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Resurrecting Brownsville

In a neighborhood immune to gentrification, a different model of revitalization is required.

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Pitkin Avenue is a three-mile stretch of central Brooklyn beginning just past the eastern boundary of Crown Heights, extending into East New York, and leaving its greatest claim to distinction in Brownsville. From the 1910s through the '40s, when Brownsville's population was composed largely of Jewish immigrants, Pitkin Avenue and the various side streets emerged as Brooklyn's most significant retail thoroughfare, supplying poor and working-class residents with what they needed—vegetables, shoes, chickens—and outsiders with what they desired: refrigerators, sofas, jewelry. The prosperous Jews of Eastern Parkway—the “alrightniks,” as Alfred Kazin, who grew up in Brownsville, described them—typically owned the businesses and supplied the consumer base. In his 2002 book *Brownsville Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto*, Wendell Pritchett, formerly a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that in 1942, 372 stores on Pitkin Avenue—among them eight banks and forty-three men's clothing shops—employed 1,000 people and generated \$90 million in annual business, which would translate to more than \$1.2 billion today, or roughly the yearly revenue of Zappos.

About the Author

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By the early 1930s, few of Brownsville's families had managed to join the middle class, but the median income of a family there was still nearly twice that of a household on the Lower East Side. Today, the median household income in Brownsville is nearly a quarter lower than it is on the Lower East Side, a quadrant of the city where in 2013 it is possible to spend \$665 on men's shell cordovan wingtips, and just as much for a room in a hotel whose promotional material describes the surrounding area as Manhattan's

most “authentic” neighborhood. Although the percentage of Brownsville residents living below the federal poverty line has decreased since the beginning of the millennium, from 43 percent to 39 percent, the figure remains remarkable—nearly twice the rate of the city's as a whole, and thirteen points higher than Newark's. Brownsville possesses an authenticity for which there is no external market.

One of the most dangerous places in the city, Brownsville remains a nexus of gun violence and all of the anxiety that attends it, with crossfire a persistent worry. In October 2011, a young mother was shot to death picking up her child from school as gang members exchanged gunfire, with one shooter taking aim from a rooftop. Parents are afraid to send children to and from school on their own. Barring absolute necessity, going out at night is something to be avoided. One winter evening, I visited a community center in the Van Dyke Houses on Blake Avenue and met Orlando Santos Jr., the director of a successful after-school program run by Good Shepherd Services. He hadn't worked in Brownsville very long, and when I asked him how he found the neighborhood, he gestured that it wasn't as menacing as its reputation suggested. He had witnessed only a single shooting, he told me—just outside Van Dyke—and that was six months ago.

By the late '60s, deterioration and misery had become the way of things, with Brownsville bearing the marks of civic abandonment that so many poor urban neighborhoods bore. In the wake of a particularly brutal few days in the spring of 1971—after demonstrations, looting and arson had erupted over cuts that proposed to curtail Medicaid, public assistance and anti-drug programs; after the Fire Department had reported fighting more than 100 structural fires in the neighborhood on a single evening and clashes with police raged along Pitkin Avenue, including windows being smashed—a headline in *The New York Times* read: Brownsville Back to Normal Despair. By that point, the South Bronx and Brownsville had become the two poorest neighborhoods in the city. Four decades later, that reality remains unchanged.

The Bloomberg era has produced an enormous amount of physical and psychological reorientation in New York—evident in large part in the emergence of Brooklyn, or a psychographic element of it, as a new center of gravity and an internationally recognized way of life—but it has not produced, nor have many other American cities created, a model for dramatically transforming struggling neighborhoods absent the mechanisms of gentrification. There is no formula for renewal outside the visual, stylistic and cultural clichés of renewal. The reimagined neighborhood is always essentially reimagined the same way.

* * *

A Sense of Enclosure

According to 2000 Census figures, Pico Union—a crime-ridden neighborhood adjacent to downtown Los Angeles that similarly had a large white and Jewish population until the mid-twentieth century—had a poverty rate virtually equal to Brownsville's. In 2007, Pico Union was selected by *Businessweek* as one of the country's "next hot neighborhoods," a judgment rendered by virtue of soaring housing prices that still remained within reach of the young professional class. Pico Union had a number of things to recommend it: proximity to other neighborhoods that had become increasingly fashionable (thus providing the spillover that it could absorb), desirable housing stock (Victorian bungalows), and its designation as a historic district.

Brownsville, by contrast, has none of those things. Nor does it have coastline, which in the South Bronx has resulted in palliatives like the modernist floating pool in the East River at Barretto Point Park. Bedford-Stuyvesant began to recast itself when its brownstones became marketable to those for whom Park Slope, Fort Greene and Prospect Heights had become too expensive. Bushwick and Greenpoint began to draw young liberal-arts graduates and papermaking visionaries and tapas once adjacent Williamsburg—and all the waterfront development that has gone into it—began to seem like a place for finance hacks with creative pretensions. Brownsville, which encompasses two square miles, is a troubled place surrounded, essentially, by other troubled places: East New York on one side, Ocean Hill on another, East Flatbush on yet another.

The neighborhood is distinguished perhaps above all else by its high concentration of public housing—the highest anywhere in the country. There are many spots where you can stand and see nothing but the high-rise towers of the New York City Housing Authority in every direction, which perhaps more than anything else adds to the area's sense of enclosure. Brownsville is a maze of NYCHA buildings, with approximately 21,000 people living in them—a number greater than the population of TriBeCa.

The preponderance of public housing in Brownsville leaves it with an unusual kind of promise: it is a place so immune to gentrification that it is also immune to the negative fallout from gentrification, which means it has the capacity to serve as a template for a different model of revitalization.

Several years ago, a woman named Rosanne Haggerty was approached by the Robin Hood Foundation—a New York anti-poverty charity largely funded by the hedge fund industry—and asked if she would be interested in working with them on the issue of family homelessness. Haggerty runs a group called Community Solutions, a nonprofit that seeks to prevent homelessness in areas of concentrated poverty. She had gained renown in the 1990s for her work in supportive housing, eventually winning a MacArthur grant. When Haggerty looked at the data on troubled neighborhoods across the city, she was struck by the fact that, according to nearly every metric of social malady, Brownsville ranked among the most imperiled places in the city. Brownsville has the highest incidence of infant mortality, for instance, as well as the highest percentage of pre-pregnancy obesity among mothers. Studies indicated that an enormous chunk of the state's prisoners came from a handful of New York City neighborhoods, and Brownsville was one of them. In certain pockets, the state had been spending \$1 million per block annually on incarceration.

Haggerty conducted further research, culling data block by block with the help of a graduate student, and discovered that although approximately one-third of the neighborhood population lived in housing projects, the greatest concentration of people sent to prison, placed in foster care or becoming homeless came from public housing. When families from the projects became homeless, Haggerty found, it was often because they were evicted for occupying apartments illegally, after the original leaseholder had either died or gone to jail, rather than for nonpayment of rent. "You would think that having affordable housing would be a protective factor against homelessness, but it turns out that it isn't enough," Haggerty observed. In Brownsville, it soon became clear, any path to renaissance for the neighborhood had to rely on reworking public housing and radically improving the lives of the people who lived there.



Student facing a police barricade in Brownsville, 1968 (Photo by NY Daily News via Getty Images)

How Brownsville became a repository for so many housing projects dates, as various misbegotten ideas do, to the era of Robert Moses. In the 1940s, as Moses went about the business of slum clearing, he planned for Brownsville specifically to house great numbers of the displaced, and for the projects erected there to be “colored.” The “ghetto” arose in many instances not merely as the consequence of white attrition, but as the result of mindful orchestration. Moses presumably reasoned that Brownsville’s Jews would be less likely to cause upheaval over an influx of blacks than the Italians of Bushwick or Greenpoint. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia agreed that the projects were well situated in “areas where there is not the slightest possibility of rehabilitation through private enterprise.”

In recent decades, New York has retained the strongest commitment to public housing of any American city; Chicago and St. Louis, among others, have demolished buildings and turned away. And yet public housing has been plagued during Bloomberg’s tenure, as a consequence of both steep federal funding cuts and egregious mismanagement. The emphasis instead has been on affordable housing, typically created through public-private partnerships and offered at below-market rates. Bloomberg’s initiative to build or preserve 165,000 units of affordable housing by 2014 is one of the largest municipal housing efforts in the country. Brownsville has been a beneficiary of the plan, with more than 4,400 units financed by the city.

“There’s no question that the mayor has done some incredible work,” said Grant Lindsay, a longtime housing advocate with East Brooklyn Congregations in Brownsville. But, he added, “some of the challenge of affordable housing is that it is not always actually affordable.” According to a report released earlier this year by the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, a research and advocacy group that has looked at units built or preserved with public subsidies between 2009 and 2011, two-thirds of the residences required occupants to have a minimum income higher than the median household income in the neighborhoods where the housing was constructed. Transitioning neighborhoods need economic diversity to grow and sustain themselves, but a casualty of the diversity in a city where it is so expensive to lay a single brick is often the needs of the very poor. A two-bedroom apartment falling under the “affordable housing” rubric in Brownsville, for instance, is priced at \$1,042 a month. To make that payment—and spend no more than a third of your income on rent, which is required—you would need to earn just over \$37,000 a year. If a husband and wife were both working full time making the minimum wage, they would earn less than that. Indeed, the median household income in Brownsville is \$23,000 a year.

The organization that Haggerty eventually formed to work on these problems is called the Brownsville Partnership. On a rainy Saturday in February, it convened a full-day summit for neighborhood residents. Close to 250 people showed up and dispersed into groups of ten, supplied with maps of the neighborhood so that they could pinpoint troubled corners and areas where they would like to see services improved. Invariably, the subject of public housing took hold. At one table, Esmerelda Miller showed me pictures of the bathroom in her apartment, where her rent is \$700 a month. The ceiling had partially collapsed; brown water stains marred all of the walls. She had been unsuccessful at getting NYCHA to repair any of it, even though she had been calling for months.

“If you put in for something now—if something is broken, or you need a paint job—you call now, in 2013, and they tell you 2016,” said Rose Sicard, seated a few chairs away. The backlog on repairs at NYCHA is, in fact, legendarily long, although recently the agency has begun to make inroads. A woman sitting next to Sicard, Mable Spence, had lived in the Tilden Houses since 1997 and finally got a cat to deal with the problem of mice that were aggressively entering through the walls of her apartment, for which she pays \$591 a month. Several years ago, the leaks from her bathroom ceiling had become so severe that she had to sit on the toilet with an umbrella. That went on for a few months, until she went to court and got NYCHA to address the problem.

A refrain of the day—and something one hears repeatedly talking to residents of

Brownsville—is the matter of violence erupting from inconsequential grievances, especially over perceived trespassing from one project to another. The shootings among teenagers, Sicard said, is “all over petty stuff. It’s ‘You can’t come here—if you’re in Van Dyke, you can’t come to Langston Hughes.’ I want to say, ‘What the hell are you talking about? You don’t own it. No one owns any of this—it’s not yours.’”

“In the old days, with crack, they had their community,” Sicard went on. “They overdosed, they killed themselves, but it didn’t cross over.”

To get to a popular recreation center at the southern end of the neighborhood, many children are forced to walk through a series of housing projects, and the current tense climate makes that hard to do. So one goal is to create a sense of linkage between the complexes. In conjunction with the state Health Department, the Brownsville Partnership recently hung banners throughout the projects to offer some semblance of continuity.

Haggerty has various ideas about how public housing can be improved—all of which will depend on NYCHA’s ability and inclination to fund them. One issue is that younger families are often crowded into smaller apartments, with senior citizens living alone occupying the larger apartments. This balance could be altered, as many, including mayoral candidate Christine Quinn, have suggested. Haggerty thinks some buildings could be retrofitted in the manner of La Tour Bois-le-Prêtre, an exemplary housing project on the outskirts of Paris, and that the retrofitting could be financed in part by energy-tax credits. “You don’t have to reach for the moon—you could simply ask what makes Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper successful,” Haggerty said to me one afternoon, referring to the block-style middle-income apartment complexes on Manhattan’s East Side. “Entrances to the development are monitored”—public housing has notoriously poor security—and the grounds are beautifully landscaped and usable. Social science tells us that open communal space is better for healthy living.”

Theoretically, some of the parking lots in Brownsville could be transformed into playgrounds, green space and so on, while others could provide the footprint for the construction of new low-income housing. But the development of new projects has been troubled. More than a decade ago, NYCHA vacated the dilapidated Prospect Plaza complex on the border of Brownsville and Ocean Hill, initially planning to rehabilitate it, but later decided to demolish the structures and replace them. The new Prospect Plaza, which will have a grocery store and gardens, has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. But construction on the project hasn’t even begun, and the new buildings are set to contain only a fraction of the public housing units that the old complex had. This means the buildings’ affordable housing units will still be out of reach for very-low-income residents, who are better served by public housing, at least on a financial level. (The average monthly rent for a NYCHA apartment is just \$436, and the waiting list is 167,000 families long.)

The Bloomberg administration’s efforts to forge solutions for other systemic problems in Brownsville have produced real benefits. Although Brownsville’s unemployment rate, at nearly 17 percent, is almost twice the city’s, the figure has dropped considerably—by six points over the past decade. This is attributable in some part to the installation of three job-training programs, with two more planned, among other initiatives. Eight schools have been closed or slated for closure since Bloomberg took office, but twenty-one new ones have been created—fourteen of them public, and seven of them charters. One small middle school, part of the Ascend charter network, draws on the models of progressive education used in top private schools. When I visited the middle school one morning over the winter, the sixth graders were reading the *Iliad*. The percentage of those 25 and older in Brownsville who are high school graduates has gone up by seven points over the past decade, to more than 38 percent—a greater gain than in gentrifying Crown Heights.

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And yet, if you were visiting Brownsville for the first time, you would perceive little sense of change either from conversations with the people who live there or simply by looking around. The narrative of many neighborhoods has revolved around the tensions between longtime residents resistant to change and the renovating classes who have come to eclipse or displace them. In Brownsville, there is a counternarrative that speaks to worries about isolation and the concern that the aspirers with their reviving energies will never come. At the summit organized by the Brownsville Partnership, I repeatedly heard the lament that there was nowhere in Brownsville to sit down and eat a meal served to you by a waitstaff, which meant there was nowhere to celebrate birthdays or anniversaries, to mark the occasions of ordinary life. At one table, a group of middle-aged women expressed dissatisfaction with the state of the retail environment more generally, implying that it catered to unseemly stereotypes of the underclasses. The clothing for sale was “skimpy,” they said, and if you were 50 and female, it was hard to find anything to wear.

A few weeks after the summit, I met with Jefferson Bannister, a longtime pastor at Brownsville’s Church of God, and his daughter Marsha, who teaches in the neighborhood. They expressed worries about diminished horizons—about children who never get out of the area to experience the wider world, about high-achieving students who couldn’t picture an education outside the realm of community college. Marsha teaches at one of the Ascend schools, where, to combat this, the classrooms are all named after colleges and universities: Stanford, Vanderbilt, Louisiana State. In his earlier years in the ministry, Bannister would organize meetings of clerics to, as he put it, “pray on ZIP codes.” They always prayed first and foremost for the 11212.

Last year, [Allison Kilkenny wrote](#) about food sovereignty, and how low-income urban neighborhoods are finding ways to produce sustainable agriculture. [Read all of the](#)

articles in The Nation's special issue on New York City.

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