

THE WAGNER PLANNER

Newsletter of the NYU Urban Planning Student Association



NOVEMBER 2005

INSIDE THIS ISSUE



A letter from the editors
By Uma Deshmukh and Susan Willetts, p. 2



Interview with Ingrid Ellen
By Mike Gedal, p. 3



Profile of the Furman Center
By Mike Gedal, p. 1, 5



Hidden Housing History in Greenwich Village
By Elizabeth Hewitt, p. 4



Planning Students Help Build Houses for Katrina Survivors
By Uma Deshmukh, p. 6, 12



Decaying Housing Stock in Eastern Europe
By Simon Gerson, p. 7



New York Affordable Housing Lecture at the Newman Center
By Carrie Knudson, p. 7-8



Planners Visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum
By Susan Willetts, p. 9



Perception Vs. Reality in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn
By Joel Dabu, p. 10-11



Wagner Planning Students Give Back and Have Fun: Photographs
P. 13

The Furman Center: Taking Policy to the Streets

By Mike Gedal
Staff Writer

Center apart from many of the "ivory tower" research institutes.

Housing policy research is an odd thing. All too often, it takes place in an ivory tower, far removed from the places, spaces and people it has the potential to affect. Not so at the Furman Center at New York University.

Since 1994, the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy has been using a very simple formula to effect change in policies that affect land use, real estate development, housing and community development in New York City: Conduct focused academic research on these issues and then coordinate dialogues between relevant stakeholders that help turn these research findings into constructive public (and sometimes private) policy. This uniquely holistic approach to public policy research sets the Furman

The Furman Center spans not only an entire city and its real estate and housing community, but also several schools in the university, including the Law School, Wagner School of Public Service, Stern School of Business and the department of economics. The Center is co-directed by Ingrid Ellen of the Wagner School and Vicki Been of the Law School; affiliated Wagner faculty and researchers include Mitchell

Moss, Dick Netzer, Kathy O'Regan, Amy Ellen Schwartz, and Rachel Meltzer.

NYCHANIS

The Center's activities don't stop at conducting research and promoting public discourse. One notable project

is an innovative research tool called

Continued on p. 5



Urban Planning Anytime at: <http://www.nyu.edu/wagner/urbanplanning>

Brownstones in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Photo at top by Joel Dabu



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The Wagner Planner is the independent student newsletter of the Urban Planning Student Association (UPSA) of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at NYU. *The Wagner Planner* is edited and produced by *The Wagner Planner* staff and the Editors-in-Chief, Uma Deshmukh and Susan Willetts. All currently enrolled MUP students, alumni and faculty are encouraged to submit material to *The Wagner Planner*. Just send an email to uma.deshmukh@nyu.edu or susanwilletts@nyu.edu

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A letter from the editors:

Urban planning is a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, multi-issue field. Encompassing topics ranging from transportation to housing, the role of the urban planner is broad, as are the areas of planning research. Recognizing the array of issues facing planners today, and the importance of learning and sharing best-practices and cutting-edge strategies in modern planning, NYU Wagner's Urban Planning Student Association (UPSA) is excited to launch this year's Wagner Planner with a special focus on the profession's latest efforts around housing.

Housing is something that affects us all, domestically and abroad. Whether we focus on affordability, green design, neighborhood revitalization or emergency shelter, housing in general is a critical aspect of planning in all communities. As we saw in the harrowing aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake that recently devastated Kashmir, people and communities across the globe - in industrialized and developing countries alike - are vulnerable to the potential for displacement and homelessness following natural or manmade disasters.

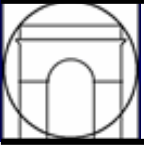
Simultaneously, the need for affordable housing is evident in many communities even without the sudden impact of an unexpected disaster. Poverty, urban decay, rapidly rising rents and gentrification are all real and constant housing issues that threaten low-income people and communities, and must be tackled by practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and students in the urban planning profession.

As the new editors-in-chief of the Wagner Planner, we are happy to launch the year's first issue with this interesting compilation of articles addressing such a critical topic. We wish to thank all the writers, editors and photographers for working so hard to contribute to the first issue of the year. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have!

Sincerely,

Uma Deshmukh and Susan Willetts
Editors-in-Chief





A Conversation with Professor Ingrid Gould Ellen

By Mike Gedal
Staff writer

Ingrid Gould Ellen, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Planning, joined NYU Wagner in 1997, and teaches courses in microeconomics, urban economics and urban policy. She is also co-director of the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. Dr. Ellen current research focuses on the ways that affordable housing investment in New York City influences development in surrounding neighborhoods, and the effects of segregation and gentrification on New York City public schools.

Mike Gedal met with Dr. Ellen to discuss her work, her take on current housing issues and her view on life at Wagner:

MG: Your work focuses on housing policy and community economic development. Where would you say you developed these interests?

IE: Growing up in Brooklyn, I think I was intrigued by the many changes I saw occurring in the neighborhoods around me.

MG: You are an economist by training. In your work you have contact with developers, planners, community groups, government officials and others. How do you view your role in the planning process?

IE: Good question. A few different roles. First, some of my research actually evaluates specific city programs, and I'd like to think these results ultimately play a role in influencing future decision making. Second, I am often asked to provide feedback on internal reports and analyses undertaken by city organizations and to help them think about how they might monitor and evaluate their programs and initiatives. Third, through various events at the Furman Center, I think we offer a forum for constructive debate about current



Photo courtesy of NYU Wagner

policy issues and expose local policymakers to innovative efforts undertaken in other jurisdictions.

MG: Since the 1970s, New York City has seen a dramatic improvement in its economic and physical condition, as well as its overall civic spirit. What's your feeling on where New York will be 30 or 40 years from now?

IE: I think the city is in great shape. The livability of the city's neighborhoods has improved, which has helped to attract workers. The city's high density continues to drive its success as a center for ideas and for business services. It has also benefited enormously over the years from continued flows of immigrants. Still, there are challenges in the future. I think the city's high concentration in financial services is somewhat worrisome, and I also think that the federal government's policies regarding immigrants will ultimately have a profound effect on the city.

MG: Over the last few years, the issue of affordable housing has come front and center for New Yorkers, as we saw in the recent mayoral race. As a

housing specialist, what do you see as the most promising programs or policy tools out there to address the issue?

IE: The key challenge today is to find land where new housing can be built in the city. Thus, I think the efforts to rezone obsolete manufacturing areas to allow for housing, and to incorporate inclusionary components that provide meaningful incentives for developers to include affordable units, are promising. Also, I think initiatives aimed at preserving the quality of existing affordable stock are critical as well.

MG: If you had to live outside the Tri-state area, what city would you choose to live in?

IE: Boston.

MG: Outside of North America?

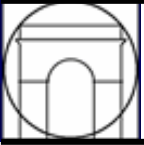
IE: London. It's the most like New York City!

MG: Would you like to recommend a book for planners interested in community change?

IE: Yes. *The Promised Land : The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, by Nicholas Lemann. It's one of my favorites.

MG: Since the move to the Puck Building, what changes have you seen at Wagner, in terms of student life, academic life and student-faculty interaction?

IE: I see many more students at the Puck Building, and I see students interacting with each other far more. I also think there are many more events happening at the school. Altogether, it feels much more like a community.



NOVEMBER 2005

A Piece of Housing History on Bleecker Street

By Elizabeth Hewitt
Staff writer

To the unknowing eye, the stretch of Bleecker Street between Thompson and Sullivan is largely insignificant. With a CVS pharmacy and other retail establishments surrounding an unremarkable residential entrance, the block resembles much of the rest of the Village. Most wouldn't give it a second glance.

A little known fact of this block, however, is that the luxury co-op units in The Atrium, at 160 Bleecker, were long ago part of Mills House #1, a hostel for poor men, which was subdivided into more than 1,500 tiny rooms measuring five by seven feet. The hostel provided these men with nightly shelter in a safe, clean environment for pocket change -- well under a dollar in its earliest days. Mills House patrons, like much of the city at the time, were in transition, and the shelter offered them a source of stability, closing during the day to encourage the men to find steady work and reopening each night to give them a place to stay.

Designed by architect Ernest Flagg in 1896, the 10-story white brick building features original iron detailing, an original cornice, and two identical, soaring atriums encompassing all 10 stories. The atriums flood light into the center of the building and what were originally small, inner rooms, which otherwise lacked natural light and ventilation.

Flagg was a strong advocate for housing reform well before the movement carried weight on a national scale. The Tenement Housing Act of 1901 had yet to be passed, and conditions in tenement houses caused residents -- most of whom were newly-arriving immigrants -- to face overcrowding, poor ventilation, little privacy, disease, vermin and unsanitary conditions. Flagg's 1922 book, *Small Houses: Their Economic Design and Construction*, offered models for tenement housing as well as innovations in structural techniques.

A prominent architect of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Flagg designed several well-known buildings in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including the Singer Building in New York; the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; and the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. As a native Brooklynite, Flagg was an advocate throughout his career for issues concerning the design and planning of the city he called home. He made suggestions for improving Manhattan's grid system and presented ideas about volume and setback restrictions at a time when technology opened possibilities for skyscrapers to reach ever-increasing heights.

Flagg's work in this field is often credited for the eventual passage of zoning laws in New York City, which set national

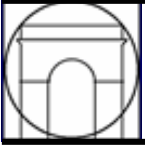


Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Hewitt.

standards and regulations for height, bulk and ventilation, in the early decades of the 20th century. Today, landlords and building management companies can't advertise a dwelling unit as having a second or third "bedroom" if the room doesn't contain a window. Such regulations didn't exist in the late 1800s, making Flagg a pioneer in his use of atriums for natural light in the design of Mills House. He brought to the forefront of the field the importance of an architect's social and civic responsibility, proving that aesthetics alone can't create a successful and functional built environment.

Originally named for its developer, Darius Ogden Mills, Mills House #1 is the last building to remain of a series of three men's hostels built by Flagg during the last decades of the 19th century, and is now aptly named The Atrium for its prominent architectural feature. Although the current ground-floor retail tenants might suggest otherwise, the building also carries a rich history in New York's cultural evolution. For more than 30 years, it was also home to the legendary jazz club Village Gate.

While The Atrium is already considered historically significant by many, organizations such as the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation have pushed for some time to landmark the entire block. The luxury co-op units currently located in the building are a far departure from its early uses as an affordable housing resource. New York City's housing history, however, stretches beyond this small block in Greenwich Village to all corners and crevices of the city, and the high-end apartments of today may actually prove to be important parts of its past.



NOVEMBER 2005

Furman Center

Continued from p. 1

New York City Housing and Neighborhood Information System (www.nychanis.com). NYCHANIS is an interactive, publicly accessible Web site that provides a broad range of statistics on housing and neighborhood conditions across New York City, down to the census-tract level.

Data on NYCHANIS is easily accessible through a searchable web-based database, and it includes historical information ranging from housing stock and housing affordability to mortgage originations and foreclosures to education and crime indicators. Users can even create custom-made maps, tables, graphs and charts.

NYCHANIS gives local housing and community development groups the data they need to monitor neighborhood conditions, plan programs that will improve their housing and neighborhoods and secure funding for these programs. NYCHANIS stands as a testament to the Furman Center's success in parlaying public policy initiatives into projects that affect New York's housing community in very visible ways.

NYCHANIS is a uniquely valuable urban planning tool that, ironically, seems to go largely underutilized by planners and planning students. For those interested, the Furman Center is currently organizing a free NYCHANIS training session for members of Wagner's Urban Planning Student Association.

Housing Policy Research: Taking It to the Hill

ALTHOUGH research at the Furman Center focuses on New York City, the impact of its research extends well beyond the five boroughs. This past summer, Ingrid Ellen took her research findings to Capitol Hill, where she testified alongside Mayor Bloomberg in Congressional hearings on the future of federal funding for community development block grants, or CDBGs.

Using a statistical model to determine whether city-assisted housing developments affect real estate prices, Dr. Ellen found that city-assisted housing investment in New York's distressed neighborhoods has yielded significant, positive spillover effects in surrounding neighborhoods. She argued that publicly-funded housing investment targeted at distressed properties directly creates affordable housing, helps revitalize these neighborhoods and increases local government tax revenue through higher property values.

By explicitly stating the stakes for both government and neighborhoods in her findings, Dr. Ellen brought the Furman Center's research out of the purely academic realm and into a more concrete role in a world where policy decisions are made.

Current Research at the Center

The Furman Center's current research focuses on evaluating the impact of land use regulation and public and private investment on the affordability of housing and the character of New York City neighborhoods.

One of the larger research efforts at the Furman Center is the annual publication of the *State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods*. This report outlines land use regulation and law, tracks affordable housing projects and reports on housing and demographic trends. Another large component of Furman Center research is devoted to exploring the *Neighborhood Impact of Place-Based Investments*, most notably of subsidies for affordable housing.

Current projects range from issues of affordable housing and its effects on commercial property values and property tax revenues, to the impact of community gardens on property values, to the combined spillover effects of all public parks in New York City. The ultimate goal of these investigations is to help guide local governments in mak-

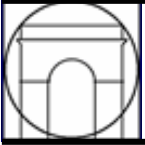
ing location and financing decisions.

In addition to these current projects, the Furman Center also conducts studies on schools, business improvement districts, historical districts, the impact of September 11, crime and housing costs. In keeping with its practice of linking research to reality, these studies focus on the interrelations between these factors and property values and service quality.

Housing policy and planning decisions affect the lives of city residents across the globe, and this is especially the case in New York City. For more than 10 years, the Furman Center has supported dialogue on housing, development and land use issues among academics, nonprofits, community leaders, government agencies and private-sector players. By bringing academic research out of the ivory tower and into the streets of New York, the Furman Center continues to make a noticeable impact on the places, spaces and faces of the city.

But the Furman Center has another mission that has so far gone unmentioned: to provide an "innovative and engaging learning environment for students interested in land use, real estate development, community economic development, housing, urban economics and urban policy."

Planners interested in getting a stronger footing in urban policy research should consider connecting with the Furman Center by exploring the NYCHANIS database or looking into the colloquium on land use and urban planning taught by the Furman Center's co-directors next semester. Check out the Furman Center website (www.furmancenter.nyu.edu). See all it has to offer. And then tell all your friends about it.



NOVEMBER 2005

Planning Students Help Build Houses for Katrina Survivors

By Uma Deshmukh
Staff writer

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, people from around the country volunteered their time to help Gulf Coast residents begin rebuilding their lives and reconstructing their communities. As part of this effort, for one full week from September 26-30, Habitat for Humanity, in collaboration with NBC News "Today" and Warner Music Group, launched a massive initiative called Operation Home Delivery, beginning with the construction of at least 100 "Houses in a Box" to be shipped to the Gulf Coast region. This initiative transformed New York City's Rockefeller Plaza into "Humanity Plaza," where volunteers worked around the clock to build houses for families displaced by the Gulf Coast hurricanes. Construction was simultaneously taking place in Los Angeles and Jackson, Miss.

Under the leadership of experienced construction workers, volunteers worked together in Humanity Plaza to build the frames and panelized walls of the houses, which were then broken down, loaded into trucks and shipped to the Gulf Coast, where they were reassembled to house low-income displaced survivors of Hurricane Katrina. House frames were constructed wall-by-wall and nail-by-nail by volunteers hammering away day and night. Among the hundreds of volunteers were several students from NYU Wagner's Urban Planning program.

Seeking to participate in reconstruction efforts and learn more about creative approaches to post-disaster planning, these students helped construct two houses on the morning of Sept. 30,

2005. The group of students arrived at the plaza early Friday morning where they were handed tool belts, hammers and nails; led to the construction site; and given instructions from the site supervisor. The students spent the rest of the morning assembling the walls of the houses and preparing them for shipment to the Gulf Coast. The experience was especially interesting from a planning perspective, as it demonstrated the potential for creativity and innovation in redevelopment strategies. While planning is typically thought of as a place-based process, this approach showed students how

slow and disorganized response coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As media reports in the days and weeks following the disaster revealed the chaos and despair of the hurricane victims, many civic-minded people were eager to lend a hand. Humanity Plaza created an organized and constructive environment for New Yorkers to actively participate. Judita Eisenberger, another Wagner planning student said, "I believe that several hundred families made homeless by the hurricane will certainly benefit from the efforts at Humanity Plaza. While the work done

over the course of the week may not have widespread impacts, small steps towards alleviating the problems in New Orleans are more effective than no steps at all."

In addition to volunteer builders, the event drew a great deal of media and celebrity attention, including appearances by Brooke Shields, Jessica Alba and Al Roker, while Warner Music Group had a line-up of popular musicians providing entertainment in the Plaza throughout the week, including the Goo Goo Dolls and Tracy Chapman.

The large amount of publicity surrounding the event helped to raise awareness and funding to support the project and the larger cause.

While the event clearly demonstrated multiple benefits, it also illuminated the limitations and drawbacks of this type of highly publicized effort, notably the attention it takes away from other smaller, but worthy projects. "While [the enthusiastic response at Humanity Plaza was] encouraging, I sometimes feel that my time is better spent at less-publicized events doing equally important work where there

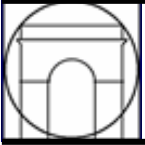


Wagner students worked with other volunteers to build houses for Katrina survivors (above). Photo courtesy of Judita Eisenberger.

people from across the country can actually contribute to local planning efforts. As Douglas Adams, a planning student at Wagner who volunteered at Humanity Plaza put it, "The effort allows one to imagine the potential for efficiently creating and shipping new housing from areas with materials and other resources into disaster areas which may be unable to respond immediately."

Furthermore, the event offered a positive way for citizens around the country to become involved and engaged in the relief efforts that had been severely criticized for the inadequate,

Continued on p. 12



The Housing Stock of New Member States

By Simon Gerson
Staff writer

From each according to his ability, and to each according to his need." When it comes to energy consumption, this mantra looks as outdated as the economic system on which it is based. Former socialist countries in Eastern Europe use far more energy than they might otherwise need. Although state socialism lasted a mere 60 years, as central and Eastern European countries turn west, they will long be cleaning up after their forebears.

And there is much to clean up. According to a report by the consultancy Ecofys, the 10 new Member States of the European Union use more than twice the energy of the previous EU-15 for each unit of GDP. A full 40% of this demand is domestic, so cleaning house is especially critical.

The majority of the square footage in these countries was built before 1975 and designed to last around 30 years. A large percentage of buildings, between 30% and 80% depending on the country, were the Corbusier-esque "Tower in the Park" blocks of apartments aristocratically dubbed "Housing Estates." Yet the socialist economic system was without private property, and the collection and payment of rent was considered immoral and illegal. Such a policy was devoid of incentives and led to decades of misallocation, underutilization and neglect.

Through privatization, the housing system in the former socialist countries is slowly modernizing. Since joining the European Union in May 2004, the New 10 have gained additional momentum in cleaning up. The countries subscribed to the *Acquis Communautaire*, the common law, and integrated their economies to join the EU-15. One particular

law, aptly named the "Directive on the Energy Performance of Buildings," requires national legislatures to adopt energy standards and renovated buildings to comply.

Unfortunately, this bold initiative may asphyxiate for lack of cash. The Ecofys report puts the bill at €1.31 billion in investment per year for 10 years, if the directive is extended to cover all buildings as may be likely. The price tag and scope of the project are certainly substantial. However, based on their calculations, retrofitting buildings with state-of-the-art insulation will yield a net cost savings of €371 million, in addition to carbon reductions of up to 14 million tons per year.

That is a huge profit, but just as the proverbial economics professor refuses to believe there is a \$20 bill lying on the ground because "somebody would have picked it up already," it pays to be a bit skeptical about these claims. After all, Ecofys was commissioned by EURIMA, the European Insulation Manufacturers Association.

The problem is certainly real, but there is no mechanism for an easy solution. Housing is a national level issue in the EU, and there is more than a whiff of federalist spirit since the Constitutional Referendum. While there are EU funds available for energy savings, the money is limited to buildings that are partly non-residential. Therefore, changing this policy may stall for fear of Bruxellian intervention.

Private investments will follow only if there is a reasonable return on investment. The Ecofys report was significant in this regard, but it may be too partial to yield €1 billion per year. It seems that just like Rasputin, Socialist housing policy will continue its torments long after it is dead.

Affordable Housing in New York: Past Progress, Future Opportunity

By Carrie Knudson
Staff writer

On October 21st, affordable housing planners, advocates and experts attended the Steven L. Newman Real Estate Institute's Conference, "Affordable Housing in New York City: Problems, Choices, Toward Solutions," at Baruch College. Conference speakers addressed a wide range of affordable housing topics, all of which set the stage for the introduction of a recently completed study on affordable housing for the Office of the Public Advocate. Many of the conference speakers contributed to the report.

The five-volume study, entitled "Report to the Public Advocate: Affordable Housing in New York City," describes the current state of affordable housing in the city; examines historic housing programs and current policies; and gives recommendations for addressing current and future affordable housing needs.

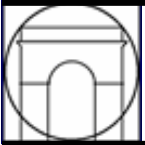
In his conference introduction, Henry Wollman, Director of the Newman Institute, described the study as "one of the most outstanding reports on affordable housing in the city of New York in the last decade."

Two of the conference speakers pro-

vided ideological considerations of the responsibilities of public versus private organizations in the production of affordable housing. James Stockard, an expert on affordable housing and community development and principal of a Boston consulting firm, suggested that the philosophical reasons for providing housing are more important than the numbers that supporting it.

Stockard argued that the government should subsidize affordable housing development because the private market simply does not provide housing for approximately 20% of the population. That 20% includes the working poor

Continued on p. 8



Affordable Housing in New York, continued

(both part time and full time workers), the mentally ill, low-income seniors and children. Stockard suggested that housing construction can also promote more general economic development, but perhaps his most compelling reason for government subsidization of affordable housing was simply, the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have done unto you."

In direct contrast to Stockard, Peter Salins gave a less popular (at least with this particular audience) but still thought-provoking argument that only the private sector can build enough housing to end New York's housing crisis. According to Salins, housing is a private good like food or clothing that will be priced and provided for by the market. Housing policies so far have fallen short, he said, because they refuse to acknowledge the laws of supply and demand. Instead, Salins suggested that a market-based approach to affordable housing is the best policy and that housing subsidies, if provided at all, should be provided to families and individuals, not connected to the dwelling units themselves.

For Salins, New York's housing "crisis" not a true crisis, but a *perceived* scarcity of housing based on the unrealistic locational expectations of New York residents that they should live in or as near as possible to Manhattan. He suggested that many of New York's neighborhoods, especially those in the outer boroughs, have benefited from this so-called crisis, because the cost of housing in central New York City has pushed both native and immigrant families to revive neighborhoods they would not have otherwise considered.

Other conference speakers provided a history of housing policy in New York City and described a number of the successful programs that the City has implemented over the years. One example is the *vacant building in rem* housing stock program that enables the City to convey tax-delinquent distressed properties to a responsible third party (such as a non-profit) for

one dollar, with the goal of rehabilitation and redevelopment. Another successful state plan was the Mitchell-Lama housing program that provided housing for moderate-income families. Finally, among the national policies that were discussed was the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit which has been a significant generator of affordable housing in New York City.

City Council Speaker Gifford Miller described some of the initiatives that the Council recently implemented, including the up-zoning of 4th Avenue in Park Slope, the first zoning change that made inclusionary zoning a requirement as part of the approvals process. More recently, zoning changes in Greenpoint/Williamsburg and West Chelsea also included inclusionary zoning provisions.

While inclusionary zoning may be one of New York's best options for increasing its affordable housing stock, many residents are more interested in preserving their community's character. Neighborhoods such as South Park Slope and Morris Park in the Bronx have successfully been "down-zoned" to reduce current FAR and preserve their low-rise, lower-density character. Councilman Miller suggested that these conflicting actions must be carefully considered before plans are implemented. New York's voluntary inclusionary zoning policies, which are promoted by density bonuses, will not be effective if neighborhoods continue to reduce their permitted densities to preserve existing character, Miller said.

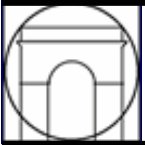
Beyond inclusionary zoning policies, conference speakers described a number of other ways the city can further increase its affordable housing stock. Frank Fish, a New York Urban Planner and Wagner Adjunct Professor, explained the potential to create additional housing opportunities by re-zoning unused manufacturing districts and commercial districts in the outer boroughs. Another creative proposal, to allow infill housing on unused public

housing land, depicted townhouse designs on the grounds parkland of New York's "tower in the park" public housing sites. This proposal imagined building up unused FAR on the sites and re-integrating them into the neighborhood fabric.

Rafael Cestero, current Deputy Commissioner for Development at the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, spoke about some of the challenges of affordable housing in New York today. In addition to a lack of privately owned land for development, the City's stock of city-owned land and buildings has decreased significantly since 1979, with much of it already gone to housing production. Decreases in federal funding and increases in land acquisition costs have also hindered the city's ability to provide affordable housing.

Finally, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum gave the conference's keynote address at the conference, criticizing the City's "piecemeal approach to re-zoning," a reference to the inconsistency of down-zoning in some areas while up-zoning in others, without a comprehensive strategy for such changes. However, Gotbaum was optimistic about the affordable housing report, which she described as a "crucial first step towards a more affordable New York."

For more information on the affordable housing report, visit the web site for the Office of the Public Advocate, <http://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/>



NOVEMBER 2005

Tenement Museum Reveals the Evolution of the Lower East Side

By Susan Willetts
Staff writer

For an example of a New York neighborhood undergoing significant cultural and physical change, you need look no further than the Lower East Side. Here you'll find a Starbucks nestled among the traditional stores selling hosiery, lingerie and luggage; ancient tenement buildings alongside renovated luxury condos; and a Chinese-language video store near a trendy bar. It seems that everywhere you turn, there is evidence of an area being transformed.

But as a group of Wagner urban planning students recently learned, it's always been that way on the Lower East Side. Thanks to an excellent tour Nov. 18 by the folks at the Tenement Museum, these students got to see firsthand how the neighborhood has been in near-constant transition for more than a hundred years.

In the 19th century, the Lower East Side was often the first stop -- after Ellis Island, of course -- for thousands of immigrants, mostly Eastern European Jews and Italians. The area was a snapshot of the migration to the United States at the time, with immigrants crowding into dark tenement apartments and pushcart vendors hawking their wares in half a dozen languages. In more recent years, the wave of immigration to the neighborhood continues, but the dialects you hear are more likely from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. And nowadays, a new generation of hipsters has discovered the Lower East Side, giving rise to boutiques and a growing nightlife.

The neighborhood has also experienced continual change in housing. In the space of one block are old law tenements -- characterized by having windows only in the front and back of the building -- adjoining the "dumbbell

apartments" of the later tenements -- with their air shafts carved out between buildings; together with 1960s-era high-rise housing projects and new luxury condos. While the Lower East Side has become a hotspot for upscale housing, as shown by the amount of new construction and renovation in the area, a surprising number of people still live very much like the tenement dwellers of yesteryear, with sinks in the kitchen and no built-in heat.

Though this way of life is fading more

7,000 immigrants who lived at that address between 1863 and 1935, described to the Wagner group her adjustment to American culture and her daily life working in her father's undergarment factory.

The ongoing transformation of the neighborhood can also be seen with its largest open space, Seward Park, developed around the turn of the last century in response to a growing belief that residents of tenement housing, especially children, needed public

open spaces for their well being.

The park proved unpopular with many of the new immigrants, who were afraid to let their children venture beyond the familiar environs of their homes, but by the mid-20th century it was known as a place that diverse members of the community could all enjoy. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Seward Park, like many other public spaces throughout the city, had become run-down and not particularly safe at night. In the late 1990s, the park underwent a major renovation, with significant input from the community, and is once again a centerpiece of the neighborhood.

There is perhaps no more striking an example of the progressive changes to the Lower East Side than the Forward Building on East Broadway. In the 1920s, the building was the site of the *Daily Forward*, a Yiddish newspaper known for its Marxist politics and its role

in helping new Jewish immigrants adapt to American life. Later in the 20th century, it became the location for a Chinese Christian missionary organization that printed religious texts; the biblical verse in Chinese characters can still be seen on the building's side. The Forward Building has clearly been a significant place for the changing residents of the neighborhood, so its apparent vacancy prompted one planner to ask about its current use. The answer? It's being converted to upscale loft apartments.

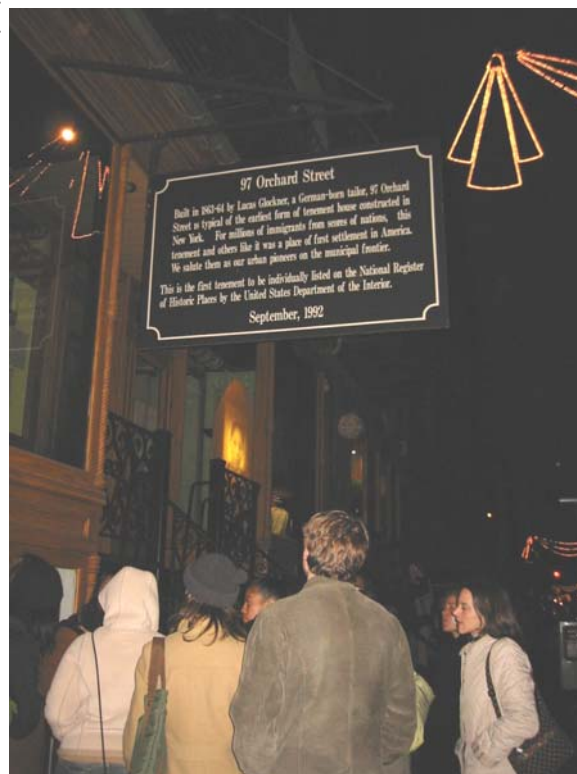
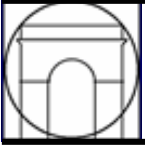


Photo courtesy of Julia Chan

and more amid the ever-growing trend of gentrification, the Tenement Museum's preserved building at 97 Orchard Street reveals to modern visitors what it was like living in the cramped tenements of the 19th century. A highlight of the guided tour for many of the planners was the re-enacting by a museum worker of the life of Victoria Confino, a young immigrant who lived with nine other family members in a fifth-floor, three-room apartment at 97 Orchard. Victoria, one of some



Perception Versus Reality in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn

By Joel Dabu
Staff writer

"You Must Take the 'A' Train." Ella Fitzgerald sang these famous words about Harlem. But if you take the "A" Train in the other direction, four stops into Brooklyn to Nostrand Avenue, you will be in Bedford-Stuyvesant, otherwise known as Bed-Stuy. The Fulton Street-Nostrand Avenue Business District is the gateway to Bed-Stuy, one of Brooklyn's original brownstone neighborhoods and home to the largest black community in New York City. Unlike Harlem, with its attendant legends of jazz and a mythology of an unprecedented African-American cultural renaissance, the popular folklore surrounding Bedford-Stuyvesant is a world away from its uptown cousin.

Like most New York City neighborhoods, Bed-Stuy has been buffeted by the forces of neighborhood change and gentrification during the recent real estate boom. Owing in part to a brownstone building stock that equals or surpasses the aesthetic quality of Park Slope and the Upper West Side, residential home prices in Bed-Stuy have risen to levels that were unthinkable three to five years ago. Existing residents have painstakingly restored their homes to their former glory, and new residents are buying and putting back into productive use many abandoned townhouses. Judging by the residential portions of Bed-Stuy, it would seem to have already arrived in the Brooklyn neighborhood lineup next to Fort Greene, Park Slope or Cobble Hill. A look at the commercial retail picture, however, presents a different picture. Fulton Street, the main east-west thoroughfare through Bed-Stuy, has a number of retail vacancies. Many small businesses set up shop only to close months later, while 99-cent stores and hair and nail salons proliferate like wildflowers. The presence of more than 60,000 people living only a 10-minute walk from Fulton Street would seem to argue for better quality and diversity of retail offerings.

While the New York City residential real estate market has "discovered" Bed-Stuy, sustaining small entrepreneurs and convincing new businesses to open on the neighborhood's main drag has been challenging. Despite a stable and tightly-knit residential community, plunging crime rates and improved city services, the popular mythology of "Bed-Stuy, Do or Die" lives on, leading many to continue to

think of it as a dangerous neighborhood. This stereotype, rooted in New York City's darkest days of the 1970s and 1980s, plays a powerful role in hindering the revitalization of Bed-Stuy's gateway business district, notwithstanding the reality of the surrounding neighborhood's current re-birth. The concept of the real city versus the city of imagination is broached by author James Sanders in his book on New York, *Celluloid Skyline*. Says Sanders, "The first is a real city, an urban agglomeration of millions. The second is a mythic city, so rich in memory and association and sense of place that to people everywhere it has come to seem real." Some neighborhoods in the real city of New York benefit from a positive mythology -- for example, the enduring promise of liberal and artistic Greenwich Village. Conversely, the consequences of negative folklore such as "Bed-Stuy, Do or Die" can stigmatize a neighborhood and handicap its renewal.



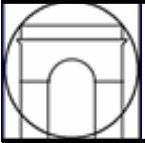
Fresh juice at Melanie's in Bed-Stuy
Photo by Joel Dabu

Rewriting Bed-Stuy's tough-as-nails legend has become central in the revitalization of its central business district. To that end, on March 10, a large crowd gathered in the lobby of Restoration Plaza in Bed-Stuy, along with local notables Mos Def, the rapper and actor, and representatives of community and environmental activist Hattie Carthan and poet and novelist June Jordan. The event bringing these people together might have seemed trivial: the unveiling of a new neighborhood slogan, "Bed-Stuy, and Proud of It." Indeed, after the event concluded with autographs from Mos Def, some attendees may have thought little more would come of it.

The "Bed-Stuy, And Proud of It" campaign was conceived to provide an alternative narrative for a community that doesn't speak of fear, crime, disinvestment and abandonment. Like many diverse communities in New

York City, the real Bed-Stuy has its share of urban problems. But the story that hasn't been widely told speaks of a hardworking and tightly knit community in what has historically been New York's largest African-American neighborhood. The local icons that headlined the press conference are examples of the untold Bed-Stuy story, of residents who have made their mark in the community and the outside world.

The new slogan aims to tell a more positive story about Bed-Stuy and convince potential residents and business owners to take a second look at the neighborhood. Already, the theme is spreading. Students at a local youth arts acad-



NOVEMBER 2005

Bed-Stuy, Continued

Many incorporate lessons and activities with the theme of "Bed-Stuy, And Proud of It," and the local business community has used the new slogan and logo in its advertising. As a result, changes seem to be underway in Bed-Stuy. Outside investment is pouring into new business ventures, including the first Duane Reade, Applebee's and Super Foodtown supermarket in the neighborhood. In addition, many local businesses are upgrading their appearance and the quality of their merchandise and service. For example, at Fulton Street and Nostrand Avenue, a local property owner recently completed a full-scale renovation of a previously vacant eight-unit apartment building with the ground-floor addition of Melanie's, a Caribbean restaurant and juice bar emphasizing fresh food, cleanliness and customer service.

While no one attributes all of this activity to a new slogan, "Bed-Stuy, And Proud of It" captures the enthusiasm being infused into the neighborhood by a shift in opinions and attitudes about its future prospects.

Comedian Chris Rock, another Bed-Stuy icon, exemplifies a shift that is occurring on an even larger scale. In his new television show "Everybody Hates Chris," Rock chronicles the travails of his childhood in Bed-Stuy. While the show acknowledges the gritty reputation of the area circa 1983, the more substantive narrative is formed by the stories of young Chris and his tough but loving working-class family and their relationships with the people in the neighborhood. In one episode, Rock acknowledges that Bed-Stuy often inspires thoughts of a chaotic nighttime scene of screaming people, mayhem and an image of police officers quelling a riot of residents by spraying high pressure water hoses at the crowd. In reality, he says, "Bed-



Picturesque brownstones line Bed-Stuy's streets.
Photo by Joel Dabu

Stuy was just like many other neighborhoods in the city. Mail got delivered, people went to work, you said hi to your neighbors and you knew everyone on your block, even your friendly local hood(lums)." Bed-Stuy may never have an image that is as squeaky clean as Park Slope or as hipster-cool as the Lower East Side, but that's because it's Bed-Stuy, and proud of it.



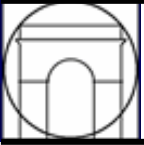
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Building Houses for Hurricane Katrina, Continued

may be a shortage of volunteers," said Judita.

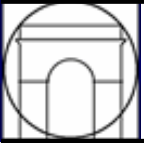
Ultimately, however, the participation of volunteers, celebrities, as well as many collaborative partnerships and corporate sponsorships, were clearly critical to the success of the project. Lowe's, a national partner of Habitat, donated all the lumber necessary for construction, while Pence transported the containers from New York City to the Gulf Coast free of charge. These public and private alliances formed in response to the disaster have positive implications for future relief efforts and convey the profound impact that a mobilized citizenry and responsible corporations can have on improving the lives of disaster victims.

But Habitat for Humanity's efforts, along with many other affordable housing agencies, haven't ended with the highly publicized events at Humanity Plaza. With hundreds of thousands left homeless after the hurricane and severe infrastructure damage in the region, Habitat and its partners have committed to building houses for low-income residents of the Gulf Coast in the long-run. Focus has now shifted in the area from rapid stabilization to long-term planning and reconstruction. "Without long-term focus, funding, and dedication, New Orleans will be a shadow of itself, and the U.S. and the world will have lost a bit of our identity, heart, and soul," said Doug.

Among the goals that have arisen in the post-disaster planning stages are those of infrastructure improvements and the creation of diverse, integrated, mixed-income communities where affordable housing is available to the poor; poverty isn't concentrated and isolated; communities aren't segregated; public transportation options are avail-

able to facilitate mobility among neighborhoods; and participatory processes are included in planning efforts. In contrast to the urban design that characterized New Orleans prior to the disaster, it is now the hope of many progressive urban planners, community leaders and advocacy organizations that the Gulf Coast will be rebuilt based on lessons learned from past mistakes, incorporating best practices into the long-term planning efforts. It is now the hope that the dark cloud that arrived with Hurricane Katrina came with a silver lining that will lead to the creation of new and improved communities and give the survivors a chance at a better, more just future.





Wagner Planning Students Give Back and Have Fun

Many planners participated in New York Cares Day and helped paint and clean up Brooklyn public schools (below).

Photo courtesy of Judita Eisenberger



But students always find time to get together and have fun....

Photos courtesy of Judita Eisenberger, Veronica Siranosian and Susanne Huerta

