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Dreams of Place: Housing, Gentrification, and the Marketing of Space in El Barrio

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a central index of gentrification, a diminishing market for affordable housing, is affecting Puerto Rican dreams of place in El Barrio/East Harlem. I pay special attention to how the area's history and cultural identity are being deployed by developers and residents, and how, despite their differing aspirations for the area, both groups end up advancing a similar development vision and ideology. New governmental policies favoring the privatization of land and property simultaneously intersect with and depart from Puerto Rican and Latino dreams of empowerment, and tap into these dreams in multiple ways. The results are consumption-based developments such as home ownership programs, favored by the Puerto Rican middle class as part of their dream of empowerment through property and the purchase of place, which are increasingly out of the reach of Puerto Ricans and most low and middle income inhabitants of East Harlem. [Keywords: gentrification, Puerto Rican politics, New York City housing, housing markets, Spanish Harlem]

“This neighborhood will be lost unless we make it ours. Look at Loisaída, that’s gone,” Nazario said. “All those white yuppies want to live in Manhattan, and they think Spanish Harlem is next for the taking.” (Ernesto Quiñonez, *Bodega Dreams*)

In *Bodega Dreams*, Ernesto Quiñonez’ novel set in El Barrio, the hopeful protagonist Willie Bodega dreams of building a Latino professional class born and bred in El Barrio that, through cunning and politics, would lead all Latinos toward economic and political empowerment. A former Young Lords activist, Bodega had learned that it is only by Anglo rules, that is, by stealing through “signing the right papers,” and by accumulating property, money, and power, that Latinos can get ahead in El Barrio. Foremost, Bodega is keenly aware that the ‘60s are over. The government is no longer pouring monies into El Barrio; white yuppies are moving in, and if Latinos want to protect their legacy and their turf, they will have to buy it, building by building. So Bodega sets out on a buying spree with illicit funds that are put into a good cause with the help of a lawyer friend who has contacts with the City’s Housing Department. But Bodega’s dream—to become the second largest “slumlord” after the city of New York—comes to an abrupt end when he is killed by his deceitful lawyer, who is intent on taking over Bodega’s reign. The lawyer is soon exposed, however, and the buildings are reclaimed by the city, leaving the shortly “empowered” Latino residents vulnerable but hopeful, propelled by Bodega’s dream for a brighter future.

Written in 2000 by Quiñonez, a young writer raised in El Barrio by Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian parents, who has expressed publicly his wish for an empowered Latino middle class to combat gentrification, *Bodega Dreams* represents the ultimate neoliberal novel. The context it speaks to is one where the purchase of place is presented as the only alternative for lasting power, even when the feasibility of such a dream is quickly fading. Rents are rapidly increasing, and buildings that a decade ago would have been abandoned or sold cheaply, are being coveted by not-for-profit investors and private speculators alike. Indeed, East Harlem is now one of the last open frontiers for development in Manhattan, and local residents are feeling the crunch.

Contributing to this situation is the rapid decline in federal and state housing assistance, which has greatly eroded the safety net for the urban poor in El Barrio. East Harlem has the second largest concentration of public housing units in the city, and among the largest number of households on public assistance¹; up to 62 percent of its population is dependent on publicly subsidized housing, making this area particularly susceptible to federal and state policy changes on public housing.² Two major trends have been particularly harmful to East Harlem residents. The first is the move, at the federal level, away from direct subsidies for the construction of new affordable housing and toward less effective measures such as the politically vulnerable tenant vouchers and subsidies programs. The second is the trend toward privatization. In New York City, this is evident in government housing policies that favor private ownership and expedited transfers of the city’s housing stock to private and nonprofit developers,³ but maintain little responsibility over housing management and maintenance. As we shall see, the results are higher rents and less affordable housing.

Obviously, the lack of affordable housing is not limited to East Harlem. Citywide, there is an eight-year waiting list for public housing. More than 224,000 households are waiting to receive Section 8 vouchers to subsidize their rents,

while one out of four New Yorkers pays over half of his or her income for rent, well above the recommended cap of 30 percent (Housing First 2001). My concern here is with the urgency and potential meaning of this crunch for the identity and demographic composition of East Harlem, in light of the area’s growing status among developers and apartment hunters, and the upwardly mobile, Bodega-like class aspirations of Puerto Rican community leaders and activists to stake a permanent hold on El Barrio. In this regard, I consider the seemingly puzzling fact that despite growing concerns about the invasion of “fake bohemians” and white yuppies to the area, development has in fact attracted more enthusiasts than open critics. Many have bemoaned the changes, but few cries against gentrification were being heard as “development” surfaced both as threat and solution.

Arguably, with some exceptions, such as the contested development of Pathmark in the 1990s, East Harlem’s development has been relatively less visible and hence less threatening to residents compared to that of Central and West Harlem, which is front-page news in the Real Estate and Arts sections of local papers. I would suggest, however, that East Harlem’s relatively pro-development stance results from the widespread embrace of a particular planning ideology favoring privatization, which coincides with residents’ upwardly mobile aspirations, even as it actively supports the area’s gentrification.⁴ As we shall see, this planning ideology engages and accommodates both the marginal history of this community and the class-based visions of neighborhood empowerment, wherein private home ownership and consumption-based housing (housing development geared to private ownership) have been equated and promoted as the promise of mobility. These associations were dominant among the different interests fueling development in the area, such as not-for-profit and private developers and community activists, even though they were accompanied and promoted by different visions of community and views for East Harlem’s future.

Thus, for many Puerto Rican leaders, disassociating this area from its marginal history is seen as a pivotal step for their larger, middle class dream of Puerto Rican empowerment through property and the purchase of place. Theirs is a vision of El Barrio as a predominantly Puerto Rican or Latino neighborhood, anchored by a strong middle class. This upwardly mobile vision for East Harlem, however, is conveniently aligned with and capitalized by the bulk of development enthusiasts operating in the area, although for the latter the area’s Latino identity is something to be underplayed, superseded, or else treated as a selling point, even if neatly packaged into a larger multicultural identity collage.

What follows is part of a larger study of East Harlem’s gentrification. My concerns speak to the intersection of class, culture, and consumption in the marketing of space while addressing contemporary debates over the contradictory role of neoliberal urban policies in global cities like New York (Zukin 1995; Comaroff 1999; Gregory 1998). But in this essay I focus on discourses of housing and home ownership in East Harlem. I start by providing a brief history of Puerto Ricans’ struggles over housing in East Harlem, emphasizing how state and federal policies have shaped their aspirations for housing and place. I then look at the widespread circulation of a consumption-based ideology favoring home ownership and mixed income housing programs, and at how residents are tapping into and maneuvering these programs. Specifically, I highlight the role that public policies and politically appealing discourses of “neighborhood revitalization,” “community empowerment” and “nonprofit development” play into the process of gentrification.⁵ I conclude with a brief consideration of the rental

market in East Harlem, where the contradictions and growing divides, in terms of affordability, housing quality and the social demographics of old and new tenants, are most evident.

Housing Policies and Struggles, Past and Present

Housing and empowerment have long been inexorably connected in East Harlem, and in government policies that appealed to people's housing aspirations and longing for place. East Harlem was a prime target for federal slum clearance under the Federal Housing Act of 1937, which led to the construction of one of the highest densities of public housing projects in the City, and to the displacement of its residents, among them Puerto Ricans who had settled in this area since the 1900s. As Sánchez Korrol notes, by the 1930s, there were Puerto Rican settlements from around 97th Street to 110th Street, around northern Central Park to about 125th Street, and from Third Avenue on the East to Eighth and Manhattan Avenues to the West, with the largest concentration around 116th Street (Sánchez-Korrol 1983:61–62).⁶ These areas were still shared by Irish, Italians, Jews, and African Americans at the time, though by the 1950s, they were becoming primarily Puerto Rican, first around 110th and 111th Streets between Park and Madison Avenues, and, later, around the sections of 106th Street, bordering Fifth Avenue on the West and Park Avenue on the East (Meyer 1989).⁷ These are the same areas that under urban renewal saw the construction of massive development projects as early as 1941, with the construction of the East River Houses, which inaugurated the high-rise model for public housing, and peaking throughout the 1950s and 1960s, causing widespread displacement among East Harlemites.

Among the three largest ethnic groups a pattern surfaces. Beginning in the mid-1940s is the displacement of Puerto Ricans by blacks moving south and to the east from Harlem, and of Italians by Puerto Ricans moving to the east.⁸ I found no statistics accounting for the number of Puerto Ricans displaced by these developments, but considering estimates that from 1959 to 1961 Puerto Ricans accounted for as much as 76 percent of the people displaced from various urban renewal sites in the city, their numbers were likely to be great.⁹ In fact, stories of displacement are not rare in El Barrio, where residents were soon sensitized about how changes in the landscape can affect their future. Lamenting the displacement that followed on the heels of urban renewal, an older resident recalls events, referring in particular to the rise of black residents with public housing, which furthered the attending competition over space: "People don't remember El Barrio before the projects, but we had a community. They took our stores, our land, our turf. And they started to bring all these people from outside in busloads. And our friends were gone, and the community was divided."

The "projects," as public housing is commonly known, have since become associated with urban blight, crime, grime, and poverty. It is noteworthy that they were initially intended for the "submerged middle classes," those "worthy" of help, not the minority, unemployed, or "untraditional" large extended families. Through this discriminatory admissions policy, Puerto Ricans had to struggle for due and equitable access to public housing, as public housing became a marker of class distinctions among the inhabitants of East Harlem. Housing policies included interviews for tenant suitability, apartment inspections for hygiene, wait lists for apartments, and other forms of tenant surveillance. Sánchez's study of Puerto Ricans in public housing from 1945 to 1980 notes that not until the civil strife and protest in the late 1960s and 1970s did Puerto Ricans begin to gain parity in their entrance to public housing, which initially tended to favor whites and blacks over Puerto Ricans, who were seen as a transient and hence

vulnerable population not worthy of permanent welfare aid.¹⁰ According to this study, Puerto Ricans were not as far behind blacks as tenants in public housing in East Harlem as they were in other parts of the city. Still, public housing did increase the number of blacks in East Harlem, particularly in the housing stock constructed along Madison and Park Avenues between 112th and 115th Streets, along the highly contested borders of East and West Harlem.¹¹ This development still informs the perception that the projects increased blacks' presence within "Puerto Rican areas." Indeed, different public housing buildings are still regarded as being more or less "black" or "Puerto Rican." These categories are based on long-time perceptions concerning those who dominated these projects at their inception, evidencing how strongly public housing admissions were intertwined with racial/ethnic politics.¹²

Then and now, a common concern among Puerto Rican activists is that "our community" should have access to the housing stock that was built in "our community." Central to consolidating such concerns were the War on Poverty programs of the 1960s, which provided Puerto Ricans with local access to resources with which they could potentially control development to their advantage. As is well known, antipoverty programs led to the growth of ethnically organized public social service infrastructures that helped further the consolidation of a politicized and bureaucratized Puerto Rican leadership in the area. Their emergence coincided with and fed the ethnicity-based political strategies and policies that pervaded the then dominant ideology of "cultural pluralism" during this racially charged time (Herbstein 1978; Torres 1995).¹³ Distribution of public funds on the basis of ethnicity became the medium through which Puerto Ricans could take control, not only to counter the white establishment that had so discriminated against them, but also to demarcate themselves from African Americans, whose concurrent struggles over turf and space in West Harlem, while a model for Puerto Rican activists, often collided with Puerto Ricans in the East (Aponte-Parés 1999). Most directly, however, these programs represented a blunt challenge to the social services organizations, such as the East Harlem Protestant Parish, Union Settlement, and James Weldon Johnson Houses, which dominated important sectors of East Harlem's civic structure, and continue to be influential (although much less so) in El Barrio. These institutions, all of them led by white leaders, mainly clergymen and social workers, are remembered for their patronizing attitude toward Puerto Ricans and the poor, and are attributed with stalling the development of indigenous leadership.¹⁴ The director of a social service organization, whose family had come into the neighborhood in the 1920s and who was both a witness to and participant in El Barrio's transformations, remembers:

My family came during the '20s and I was raised [here and] there were a lot of "gente blanca" but they were not *blanco* (white), they were ethnics—Irish, Italian Irish. Those differences mattered, but now is all white and black. I went to the service and came back in the midst of the civil rights movement. And everyone was involved. We were young and we were going to end poverty forever. Community Control was the banner and we got control of the poverty funds to the chagrin of the whites. For them we were sheep to be led, but never leaders.

He went on to recall the 1960s as a time when there were a variety of groups, from gangs to community groups to social clubs, caught in the movement for social

empowerment and community autonomy. But the War on Poverty was predicated on community-based disbursement of funds, which were easily centralized, and in East Harlem soon led to one of the strongest welfare-funds-driven political clans in the city. Its anchors included the ten-times-elected former assemblyman Angel del Toro (1974–1995) and his brother William; the brothers Raul and Roberto Rodríguez, the latter a city councilman from 1980 to the mid-1990s; Bob Anasagasti; and state senator Olga Méndez (1978 to present).¹⁵ By holding political office in the city council and the state assembly and by controlling the two entities dispensing anti-poverty funds—MEND (Massive Economic Neighborhood Development), which was founded in the late 1960s and later reformed as the East Harlem Council for Community Improvement (EHCI); and EHCC (the East Harlem Community Corporation) established in 1967—as well as all of their satellite offices, this Puerto Rican power bloc achieved almost total control over development and political activity in East Harlem throughout the 1970s and mid-1980s.

The story of the political power attained by Puerto Ricans through control of federal funds for local development merits more attention than I am able to provide here, except to note that its legacy is still strongly felt in the area. After some of its core members were publicly discredited and accused of bribery and mismanagement of funds, they came to be seen by some as the area's poverty pimps, blamed for fostering patronage, wasting scarce resources, and tainting the political integrity of the Puerto Rican community. As one critic noted, because of them “people dismiss us as a plantation run by the Toro brothers....Puerto Rican politicians in East Harlem have not been taken seriously since.”¹⁶ Others, however, defend them, believing they were wrongly persecuted as a reprisal for creating the first Puerto Rican power bloc in Manhattan. Among its defenders are those who benefited from their access to state management contracts and resources, receiving jobs, incomes, contracts, services, and housing. Moreover, many of the East Harlemites who became politically active during this era are still heading social service and housing organizations (such as NERVE and East Harlem Multiservice) and are recognized leaders in entities such as the former local New York City Public School Board and the East Harlem Chamber of Commerce. Others are important figures in not-for-profit groups and private housing development in the area.

Most important, these leaders have friendships and contacts with long-time elected officials such as Olga Méndez and Charles Rangel, whose almost unchallenged permanence in office since the 1970s assures the continuity of networks of support and patronage. Indeed, the legacy of the 1970s is still felt in the importance of social service and not-for-profit institutions. Their directors are the ones whom I was told to interview first, and are always represented in local community and political affairs. At the same time, and echoing the ascendancy of neoliberal politics, these earlier leaders and their political gains were also viewed with deep suspicion by many for promoting reliance on programs in which political power is forever vulnerable and transient. As a local businessman put it, echoing what others said in different ways: “What happened was that Puerto Ricans got only programs. We got elected officials, and worried only about public monies and programs to put family and friends to work. That's it, no bricks and mortar and no real power. That's East Harlem's history for thirty years.”

The War on Poverty funds provided little money for housing development, and it would not be until the 1980s, with the advent of federal programs, that Puerto Rican leadership would tap into these funds to develop housing. Even so, the few projects

developed at the time stand as legacies to the struggle over the control of federal and state monies for “Puerto Rican-controlled housing.”¹⁷ Speaking about one of these projects, Robert Anazagasti, one of the East Harlem political leaders influential at the time, made a point of noting the large backyard for extended families and the stoops, and the *escaleras*, with railings that had been designed in Tres Hermanos (Angel del Toro Housing Development) to evoke the tenements where Puerto Ricans used to hang out prior to the projects. When Anazagasti was interrupted by a call from a potential tenant, I witnessed one of his self-described operations to support Latinos in El Barrio. Because the call was from an undocumented Salvadorian family from Queens, he explained to the family that he was unable to house them in his Section 8 (federally funded) restricted building. But, stating that his primary objective is to keep East Harlem “Latin,” he quickly instructed them to write him a letter stating that they have children and are at risk of homelessness, and promised the family that he would get them housing. As we shall see later, such strategies are now infrequent in a context in which it is not locals but outside agents who control housing development in the area.

But Puerto Ricans' struggles for affordable housing have not been solely waged on the public housing front. For the most part, they countered countless private “slumlords,” whose tactics of abandonment, disinvestment, and retrieval of services had, by the 1970s, turned East Harlem into a prime example of urban blight. This massive abandonment and disinvestment followed a citywide pattern, stemming from a wave of owner abandonment, in the 1960s and 1970s, that hit the city's poorest communities particularly hard (Sierra 1992). At this time, hundreds of buildings became part of the city's centrally managed stock, making the city the “reluctant landlord” to thousands of people living in East Harlem. Another major policy that would influence housing policy in the area was triggered by this development. Specifically, by the 1980s, rapidly declining federal housing funds, plus the city's inability to keep its housing stock, led to the development of what is still the largest municipal housing plan executed under any city administration. The Koch administration's ten-year housing plan was intended to dispose of thousands of abandoned and tax-delinquent buildings that the city had accumulated by handing them out to private and not-for-profit developers and tenants. Similar disposition programs have since been in effect, though renamed by different city administrations (Braconi 1999).

The ten-year housing plan, like other urban renewal programs, has been criticized for displacing the poor and for the unevenness of revitalization. What is certain is that the plan had important consequences for current development in East Harlem. The plan furthered the “neighborhood revitalization hypothesis” (Van Ryzin and Genn 1999), the idea that government housing programs should work in tandem with community-based, not-for-profit and profit-making organizations, which greatly stimulated the public housing sector. Most of the more than thirty social service and housing nonprofits involved in developing housing units in East Harlem were created after the mid-1980s (Manhattan Community District 11, 2000). The plan also intensified current concern among East Harlemites over the development of mixed and middle income housing, to remedy what they perceived to be the misuse of their neighborhood as a dumping ground for special needs and low income populations. Central to the ten-year plan was the development of an economically integrated community, through a combination of mixed income housing and home ownership programs, as a means of creating truly “revitalized” communities.¹⁸ In East Harlem, however, most of the housing developed under the Koch plan was constructed

or rehabilitated under federal programs such as Section 8, Federal senior housing, or special needs housing, mostly under the sponsorship of community-based agencies with different orientations and histories, including religious, social service-based, and tenant groups. Local residents felt those types of housing overburdened their community with social, economic, or needy populations. As explained by one resident: “The problem is that poverty-alleviating programs failed to meet the needs of the middle class. We were raised in the projects, and there is all this housing for the elderly, for battered women, for people with AIDS, but our children are college educated and they have nowhere to live.”

Similar statements were made by district leaders and representatives from entities like the Community Board and the East Harlem Chamber of Commerce, as well as by the upwardly mobile, highly educated, and politically connected Puerto Rican leadership of El Barrio. As a leader of a social service organization stated: “I grew up in the projects, but if you were getting ahead, you could not live here. You had to leave El Barrio. They did not think that we Latinos could make money. So all they built was public or special needs housing. Like myself. I left and bought property in New Jersey.” As many residents were quick to note, there were no middle income or home ownership programs as there were in other parts of the city, including the Bronx. As a result, the promotion of mixed income and middle income housing made sense to residents, who have long felt that El Barrio has been discriminated against as a dumping ground for special needs housing. Fueling these statements was controversy over the 2000 census, in which Puerto Ricans in New York were shown to be declining in numbers while remaining among the poorest of the poor. The lesson many residents took from such news was that upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans had left the City, and that for the community’s survival this exodus had to be stopped.¹⁹

Housing and Urban Flight: On Those Who Stayed and Those Who Left

Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. has been constant and ongoing, as well as circular in nature (Duany 2002; Flores 1993). Since the 1960s, however, many Puerto Ricans have purposely migrated away from New York, in a stream that has been fueled by changes in New York’s economy, including a trend toward service jobs denying opportunities to skilled workers, and by the general association of upward mobility with leaving El Barrio for such places as Puerto Rico, Connecticut, New Jersey, any suburb, or even the Bronx. Many of those who left El Barrio did so with no intention of returning. Consider the comments of Roberto, a labor union leader who was born and raised in El Barrio and who is, now in his mid-50s, a first-time homeowner in Westchester. His comments, in response to questioning whether he would have bought property in El Barrio if given the opportunity, provide additional insights into the ongoing debate about who feels symbolically invested in the area, as well as on what basis a person would be concerned about the area’s gentrification:

Most of us, and with that I mean my friends from El Barrio and I, who got education and jobs, don’t share the sentimentality of El Barrio. It’s only the people that never lived there that do. I saw a lot of brutality. Even if I had a choice to buy property, I would never go back. ‘Cause El Barrio will always be El Barrio, not the Puerto Rican Barrio, but the barrio of other immigrants and the poor. What I miss is the family, cause we all lived close to each other in El Barrio, but I don’t miss the violence, the brutality, the welfare agency, the stigmatism and the poverty.

Roberto’s self-described “lack of sentimentality” about El Barrio is quite revealing. It reminds us that, unlike the views harbored by many Puerto Rican intellectuals, the working poor’s experience is that the area has fewer opportunities to achieve empowerment and upward mobility. It appears that the acquisition of cultural and economic capital can fuel romantic views of El Barrio, just as it can easily distance one from it, if for different reasons.²⁰ In this regard, consider the story of Anna Morales, who was raised in El Barrio and whose family decided to stay. She speaks of the pressure exerted on her family to leave, and the price she paid for staying, as she remembers the many who left to look for what she described as “the American Dream in Puerto Rico”:

I remember people would knock on the door to say Adios [gets tearful]. People who had saved a little money would leave. There [in Puerto Rico] you had the factories and mom could stay home and take care of the children, and houses were very cheap, and you did not have to be afraid of gangs and drugs. Once a child had reached puberty they would pack up and leave. There was no mold there, just chickens and cows, and animals. Some of them have come back to visit, and when I show them the buildings where they used to live, and they don’t believe it. They never thought that this would take on any value. For so many years we were not visited by our own families. We were isolated. They looked down on us. Upward mobility meant going back [to Puerto Rico]. My family implored my mother to take us, her two daughters, away. They would not understand that this was our community.

Seen in this light, the flight of Puerto Ricans from El Barrio was never solely caused by the type of housing available, but also stemmed from a range of factors, foremost among them the real conditions of poverty and the stigma resulting from the association of El Barrio with urban blight. In fact, these associations were in turn strengthened by Puerto Rican nationalist discourse, which saw urban New York life and the Nuyorican—the New York-born/bred Puerto Rican from El Barrio—as evidence of polluted culture, in theory always opposed to the supposedly authentic culture of the island. In other words, El Barrio was a place you had better leave, lest your children became polluted or corrupted.

These views have been documented in recent studies of Puerto Rican immigration. Gina Pérez’s study of out-migration from Chicago to San Sebastian, for instance, shows how migration is constructed as an economic decision, the return (primarily to Puerto Rico) being associated with notions of community, place, home, and nation (Pérez 2000). Consequently, out-migrants have become directly embedded in the same discourses that forever render migrants Other, that is, polluted and suspect, since mobility is always associated with return. But class and cultural capital have always figured in the ways Puerto Ricans experience and interpret El Barrio, and in contrast to poor and working class Puerto Ricans born or raised in El Barrio, Puerto Rican intellectuals moving to New York have long tended to be attracted to the area. They see moving and establishing roots in El Barrio as an assertion of their commitment to the area’s preservation and growth.

This situation directly echoes Monique Taylor’s research on gentrification in Harlem. Middle class and educated blacks played a central role in the gentrification

of the area, though this trend is not seen in these terms, but rather as an act of black assertion and progress. As she notes, moving to Harlem, maintaining a steady job, and becoming involved in neighborhood events and community groups are activities through which new residents positioned themselves as “examples” and champions of the greater goal of making Harlem into a center for black people in the city and beyond (Taylor 1994). A similar stance mediates perceptions of Puerto Rican newcomers to the area, notably those deemed able to contribute political, cultural, or intellectual capital. Local professionals moving to the area, for instance, are often the center of attention, celebrated in the pages of local newspapers and becoming the object of local comment.

Yet it is important to recognize that the departure of the upwardly mobile does not entail their complete divorce from the area, but rather a repositioning of their relationship with it. Felix Leo Campos, a self-described Nuyorican filmmaker who continued to gravitate to East Harlem and to identify himself with the cultural life of El Barrio, even after his family moved to the West Side during his youth, put it this way:

For many, East Harlem was the ghetto and the idea was to leave. But though people moved to the South Bronx and other parts of the city, their cultural life was in El Barrio. They have a Puerto Rican day parade and parties in the Bronx but is never the same as the one in El Barrio, because El Barrio *es la cuna de los puertorriqueños* (the cradle of Puerto Ricans)... and I have lived in Harlem and the Bronx, and I still have never felt as good as I felt in El Barrio.

I heard similar comments from other East Harlemites who had moved, or whose parents had moved, in search of greener pastures, and who now saw El Barrio with nostalgic eyes, maintaining active connections with the community. A good example is the association of old-timer stickball players, who meet annually at a block party on 111th Street. The meeting is now nearing its 30th year of celebration. Its members, most of them born and raised in East Harlem and many of them professionals now living in Puerto Rico, Florida, San Diego, and beyond, return annually to play, meet family, and friends in a ritual celebration of assertion and continuity with El Barrio. Visitors returning to the annual 116th Street Festival on the weekend of the Puerto Rican Day Parade, which brings together thousands of Puerto Ricans from beyond the city, is another good example of public affection for El Barrio. Nevertheless, when prompted, few of those who left the neighborhood for other places affirmed forthrightly that they would trade their Westchester or San Diego homes for a Barrio apartment. Cheaper housing was mentioned as a factor attracting them to the suburbs, but so were better schools, social infrastructure, and services.

It becomes clear, then, from these examples that reducing Puerto Rican flight from East Harlem to an issue of housing alone is largely misguided, as is the promotion of mixed income housing as the primary method ensuring Puerto Ricans’ continued presence in the area. As we have seen, housing, while playing a central role, is nonetheless only one of the many variables influencing Puerto Ricans’ decision to stay, leave, or return to El Barrio. The use of housing as the dominant factor explaining why Puerto Ricans leave the area is thus better seen in relation to the factors furthering privatized development in El Barrio. In fact, the promotion of middle class housing has been accompanied by attacks on public housing, seen by many as a barrier to the permanent settlement of Puerto Ricans in the area. The statement of a social worker and administrator of a work training program, born and raised in the projects and still with family there, is evocative of this position:

Concerns over gentrification are ill founded. The projects will stop whites from moving to El Barrio. Who’s going to want to live next to the projects? The projects kicked our people from El Barrio. I was born and raised in the projects, but the problem is that there is nowhere to go after the projects.

Rolando, an MTA worker, who bought and renovated two buildings in the 1980s when Puerto Ricans were reluctant to buy property, and is now a landlord and a recognized local expert on real estate on the community, was even bolder in his association of public housing with the sad fate of Puerto Ricans in El Barrio: “You won’t believe it, but when I bought property here, my friends thought I was crazy. I see low rents as part of a master plan to keep Latinos from buying property in El Barrio. Puerto Ricans were paying as little as \$75–100 for rent. The current thinking was, Why buy when we live so cheaply?” Rolando is well aware that prices are rising and now sees property sharing, or pooling of resources, as the only recourse for purchasing property in East Harlem. His goal, is *atraer la gente buena*, (who he defined as the “positive assets to the community”), mentioning Latinos who are socially aware and keep rents low for other Latinos, as examples of his vision. The “positive assets” he mentions are connected with buying available properties whenever available; unfortunately, fewer and fewer properties are now available through local hearsay and informal networks.

A quick look at a map of East Harlem confirms that public housing does pose a structural barrier to development. It interrupts cross streets and avenues throughout the entire surface of El Barrio, blocking traffic and forming pockets of low-income housing. Associated as it is with race and marginality, public housing also creates tangible and intangible barriers that insulate and contain the area with respect to its downtown neighbors.²¹ What is less clearly evident, however, is that, under present policy, the future of public housing is in doubt, and instead of barricades, the “projects” could potentially be catalysts to gentrification. Indeed, the 1998 Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHA), the first major federal public housing reform since 1988, is intended to deregulate public housing authorities, granting them greater flexibility and oversight, with the ultimate goal of abolishing public housing.

Additionally, the law repeals federal preferences for the neediest families in favor of higher income ones. While the local effects of this legislation remain to be seen, the law is unequivocal in providing for rent increases, abolishing the construction of new housing units, and promoting new forms of private and public initiatives. The destruction of the Robert Taylor Homes, razed by the Chicago Housing Authority and targeted for mixed and middle income redevelopment, looms as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the high rise public housing projects nationwide (Venkatesh 2002). Also threatening are less blatant measures, such as the recent Supreme Court ruling upholding a federal mandate allowing the eviction of public housing tenants if a family member or guest is arrested on drug charges. The decision is likely to have great impact on neighborhoods such as El Barrio, which is carefully watched by police. As Coco Cabrera, the host of the Spanish language radio station “Latino Mix,” observed when the news was announced: “Are they going to kick all Latinos out of housing?” Contrary to the view of many East Harlemites, the days of public housing as public, and hence as a protective haven against gentrification, may be numbered.

Gentrification and the Planning Process

I started this paper by suggesting that explanations of the relatively pro-development stance of people living in East Harlem can be found in their widespread acceptance of planning favoring privatization, a strategy that closely aligns residents' upwardly mobile dreams with consumer-based developments in the area. It is important to note that this planning strategy is centrally expressed through community involvement and participation and that it also influences other areas of East Harlem's planning process.²² Consider, for instance, East Harlem's *New Directions*, an important document contributing to the circulation and consolidation of these views. The plan, part of the 1989 city charter revisions allowing communities to draft plans detailing their recommendations for future development, was developed by the local Community Board over a period of ten years, in consultation with representatives of local institutions, as well as staff from the New York City Department of City Planning. Though it has yet to be approved by the City's Planning Commission, as required by the 1989 charter, the document stands as a legitimating source for residents' vision of future development; it has been widely circulated in board meetings, and mentioned by development consultants and local leaders, to direct and challenge local development. In fact, as of 2001, East Harlem was one of the few community boards that had conducted this planning process, which in itself indicates community leaders' concerns over development.²³

By allowing communities to recommend a planning vision for their communities, the 197-A document is recognized as a double-edged sword, a tool to assert community views as well as having the consequence of rendering the area more vulnerable to investors.²⁴ After all, the document is not enforceable, nor is it an autonomously local development, but rather it is directed at, and ultimately validated by, the City's Department of City Planning, who sees it as a means of facilitating development by having clear directives and a consensus plan with the appearance of community support. What the process provides, then, is a venue for community involvement and a good entry point into planning favoring the goals of development and privatization. The plan's recommendations for housing, for instance, draws heavily from a study conducted by George Calvert, the former director of Hope, one of the largest non-profit developers in the area. The study, entitled "A Call to Action: Rebuilding Main Street in the Village of East Harlem" (1998),²⁵ is widely quoted in *New Directions*, and in contrast to the dry wording and formulaic format of the document, is explicit in its enthusiasm for private development. It reads: "Businesses are coming in: Pathmark on 125th Street is underway, Home Depot at 118th Street in the East Harlem Plaza site is moving through approvals... workers all over the city are looking for apartments. East Harlem's cultural heritage is drawing national attention... Household income levels are increasing in East Harlem" (1998: 8). Calvert's vision of East Harlem is that of a community quickly coming of age, primarily because of the work of private corporations (the effects of private development, in terms of pollution and quality of life, though highly debated, are never mentioned in the document).

East Harlem is presented as an open community, a home to "workers from all over the city," a vision that prioritizes housing for working people, but not necessarily for locals. A similar outlook is evident in *New Directions*, whose recommendations in terms of housing, urban renewal, and design overwhelmingly favor middle income and mixed income housing and home ownership. Indeed, the plan calls for the renovation of all "occupied and vacant city-owned buildings." In fact, the plan recommends that all city buildings, occupied or vacant, be disposed of.²⁶

It offers few provisions for sustaining, conserving, and rehabilitating the existing public housing stock, except to encourage management alternatives such as privatization. In other words, *New Directions* is a little disguised ode to state-subsidized private development, expressed as "community recommendations."

Yet considering that similar programs have been rejected by many community activists, including some involved in the A-197 planning process in the mid-1980s, their inclusion as "community recommendations" is better seen as a triumph of planning ideologies favoring privatization than as community consensus. Indeed, when the New York Housing Partnership first sought to build small homes for private ownership in the area, on land that had previously been cleared for urban renewal, community activists stopped the initiative through a lawsuit by the local Legal Aid and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDF). Residents had also protested proposals to develop a television studio on the same East River site coveted by Home Depot. Francisco Diaz, a private development enthusiast and corporate consultant, who was then one of the activists, recalls: "I remember that this was the first time that I heard the word gentrification. Prices were skyrocketing, and everybody wanted a piece of East Harlem, all based on rumors of Procter and Gamble and a TV studio coming to the area."

The studio plan never materialized, but residents had been warned. Gloria Quiñonez, a retired lawyer and resident, who was at the forefront of the lawsuit to stop the New York Housing Partnership's homebuilding plan, explained:

It was our position that this land had been cleared of low income people with the promise that they would be able to return to new affordable housing. The city hoped that the people had lost the collective memory with respect to that land clearing through urban renewal. Our argument was very simple. We were talking of city owned lands that belonged to everyone in the community, that were of the people, and that by definition could not be sold to the highest bidder. We felt strongly that the only appropriate development in those lands is affordable housing geared to the people of this community, who are low income.

Gloria's comments speak to the diversity of factions in the Puerto Rican middle class, and the fact that not all of them embraced private-driven developments so wholeheartedly. The lack of development choices, however, presented little room for dissent. Indeed, the project was halted, but not for long.²⁷ As Quiñonez notes, the plan may even have backfired: "We stopped the development, but then there was no development, no housing for anyone, and now people are clamoring [for] development."

It is in this context that the *Cacique* and the *Nueva Esperanza* houses, the first private homes constructed on public lands, were built in the late 1990s, with little criticism and much fanfare. Both were sponsored by Operation Fightback, a housing nonprofit led by a Puerto Rican housing advocate. This move eased the transition by investing the houses with an "indigenous" feel, that is, as a development for and by Puerto Ricans in the area. With evocative names such as *Cacique*, a Puerto Rican indigenous Taíno name for a leader, and *Nueva Esperanza*, which means "New Hope" in Spanish, these homes were presented by their sponsors as developments consolidating the community and protecting it from gentrification. There was considerable comment about the possibility of home ownership for upwardly mobile families

in East Harlem. The success of these homes led quickly to more programs. East Harlem is now the site of six new developments under The City's Housing Preservation and Development's (HPD) Cornerstone Program, under which 2,300 new middle income and market rate housing units will be created in Upper Manhattan. The project is financed primarily by private sources.

Obviously, homeownership, long an important goal of grassroots housing movements, is not the problem. Rather the issue is how the hype over middle income housing opportunities veils the growing inaccessibility of most of these projects, coopting in the process the dreams for place many residents of East Harlem have. Sponsored by federal/state monies, the construction of the projects falls under government regulations requiring specific income guidelines and tenant eligibility requirements. They are entirely out of the reach of the poor and those who most need housing. For instance, 2001 income requirements for renting low-income housing for a three-person family are \$26,600 for very low income housing and \$42,550 for low income housing. They are not affordable to many residents of East Harlem, whose 2001 median household income is \$14,882. But this situation has not gone unchallenged by local residents. As one stated: "These developments are supposed to be for affordable housing, but they want incomes of \$20,000–25,000 for a studio and for 2 adults, \$28–35,000. Who are they talking about, from which community?"

Moreover, most new state-subsidized construction is for middle class and home ownership programs, which are also out of the reach of most local residents. A good example of such programs is the lot between 119th and 120th Streets and Madison Avenue, sold by the City for \$15 and due to be privately developed into a "standard old fashioned co-op," one that will admit buyers earning up to 250 percent of the \$59,100 median income for a family of four, or \$147,750 (*New York Times* 7/8/01). These home ownership programs are open to anyone who meets eligibility requirements, applies by the deadline, and is selected by a lottery. A two-income working family applying for a one-bedroom apartment has as much chance to be selected as a single professional applicant applying for a three-bedroom apartment: both are equally eligible so long as they meet income eligibility requirements that can be as high as 250 percent of the maximum median income. These constructions are no longer "Gilded Age private philanthropy for the deserving poor" (Plunz 1990), as they were initially regarded, but rather are seen as subsidies for young professionals.

All the while, property prices are rising rapidly,²⁸ and city-owned properties are disappearing quickly. During an action that gave rise to much talk by residents throughout the summer of 2001, five city properties were sold for record prices, including one for \$1,250,000. Among the sites was a lot on 111th Street and Third Avenue, which some residents had hoped would be given to the International Salsa Museum. Such news confirms that outside developers had already heard the call for development, quickly reducing the chances for local control. East Harlem was no longer a vacant neighborhood, full of government buildings up for the taking, as described in *New Directions*. At issue was the involvement of Puerto Ricans in the new development initiatives, as well as the old debate whether "our community" was being housed in the new structures.

The Who Behind "Our People"

Government-subsidized projects always function under income guidelines and tenant eligibility requirements. But within these guidelines, the struggle over turf is ongoing. As a local resident noted, "If we can't stop speculators from coming in, we can at least make sure Puerto Ricans buy and relocate in the area." The problem,

however, is that while Puerto Rican nonprofits and developers have been partly involved in some of the early home ownership projects, such as *Cacique*, most housing development has been spurred by larger not-for-profit housing organizations such as Hope. In fact, most of the current development is dominated by private developers who have been designated by the City's Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) Office.²⁹ Only the marketing of different projects, and the stipulation that the community be represented to some degree by tenants, have given local people a last chance to assert local control. This was the case with the *Nueva Esperanza* project, where aggressive marketing by a Puerto Rican developer resulted in a mostly Puerto Rican and Latino tenancy, and a majority of local East Harlem tenants. The developer estimated that 90 percent of the applications had come from East Harlem and that 65 percent of the homeowners were Latinos. As he said: "We are required to do a seminar, to print newspapers ads and to look for people who are qualified, but we did far more than that. We did a lot of hand-holding to make sure that *our* people would qualify [my emphasis]. 'Cause there are qualified, qualifiable, and not qualified people. People just look at the qualified. Why waste their time? Someone who is not from this community will not take the time."

These strategies, however, did little to subdue contentions about the people who make up "our people."³⁰ The clannish times of the past surfaced quickly in the response of people in El Barrio, many of whom felt slighted by the new constructions. The comments of a black Puerto Rican woman, who was unaware that there was an open application process for the new houses on 109th Street, or that it was a city-subsidized project, is representative of the feelings of many who felt left out: "What you see is the Calderons and the Allendes living in these houses, but who's ever heard of an everyday Maria Rodriguez getting a home?" The informant is referring to some of the politically important families in the area; I was unable to confirm whether they had indeed bought a house or were renting from the development. The point the informant makes, however, reflects a common perception in this community: that clannishness and political patronage are still active, excluding many Puerto Ricans who are neither able nor allowed to realize the ethnic/class aspirations of those who have wrested political or economic power.

Ironically, perceptions of clannishness are fostered by the fact that the only tool left to combat what an activist called the "the cultural gentrification of the area" may be the futile attempt to circumvent rules that are ultimately unbeatable. Indeed, even development enthusiasts complained of receiving inadequate notice of housing developments' arrival in the area, as well as poor notice of deadlines for the application process, and eligibility requirements. Anxiety over the new construction was amply visible during Community Board meetings, when marketing agents for different projects announced seminars and housing workshops to an apparently confused audience. Further adding to the sense of exclusion was that in their promotion of home ownership as a means to strengthening the Puerto Rican presence in the area, Puerto Rican leaders had to rely on or else slog through financial requirements based on a very narrow conception of Puerto Rican identity. They were forced to emphasize the housing needs of the "right people"—people who, like them, had the cultural, class, and economic capital to meet guidelines which were aimed at attracting the "deserving" Puerto Ricans, but which at the same time veiled the exclusion of the housing-needy.

As a result, critics saw home ownership programs as part of a master plan to further divide the community, and ultimately turn it again into a ghetto. As one stated

“We forget that all the hoopla is really about low quality housing with low floor ceilings and brick facing questions. They are badly planned, with cheap prefabricated materials. Where are the theaters, the entertainment, the offices, mom and shop stores, the services, that bring community development, if East Harlem becomes a ‘bedroom’ to the city?” Rumors also circulated that “the stakeholders” of El Barrio (that is, people with political contacts) were buying up the few brownstones and more valuable properties, leaving only prefabricated homes to be acquired through the market. These rumors notwithstanding, the struggle to increase the presence of locals in these programs was ongoing, even though most developers did not play by the “right rules.”³¹ The most qualified, not qualifiable, tenants are what developers are after, and there is little to be done about it. The Puerto Rican leadership’s dream of turf control is not shared by institutions and developers, for whom the area is coming of age as a sanitized community, perhaps “multicultural,” but never solely “Puerto Rican.”

Perhaps the best example of this trend is provided by Hope, the oldest, most visible and influential not-for-profit developer in East Harlem. Hope was established in the late 1960s by a group of merchants, community activists, and George Calvert, the minister affiliated with the Church of Living Hope. Initially a small operation that acquired and rehabilitated buildings, Hope grew rapidly in the 1980s, taking advantage of government disposition programs for neighborhood renewal to become one of the city’s most influential and politically connected neighborhood organizations. Today, signs of Hope are visible everywhere: plaques announcing Hope’s sponsorship of murals, as well as nearly 1500 units of housing that have been renovated by the group, which have spawned growing rumors about its effects on the community. El Barrio residents have begun asking whether Hope and, by extension, newer housing development groups building “affordable housing” are helping or gentrifying the community.

Hope touts that it has been central in making East Harlem an “economically, ethnically and culturally diverse neighborhood.” To stress this point, their 30th anniversary journal “East Harlem on my Mind” depicts children of color engaged in some of the cultural and social activities sponsored by Hope—including some, such as *poetas con café*, who evoke Puerto Rican culture and heritage—against a background of renovated buildings. It is through this and other inclusive strategies, such as the inclusion of Blacks and Puerto Ricans on its staff and board, that Hope has projected itself as a culturally and community-concerned organization. Piggybacking on its community reputation in the area, Hope has received much support from local politicians, who either acted surprised or else outrightly defended the organization in local forums when residents inquired about the high cost of Hope’s apartments.³² The rising rents, the eviction of many low income tenants, many of them undocumented immigrants, and the fact that as a result of Hope’s move toward privatized home ownership and middle income housing, fewer people from El Barrio will be housed in these units, were too conspicuously evident.³³

Feeding this trend are growing construction costs, along with increasing competition over a diminishing source of city real estate. This has forced not-for-profit developers throughout the city to privatize their operations in order to compete for a diminishing housing stock (Oser 2001). In fact, through a joint venture partnership with the Briarwood Organization, a private developer, Hope plans to develop more market-rate apartments to increase its rent rolls with no income caps. This is a kind of development that is unprecedented among not-for-profit housing developers, and will undoubtedly result in unaffordable housing for the families of the black and Latino kids featured so prominently in its anniversary journal.

Hope’s executive director, Mark Alexander, who is white but was raised in El Barrio among Puerto Ricans and African Americans—a factor that has helped him make inroads into the leadership of both communities—is keenly aware that his institution is geared toward the production of market-rate housing that may be out of the reach of locals. But he sees few problems with this trend. Embracing the business mantra with which people deflect criticisms of privatization, he maintains that Hope is not a social service but rather a real estate business. The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) does not require housing nonprofits to maintain information about the ethnicity and race of their tenants; moreover, its practices contrast with those of the Puerto Rican developer of *Cacique* Houses, who proudly describe most tenants as being Latino or from East Harlem.

Alexander was not initially forthcoming about the makeup of its clients. While upholding his commitment to a traditional constituency of Black and Latino residents, he admitted that home ownership programs and a less regulated market would result in more “Caucasians” moving to East Harlem. But he asserted that this trend was justified by East Harlem’s ethnic immigrant history, making it a “transitional” or gateway community, used by the Irish, Italians, and Puerto Ricans, and that in the future the neighborhood would be up for the taking. As he commented:

I recognize El Barrio’s importance for Puerto Ricans, but I don’t recognize it as the rightful home of only Puerto Ricans. Middle class Puerto Ricans themselves have chosen to vote with their feet, they’ve become upwardly mobile and are gone. That shapes my view of what we should do in our community. The intelligentsia has for long focused on the lower class and they’re not focused on the middle class and those who went up the ladder because they’ve nowhere to go.

Yet as aligned as Alexander’s statements may be with the concerns and statements of the Puerto Rican development enthusiasts discussed earlier, it is obvious that his vision of East Harlem responds to a very different logic. He, like the Puerto Rican leadership and other nonprofit and government representatives, stressed the need for middle class and home ownership programs that would encourage people to be upwardly mobile, that is, “to pursue the American dream.” But unlike the Puerto Rican leadership, when Alexander referred to “people,” he did not mean Puerto Ricans, but rather the most qualified—and not the *qualifiable*—tenants. In fact, his goal of achieving a “dynamic” balanced multicultural community, counters the dreams of many Puerto Ricans for El Barrio as a mostly Latino/a community, for it requires attracting working and middle class whites, those groups of New Yorkers who have historically most shunned El Barrio as a home. Ironically, this strategy echoes compensatory tactics originally devised to reverse the discrimination of minorities in housing. However, this thinking has now been turned against Puerto Ricans and used to justify limiting their entrance to housing in El Barrio, since it would obviously hinder the making of a “balanced” multicultural community.

The Market

I wanted to be around Puerto Rican culture because of the kind memories of my parents. When I moved here the smell of beans

or steak and onions or plantains made me smile; the sounds of songs, I liked, was *conmovedor*; the inclusiveness of Puerto Rican females was familiar; the respectfulness of Puerto Rican men was memorable, as were people walking by churches and making the sign of the cross. (Gladys Rodriguez, East Harlem Online on “Choosing Where to Live.”)

They don't tell you they want white kids over Mexicans.
They [building owners] say the rents are going up.
(Licensed Real Estate Broker operating in East Harlem.)

The fact is that the Puerto Rican dream of purchasing (or more likely, renting) space in El Barrio will probably be relegated to the open market. The many educated Puerto Ricans, artists, and young entrepreneurs for whom the area has symbolic meaning are starkly aware of the area's increasingly limited housing environment. Professional Latinos seeking property (primarily rentals) in East Harlem I spoke with were particularly concerned that many properties were not being circulated in forums where they would likely see them. One complained about the lack of services and amenities in the neighborhood. As she stated: “The prices are going up, but the services are not there. There are no schools, crack dealers are still around the corner. You can't even find a taxi to pick you up and drop you there. The reality does not meet the prices.”

In fact, real estate possibilities in East Harlem are not always circulated in areas where Latinos would see it. They are not advertised in *El Diario*, or Latino or local newspapers, and rumors abound that the best properties have been given to downtown realtors in order to keep Latinos out of the area. Students from New York University, where I teach, were finding vacancies in the school's housing office put there by landlords seeking “worthy” tenants. And as the real estate listings show, East Harlem holdings are more often listed under Harlem, or Upper Carnegie Hill, names that disassociate the area from its Latin roots. Other landlords were using the Internet, which enabled an informant's friend from Paris to find a fully renovated apartment for \$1,800, a considerably high price for a one-bedroom apartment, but not when comparing it with the \$2,600 she would pay for an apartment below 96th Street. Another landlord, who had been renting renovated one-bedroom apartments for \$600 in 1998, increased the rent to \$800 to \$1,200 for a similar space by 2001. Though still inexpensive by Manhattan standards, this represents an almost twofold increase in three years. This is the kind of rent that has long attracted students, artists, and other young urbanites to ethnic neighborhoods, displacing locals.

In response to East Harlem's furtive rental market, my respondents spoke of strategies to maintain informal rental networks to ensure Puerto Ricans are not affected by these trends. Erica Gonzalez, a member of the community board and of other local groups, explained:

I found my apartment through friends who were leaving for the island. They told me about their apartment. They were looking for someone who was progressive. They saved it for me, and I have done the same for others.... We once went building by building making an inventory of all buildings that had a “for Rent” or “for sale” sign, to circulate among young professional Puerto Ricans, all part of a strategic trend so that those who have money can buy or at least make sure that we rent to our own.

Contributing to this paucity of rentals are the profits that East Harlem landlords have historically wrested from immigrant tenants. East Harlem is heavily dominated by a few landlords who have owned property for over thirty years and who, having profited from one working group and immigrant population after another, see little incentive to change since they already have a dependable base of vulnerable and “industrious” tenants. One of these private landlords, who is reputed to own one-third of East Harlem, is a good example. For him, “gentrification” was a threat to his business since higher rents are predicated on rehabilitation and repairs and investments, which he has little incentive to make.

This landlord's East Harlem office does not even advertise in the real estate pages, but relies largely on word of mouth, which works fine since there is little turnover. His tenants, who he describes as being primarily Korean, Chinese, and Mexican, stay put, sharing their space with friends and family or acquaintances, taking additional roommates as needed. He also occasionally houses students, who are referred primarily through nearby Mt. Sinai Hospital. He offers this population the better apartments to assure that “they are safe.” For him, the system works fine; his buildings do not have to comply with any standards, and his “desirable” tenants, as he called them, are not about to complain to housing authorities about the conditions of their buildings. Besides, he sees himself as providing a safety net for a population that needs a place to sleep. Recalling his own immigrant family, he made a point of noting that he had housed the first Puerto Rican immigrants, and is now doing the same for the Mexican, Chinese, and Korean newcomers, people who work hard and make very “desirable” tenants. Despite his good intentions, however, tales of exploited tenants were easily forthcoming from my Mexican informants, who offered stories about tenants whose rent was raised each month, who were requested a keepers' fee in addition to the rent, and who were threatened with eviction if they complained of typically bad housing conditions, from mold in the walls to heating problems.

What this landlord did not like was welfare recipients. He associated them with Puerto Rican people who never pay their bills, take drugs, and are impossible to evict. Even in this degraded sector of the market, Puerto Ricans find themselves displaced. The in-flight of upscale whites at the top end, and of immigrants at the bottom, is deeply affecting the welfare-dependent housing needy, many of whom are Puerto Rican. They are rejected by landlords who can pick and choose their tenants. As a housing activist lamented, referring to the downgrading of Section 8 vouchers among landlords: “Why should landlords take the vouchers and deal with government bureaucracy if they can have cash, there and ready?” Besides, in order to take people through Section 8, buildings have to comply with certain standards which, given the growing housing demand by Mexicans and other immigrants, El Barrio slumlords have little incentive to meet. Here then we have another process exacerbated by gentrification, involving not only one class displacing another, but also one group of the ethnic poor being pitted against another.

Bodega Dreams or Nightmares?

Myriad obstacles challenge Puerto Ricans' longing for a permanent place in El Barrio: from the lack of a dominant planning ideology, to housing policies that foster privatization, to marketing the area to the highest bidder. Other hindrances include the creation of development subsidies that target the upwardly mobile and “deserving middle classes” throughout the city, as well as landlords who do not even advertise their rentals among the local population, preferring young professionals

or else pre-selected and more vulnerable immigrants. For these varied interests, El Barrio is East Harlem, Upper Yorkville, or Spaha, or Spanish Harlem, (the name echoes the trendy abbreviated names for neighborhoods such as Soho). It is a very different community from that suggested by the Puerto Rican leadership I talked with. East Harlem is envisioned by non-Latino interests as a multicultural community, in which Puerto Ricans are a passing group, and the growing Mexican and Latino population just a backdrop to current development rather than a possible target for affordable housing. In all my conversations with people from the Department of Housing and Preservation Development, the community board, and nonprofit developers, I heard no one mention housing for immigrants or the working poor. What most of these interests do share with the Puerto Rican leadership is a class-based vision of neighborhood empowerment, equating private ownership and consumption-based housing with mobility. As we have seen, this dominant premise of development is one that directly touches their dreams and aspirations, but not without entangling them in their own continued dislocation or in the breakdown of their dreams of empowerment. This is one of the many contradictions of policies emphasizing privatization in the neoliberal city as they play out in the contested intersection of class, culture, and the marketing of place. Visions of community are plentiful; scant are the alternatives for equitable development, and the opportunities to bring life to these visions.



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NOTES

- ¹ See Community Service Society of New York (1998).
- ² This involves 40 percent of public housing stock and 22 percent of other publicly funded housing. *New Directions: East Harlem, El Barrio, Randall's and Ward's Islands. A 197-A Plan for Manhattan Community District 11*. Third Edition.
- ³ Though tenants can also obtain some of these properties, they have not benefited from these disposition programs to the extent that have nonprofit and private developers. Because the transfer process is done between individual entities and parties, rather than with multiple tenants, the transfer of properties runs smoother and faster when tenants are not involved. As a result, the biggest beneficiaries of these programs have been nonprofits and private developers.
- ⁴ Here Lefebvre's (1995) conceptualization of planning as ideology is relevant for reminding us that all "policies have their system of signification," that is, they have particular ideologies that help formulate all that is problematic in society in terms of space and its management, and in so doing, reduce the social and historical to a particular spatial logic. As we shall see, these dynamics operate in El Barrio, where the area's

marginality, the flight of the Puerto Rican upwardly mobile, and their lack of power, among other issues, have been associated with the lack of ownership.

⁵ Indeed, gentrification is most generally known as a market-driven development, but research has also shown that city policy and fiscal and development strategies are directly involved in directing capital investments and gentrification. See Sites (1994) for how these processes played out in the Lower East Side.

⁶ She also notes that as early as the mid-1920s, sixty percent of the Puerto Rican migrant population lived in two areas of Manhattan: spanning 90th Street to 116th between First and Fifth Avenues and between 110th Street to 125th Street between Fifth and Manhattan Avenues, communities known as El Barrio or La Colonia Hispana (1983:58).

⁷ See Cayo Sexton (1965) for a more detailed discussion of the distribution of space around ethnicity between African Americans and Italians. Writing in the 1960s, she notes in particular the role of the commuter's railroad track on Park Avenue on 102nd Street as a boundary isolating groups from each other, and she also describes how public housing itself served to further segregate East Harlem around race and ethnicity. Alongside these divisions, Cayo Sexton remarks how tenement buildings and even entire blocks were divided between these groups. In other words, she describes a world of neighbors who lived their lives both together and separately.

⁸ I am obliged to Gabriel Haslip Viera for clarifying this point, confirmed by other informants. Indeed, urban renewal affected all groups in East Harlem: the area lost 17 percent of its population in the 1960s (Cayo Sexton 1965). There is a lack of research on how housing policies affected Puerto Rican settlements and on how the history of Puerto Ricans in New York hinders a more accurate assessment of these trends.

⁹ Sánchez 1990: 436, quoting Anderson 1964.

¹⁰ As Sánchez notes, from 1950 to 1980, Puerto Ricans had similar rates to Blacks as recipients of public welfare, but were largely behind Blacks as recipients of public housing. Sánchez argues that this shows that Puerto Ricans were just as needy as Blacks were, but that they lacked political power. This further shows, he argues, that Puerto Ricans were seen as a peripheral labor force, hence their being relegated to receiving the more vulnerable and less permanent aid of welfare rather than housing (Sánchez 1990).

¹¹ Such is the case of Taft and Johnson's Houses, where Blacks comprised 59 and 58 percent of initial occupants versus 35.8 and 25.4 percent for Puerto Ricans (Sánchez 1990: 563).

¹² Similar associations were drawn in relation to class with some housing projects, identified as more or less middle class or working class than others. These distinctions were based on the kinds of subsidies available to tenants, and whether some were coops or rentals, or were supposedly bigger or nicer than others. Interestingly, within these hierarchies, tenements, which are now generally prized as real estate property because of their history and insertion in the market, were initially placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. More research is needed to understand how these hierarchies were drawn up, and how they play out today.

¹³ Cultural pluralism dominant in the 1960s saw ethnicity as an integrative device, as a depoliticized tool for the integration of distinct groups, each with its culture, into a harmonious whole. The terms are similar to the policies and discourses of multiculturalism two decades later.

¹⁴ Writing in the mid-1960s, Cayo Sexton (1965) describes the overwhelming power of social workers and clergy over East Harlem. Their power, she notes, stemmed from a variety of sources, such as from white Protestant privilege, as well as from their identification with the Democratic Party, which represented a challenge to the then powerful Italian and, to a lesser extent, Irish political machine. Her description attests to the conflicts caused by an emerging leadership who felt controlled, abused, and undermined by social workers. The social workers' alliances with middle classes and their conciliatory stance toward change was a particular cause of conflict.

¹⁵ I do not mean to suggest that these Puerto Rican leaders and politicians shared a common politics at this time. They were in fact known to feud and disagreed with one

another during their tenure and collided over different programs and initiatives. By listing them as important political anchors in East Harlem, I seek rather to highlight the confluence of power they brought to East Harlem during the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁶ See the “Barons of El Barrio,” a *Village Voice* exposé of their “kingdom” (Barrett 1985). More recent debates over del Toro occurred shortly after Angelo del Toro’s death when a priest-led organization, the East Harlem Partnership for Change, requested, unsuccessfully, a public audit of all public program funds managed in East Harlem by the Del Toros (Vega 1995).

¹⁷ These include Los Tres Unidos, later renamed for Angel del Toro, and the Taíno Towers, conceived and spearheaded by an East Harlem Tenants Council struggle in 1965. Both were built in the late 1970s and early 1980s, yet the sites where they stand and the struggles over the monies with which they were developed long preceded their construction. The projects were greatly aided by the political power amassed by Puerto Rican politicians in East Harlem.

¹⁸ See Van Ryzin and Andrew Genn (1999) for a good overview of the effects of the Ten Year Plan in New York City. Obviously, there are progressive reasons why mixed-income housing should be promoted, provided displacement does not occur. For one, it provides a higher tax base to support public education. Often, however, the promotion of mixed-income housing, as well as of programs for residents that “create community,” are also directly informed by Wilson’s conceptualization of the underclass as isolated. Healthy neighborhoods involve the promotion of class—and ethnically diversified communities to counter the “ills” and “pathologies” of the lower classes. In other words, the plan’s premises are based on middle class “uplift ideology,” which associates positive role models exclusively to middle classes while pathologizing the poor and viewing them as always in need of social and cultural support. As shown by Sabiyha Prince’s 2002 research with black professional managerial workers in Harlem, there is ample acceptance of this middle class uplift ideology among all class fractions; however, differences in how black professionals interact with the broader community contradict the facile view that the involvement of middle classes in low income communities always leads to improvements in the quality of life of low income community members. On this point, see also Lawson Clark (2002).

¹⁹ Particularly upsetting was Mireya Navarro’s (2000) front-page article, whose headline “Puerto Rican Presence Wanes in New York” was seen by many as a concerted effort to erase Puerto Ricans and their presence from the city. Similar reports on the census results in other newspapers practically erased Puerto Ricans by highlighting their “dwindling” numbers. As Angelo Falcón (2001) states, Puerto Ricans are still the largest Latino ethnic group in the city. A decrease in their number and the dramatic growth and diversification of the Latino population does not warrant their erasure as a political force in the city.

²⁰ Michelle Boyd’s (2000) description of what she regards as “racial nostalgia” in the redevelopment of Bronzeville, an African American neighborhood in Chicago’s South Side, is relevant here. She speaks of how a marginalized past can be remembered differently in the process of inhabitants’ assertion of claims to neighborhoods and their development. The result is the favoring of middle classes, in this case, the black middle classes, and values congruent with development advocates, while the memories and needs of the poor are erased. Again, class matters and always in multiple and contradictory ways.

²¹ Walls don’t have to be physical or tangible, though projects constitute both. See Marcuse’s (1995) discussion of walls as metaphor and expression of social divisions that simultaneously reflect and reinforce such divisions. Their ambiguous nature is evident here, where they serve multiple purposes and effects. Intended to contain the poor and consolidate the power of the powerful, walls obviously insulate Latinos from prospective gentrifiers and the area from development.

²² See Makosky (2001) for a discussion of how community participatory models can serve as mediums of regulation and government.

²³ According to a coordinator in the City’s Planning Office, as of Fall 2001, less than 10 out of the 59 existing community boards in the city had filed these plans, and only a few

of the plans had been approved. Interestingly, Communities Boards 9, 10, and 11, all three representing Upper Manhattan, had filed plans.

²⁴ A critical overview of the 197-A planning process and their political efficacy is provided by Bressi (2000). This study notes that the drafting of these plans is an extremely slow and time-consuming process, which is yet not enforceable by law, as well as being dependent on approval by New York City’s Planning Commission. The plans are considered a palliative in the development process.

²⁵ This report was drafted by Calvert under commission from CIVITAS Inc., an Upper Manhattan community organization involved in quality-of-life issues on the Upper East Side and East Harlem. While writing the report, Calvert was also head of Calvert Associates, a real estate consulting company.

²⁶ It calls in particular for these buildings to be disposed through the City’s Housing Preservation and Development Office and its Neighborhood Entrepreneur Program, the Neighborhood Revitalization Program and the Tenant Interim Lease Program.

²⁷ Although community protests are made responsible for the halt of the project, actually a dispute and counterlawsuits between Procter & Gamble and the developer were responsible for its failure. In particular, accusations of fraud, breach of contract, and racketeering stalled the project indefinitely, halting speculation in East Harlem’s real state, triggered by the potential advent of a soap opera studio (De Palma 1986).

²⁸ The rise in property prices is also directly spurred by city ownership programs. This is another negative outcome of these programs, which may cause the displacement of locals who are pushed out by rising property and rental prices in the “revitalized” areas (Hevesi 2001).

²⁹ Operation Fightback, the sponsor, is a Puerto Rican-led and -identified organization. The developer of *Cacique* was an outside developer, chosen by New York City’s Office for Housing Preservation and Development. The *Nueva Esperanza* homes, however, were sponsored by Fightback and developed by a local Puerto Rican developer.

³⁰ Indeed, it is not surprising that those most enthused about home ownership and local entrepreneurship are those who have political contacts, or are members of the Community Board and hence bound to hear of coming developments and the application process, or people who are directly tied to their development, and are hence most able to tap into these very scarce opportunities for home ownership. Among the people involved in their constructions or residing in the *Cacique* and *Nueva Esperanza* Homes are former Chairmen of the Board Harry Rodriguez and Eddie Baca. Meanwhile, among the few Latinos obtaining city properties for development is state senator Olga Méndez’s brother, recognized by all to have been assisted by his sister’s connections. Bill Guerrero, selected as a Neighborhood Entrepreneur by one of the government disposition programs for rehabilitating housing units under the Giuliani administration, was a Republican inevitably favored by that administration.

³¹ Complaints about the marketing of home ownership programs were common, particularly because many home ownership programs within CB #11 bounds were known to be marketed outside of the community. Moreover, many developers counted residents of Community Board 10 (in West Harlem), as “community” when they counted the number of residents that bought projects in East Harlem. (City Properties Committee Meetings, Monday, June 10, 2002).

³² This includes meetings such as those held in Phil Reads’ office, over the marked problem of high incidence of asthma among East Harlem residents, and the lack of affordable housing. There was another meeting, of elected officials, including Phil Read, Charles Rangel, and others and invited community leaders, held at Taíno Towers on Monday 25, 2001, that addressed these issues.

³³ A good expose of the eviction of immigrants by Hope, which also addresses the difficulty immigrants face in housing court, is provided by Pacenza (2002).

³⁴ Rates for apartments by Steve Kessner in 1998, quoted in Calvet 1998. Rates for 2001 were obtained over the phone in July 2001.

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