Museum.jpg>

<sup>125</sup> Minutes, August 10, 1999, Folder: Board of Trustees: Real Estate Committee Minutes, RG 1.1.14, LESTM, New York, New York.

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- <sup>126</sup> Clyde Haberman, "Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Building?," *New York Times*, February 13, 2002.
- <sup>127</sup> Lisa Keys, "Immigration Museum Called Bad Neighbor in Expansion Battle," *The Forward*, February 6, 2002.
- <sup>128</sup> John Lehmann, "Museum in Bizarre Bid to Wreck Building," *New York Post*, January 4, 2002.
- <sup>129</sup> Lisa Keys, "Immigration Museum Called Bad Neighbor in Expansion Battle," *The Forward*, February 6, 2002.
- <sup>130</sup> Lou Holtzman, "Tenement Museum: The 'True' History: Family Album," <http://www.tenementnauseum.com/album.htm>
- <sup>131</sup> Lisa Keys, "Immigration Museum Called Bad Neighbor in Expansion Battle," *The Forward*, February 6, 2002.
- <sup>132</sup> Minutes, August 10, 1999, Folder: Board of Trustees: Real Estate Committee Minutes, RG 1.1.14, LESTM, New York, New York.
- <sup>133</sup> Jennifer Jensen, "Neighbors Fear Museum Will Make Them History," *The Villager*, January 9, 2002.
- <sup>134</sup> Robin Marcato to "John" from Tenant.net, January 8, 2002, Folder 2: 99 Orchard Street Correspondence 2002, Box 1, RG 2.10; Ruth J. Abram, "Saving a National Treasure," Folder 3: 99 Orchard Street Correspondence and related docs re: code violations 2002, Box 1, RG 2.10, Box 1, LESTM, New York, New York.
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- <sup>136</sup> Ruth J. Abram to Martha Danziger, Memo, November 28, 2000, Folder 3: 99 Orchard Street Correspondence and related docs re: code violations 2002, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.
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- <sup>138</sup> Brian Kates, "Immigrant Museum vs. Locals: Lower East Side Divided," *New York Daily News*, April 28, 2002.
- <sup>139</sup> Josh Getlin, "The Nation; Museum Plan Hits Too Close to Home; Dispute: Space-hungry N.Y. tenement exhibit seeks to evict tenement neighbors; 'The irony just smacks you in the face,' opponent says," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2002.
- <sup>140</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Saving a National Treasure," Folder 3: 99 Orchard Street Correspondence and related docs re: code violations 2002, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.
- <sup>141</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Saving a National Treasure," Folder 3: 99 Orchard Street Correspondence and related docs re: code violations 2002, Box 1, RG 2.10, LESTM, New York, New York.
- <sup>142</sup> Testimony from Michael Adlerstein, National Park Service; Susan Chin, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Frank Sanchis, Executive Director, Municipal Art Society, Catherine Cullen, Henry Street Settlement, Folder 5: Remarks made by Ruth Abram re: 99

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<sup>143</sup> Charles A. Gargano to The Directors, Empire State Development Corporation, "General Project Plan Re: Lower East Side Tenement Museum Expansion Civic Project," August 23, 2001, Accessible via: <http://www.tenant.net/alerts/lestm/lestm.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> "EMINENT DOMAIN ABUSE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DISRUPT TENANTS AND NEIGHBORHOODS on a scale not seen since Robert Moses evicted 500,000 tenants", *Tenant/Inquilino*, April 2002.

<sup>145</sup> Analyses like these attempt to trace the consequences to the built urban environment of neoliberal policies. For an excellent examination of similar forces of gentrification, cultural investment through museums, and the marketing of ethnicity, see Arlene Davila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), particularly Chapter 3.

<sup>146</sup> Josh Getlin, "The Nation; Museum Plan Hits Too Close to Home; Dispute: Space-hungry N.Y. tenement exhibit seeks to evict tenement neighbors; 'The irony just smacks you in the face,' opponent says," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2002.

<sup>147</sup> "Tenement Museum Wants Tenement Next-Door," *New York Observer*, February 4, 2002.

<sup>148</sup> Jennifer Jensen, "Board 3 Committee Critical of Museum Expand Plan," *The Villager*, January 16, 2002.

<sup>149</sup> Brian Kates, "Immigrant Museum vs. Locals: Lower East Side Divided," *New York Daily News*, April 28, 2002.

<sup>150</sup> 'Campaign Components – Draft,' Folder: Board of Trustees: Real Estate and Campaign Planning Committee Minutes and Memoranda, March 2002, RG 1.1.14 Real Estate Committee, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>151</sup> *NYTenants On-line/TenantNet*, April 28, 2002 (<http://tenant.net/pipermail/nytenants-online/2002-April/000141.html>)

<sup>152</sup> Brian Kates, "Immigrant Museum vs. Locals: Lower East Side Divided," *New York Daily News*, April 28, 2002.

<sup>153</sup> Tenant.net, <http://tenant.net/alerts/lestm/rally.html>

<sup>154</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "Money, Politics, and Protest: The Struggle for the Lower East Side" and Sarah Ferguson, "The Struggle for Space: 10 Years of Turf Battling on the Lower East Side in Patterson, 81, 146; Sevchenko, 314.

<sup>155</sup> Neil Smith, "New City, New Frontier: The Lower East Side as Wild, Wild West," in ed. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992); "From Disinvestment to Reinvestment: Mapping the Urban 'Frontier' in the Lower East Side" by Neil Smith, Betsy Duncan, and Laura Reid in Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*

<sup>156</sup> Bret Senft, "If You're Thinking of Living In: The East Village," *New York Times*, June 14, 1992.

<sup>157</sup> Allen Salkin, "Fading into History," *New York Times*, October 20, 2002; "RIP Leshko's and Kiev," *Slavs of New York* blog, October 26, 2005, <http://nycslav.blogspot.com/2005/10/rip-leshkos-and-kiev.html>

<sup>158</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), 22-23.

<sup>159</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Urban Pioneers" Speech, November 9, 1992, p. 9, Folder 1., Box 1, RG 1.2.1, LESTM, New York, New York.

<sup>160</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier...", 5.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>164</sup> Janet Forman, "New York's ragtag chic," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), June 5, 2002.

## Epilogue

In the August 2013 issue of *Marie Claire* magazine, lifestyle editor Jessica Flint shared a comment she overheard while visiting one of Manhattan's most fashionable neighborhoods, the Lower East Side. "When you leave the Upper East Side," her *au courant* fellow visitor noted, "it's like going on safari."<sup>1</sup> Like the "elephant hunting" slummers of yesteryear, this urban wanderer, venturing forth from the tony reaches of Upper Manhattan, was surely seeking the wild delights and dangers, the edgy fashions and tantalizing otherness that the Lower East Side continues to represent in 2013. Walk its still-narrow streets where aging tenements mix with new, luxurious condominiums and one's gaze cannot help but fall upon bright objects of desire, much as it might have more than a century ago. Today, however, poverty and its associated evils are less central to the attraction than they are a rough-edged, often sanitized enhancement to the high-priced consumer items on display. Here, on the ground floor of a New Law tenement, one may buy bespoke blue jeans in the \$150 to \$200 range, while, there, in a former bodega, one may satisfy gastronomic cravings with an expertly-plated dish of pig tail, artichoke, olive oil jam, and hazelnut.<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity, too, has a different meaning as an increasingly globalized economy brings international travelers and cosmopolitan tastes to the area. Spanish tapas, Neapolitan pizza, Austrian *landjager*, Filipino chicken wings, Vietnamese *pho*, and even traditional meals from the Isan region of Thailand are available for all who seek them, as are vintage Japanese track bikes, French-designed frocks, and Swedish roast coffee. Where nineteenth century reformer Helen Campbell warned that "any one who undertakes to 'see life' in the haunts of vice and crime in New York, especially by night, takes his life in his own hand, and courts danger in many forms" a nightlife of both seedy and sophisticated bars, clubs, music venues, and art galleries

dominates.<sup>3</sup> Real estate, too, has become more attractive. Tenement apartments that would have cost around \$15 per month in 1930 (the equivalent of about \$210 per month today) now lease for a monthly rate of more than \$2500. As of late-August 2013, a recently renovated duplex, penthouse loft on Ludlow Street between Broome and Grand Streets went on the market for \$3.5 million, down from its original listing of just over \$5 million. While even real estate insiders publicly wonder whether the latest price is still too ambitious, nearby condominiums consistently have sold above the \$2 million dollar mark – and many believe the stabilizing New York City market will begin to deliver higher profits in the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> Such a Lower East Side seems a far cry from the congested streets, firetrap apartments, and drug-infested vacant lots of the past.

Remnants of the Lower East Side's layered history as both the classic slum and the immigrant gateway live on, sometimes in semi-original form and, other times, in a symbolic one. The Essex Street Market, the LaGuardia-era warehouse space that replaced the neighborhood's more haphazard pushcart markets, still serves local shoppers and maintains a reflexive relationship with its diverse neighbors' changing needs. Aging synagogues such as the Stanton Street Shul and churches such as St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Roman Catholic Church stand shoulder to shoulder with declining tenements, while other landmarks teeter between incongruity and quaintness as modern-looking constructions ascend around them. Meanwhile, history itself is fetishized in new buildings and businesses. Lolita Bar on Allen and Broome Streets takes its name from Lolita Bras, a long-time lingerie purveyor on Orchard Street, and the music venue Arlene's Grocery on Stanton Street simply claims the name of the business that previously occupied its space. Pushcart Coffee on East Broadway and Clinton Street no doubt nods to the commercial icon of the past from which it derives its name, while the short-lived Tenement, an upscale restaurant located on Ludlow Street, and Happy Ending Lounge, a former massage

parlor on Broome Street, cash in on the less savory elements associated with Lower East Side history.<sup>5</sup> This repackaging of the past both lends authenticity to the commercial aspirations of the present and ensures that the Lower East Side remains a space set apart – now in a uniquely valuable way -- from the rest of Manhattan.

Sociologist Sharon Zukin observes the same phenomenon in her 2010 book, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. Referring to the northern portion of the area – the “East Village” – Zukin suggests that, “People come here because they want to experience a historic ‘authenticity,’ and these neighborhoods offer a toolkit of places and products to do so.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the very details and discourses of poverty and alienness that so taxed the Lower East Side since it was first mapped as a distinctive urban space now buttress its cultural and economic value to the city. That so much of the Lower East Side remained abandoned and unimproved over the years despite attempts to re-plan it allows its current, archaic built environment to be extolled as aesthetically unusual if not also, as Hutchins Hapgood once described it, a place for “vigorous, straightforward, and genuine character of...expression.”<sup>7</sup>

What does this tell us, then, about the power of language to help determine the physical world, particularly in the case of urban neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side? On one level, it suggests that the meaning of a neighborhood may long outlast its people. Even as populations changed and as residents fought to sustain their own visions for the Lower East Side, the popular, often “outsider” notion that the area had gone to wilderness – or, indeed, never escaped it – endured. For most of its existence, any tendency to imagine the Lower East Side as salvageable or even valuable came from the people within the neighborhood who had intimate connections to the area’s many communities, institutions, businesses, streets, and parks. These attachments, in fact, provided what social reformer Robert Woods argued in 1914 was the

building block of democracy. “The neighborhood,” he asserted, “is the vital public arena to the majority of men, to nearly all women, and to all children; in which every one of them is a citizen.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, to those who relied on a discourse that cast the Lower East Side as alien and different, the eyesore (as they saw it) of crowded and decaying buildings, of foreign habits and abandoned lots, far outweighed the benefits of cultivating people’s attachment to place and democratic practices.

The transformation of the Lower East Side from slum to cosmopolitan playground even as the discourse of its alienness remained testifies, as well, to the ways in which urban space reflects not only the political economy of the city, but also its cultural economy. That is, just as congestion research, regional planning, visions for a “balanced community,” and the resale of “in rem” tenements were informed by a liberal and neoliberal state willing to devote public funds to relieve the city of its slums, upscale condominiums in the Jewish Daily *Forward* building and password-protected, modern-day speakeasies are informed by a postmodern appetite for the “mashup,” the practice of genre-blending and decontextualization that prevails in contemporary cultural expression. This sort of “conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a ‘palimpsest’ of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a ‘collage’ of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral,” as David Harvey describes it, is not new to the Lower East Side in the 21st century.<sup>9</sup> Both CHARAS and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum benefitted from the reclamation of abandoned buildings for novel and current uses while acknowledging the former meaning of their locations. Yet the celebration of mixed meaning and mixed architecture does much to convert the alienness of the area from a problem to an asset; it adds flair to the idea of the Lower East Side as an urban frontier, once again unconquered and ripe for discovery by the youthful artists, bohemians, fashionistas, and consumers of a new generation.

While the transformations that have occurred on the Lower East Side are reflected in cities across the United States and elsewhere in the world, long-time Lower East Siders exhibit an impressive resilience and a passion for resistance that is exceptional. From continuing tenant activism through the Cooper Square Committee and the Good Old Lower East Side to community protests through Occupy 4<sup>th</sup> Street and The Bowery Alliance of Neighbors, among others, to the lively blogging life of E.V. Grieve (evgrieve.com) and The Lo-Down (www.thelodownny.com), Lower East Side residents are savvy fighters who rarely sit on the sidelines as the neighborhood changes. In some cases they even benefit financially from the change, as Lou Holtzman did in 2002. Whether or not they are able to take control of the narrative of the Lower East Side, however, is unpredictable. So much of its spatial definition is entangled with its narrative one that the Lower East Side may always exist as an alien space. If or when it does not, then perhaps, as Hapgood once did, we will carry our East Side with us like a pocket watch, lamenting the passing of a rich and inimitable urban neighborhood while, at the same time, hungering for new, exhilarating conquest.

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<sup>1</sup> “Tweet Beat: Top 140, Our Twitter-happy editors hash(tag) it out,” *Marie Claire*, August 2013: 25.

<sup>2</sup> Earnest Sewn is located at 90 Orchard Street in a space formerly occupied by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s Visitor Center. Chef Wylie Dufresne’s wd-50 at 50 Clinton Street between Stanton and Rivington Streets opened in 2003, partly replacing a bodega.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Campbell, *The Problem of the Poor: A Record of Quiet Work in Unquiet Places* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1882), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah Budin, “Lower East Side Penthouse Can’t Find a Buyer for Some Reason,” *Curbed.com*, August 28, 2013,

[http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2013/08/28/lower\\_east\\_side\\_penthouse\\_cant\\_find\\_a\\_buyer\\_for\\_some\\_reason.php](http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2013/08/28/lower_east_side_penthouse_cant_find_a_buyer_for_some_reason.php)

<sup>5</sup> There are also Pushcart Coffee locations across from Peter Cooper Village on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and at the New Amsterdam Market, but the East Broadway location appears to be the first. Interestingly, on a recent visit, I noticed the café was selling pastries from Gertel’s Bakery, a longtime (since 1914) local business that had been priced out of the Lower East Side in 2007

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and moved to Brooklyn. When I asked more about Gertel's, the staff was unaware of its historical location only a few blocks away.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121.

<sup>7</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1910), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Woods, "The Neighborhood in Social Reconstruction," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (March, 1914): 579.

<sup>9</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 66

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