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Public Housing in the New York City: The Case of the Red Hook Houses

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Introduction

In the United States, public housing conjures up negative images of decaying high-rise buildings, places ridden with crime, drugs, and gangs. This stereotype largely represents society's attitude towards the urban poor that has evolved since the housing movement began in the 1920s. When support for public housing took hold, the United States were living in tenement houses under the most horrific conditions. It is easy to forget that public housing was created in order to provide safe, affordable spaces for working and middle class families to live. However, policy changes, mismanagement, and inadequate funding are among the several factors that changed an image of public housing that most never knew. Public housing developments are now occupied by the poorest families, many who are on welfare, and have little chance at upward mobility. The evolution is best seen by examining the history of New York City public housing and New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). As one of the first large scale housing developments of its kind, the Red Hook Houses best illustrate how the image of public housing has changed over time. In this paper, I first examine the early beginnings of the housing movement in the context of New York City public housing and the Red Hook community. I then describe how racial segregation, policy shifts and the advent of two drug epidemics forever changed those in the Red Hook Houses. As violence peaked in the late 1980s, the murder of an elementary school principal signaled a tipping point. The neighborhood was forced to come together and confront its tough reputation. Today, the future of public housing has never been more uncertain. Although some might argue that New York has the best public housing in the world, I argue that public housing will become the tenements of this era if the NYCHA does not return to the principles on which it was founded.

Chapter 1: From Tenements to High Rises: The Beginning of NYCHA

In the 1920s, the housing movement began as a means to address the unsafe and deplorable conditions of tenement houses. In New York City, government officials wanted to be a model for other cities, replacing urban slums with high quality, low cost public housing. In 1934, NYCHA was founded, and only one year later, the First Houses were built on Manhattan's Lower East Side. A new wave of support for housing initiatives swept across the country, culminating with the passage of Federal Housing Act of 1937. The Act allowed for state and city housing authority's across the country to receive federal funding as long as they met certain conditions. As public housing developments began to be around the country, New York City was different. Public housing was not only a means to address slum conditions. This was an investment in the City's future. Although crippled by the Great Depression, New York City was determined to rebuild its economy by providing stable housing.

The Beginnings of the Housing Movement

After the Great Depression, major cities across the country faced a housing crisis. In New York, the conditions of many tenement houses best chronicled in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*[1] were the worst of the worst. Wooden tenements were at risk for fire, hallways were dirty, and, in most cases, the only heated room was the kitchen.[2] As a modern alternative to slum conditions, early supporters of the housing movement saw public housing developments as a worthwhile investment. Instead of coldwater flats and cramped hallways, public housing promised central heating, modern appliances and plenty of open space.[3] New York City Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia agreed: "Tear down the old, build up the new! Let in the sun! Let in the sky!

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[1] Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891.
[2] Harold X. Connolly. *A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: New York University Press, 1977. pp. 118
[3] Lawrence J. Vale. *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. pp. 5

A new day is dawning. A new life. A new America," he proclaimed over the airwaves.[4] LaGuardia knew that slum conditions were not sustainable and that public housing had the potential to create much needed jobs for City residents. Therefore, on January 20, 1934, LaGuardia created the New York City Housing Authority, appointing Langdon W. Post the Authority's first chairman.[5] As broad support for public housing swept the country, NYCHA was a critical piece in addressing the City's housing crisis.

The First Houses

New York City has always been a city of firsts, and this is especially true with regards to housing policy. According Schwartz, "the city had the nation's first tenement laws, its first comprehensive zoning ordinance and the first public housing project."[6] Using laws of eminent domain, the City selected sites that they determined to be most desirable and the least expensive. Early public housing was designed much like after European post-war housing, which emphasized low-cost uniform buildings and housing was a tool for rebuilding cities.[7] A pioneer in the housing movement, NYCHA completed construction for its first development just one year after its founding. Aptly named, the First Houses, 123 apartments on Manhattan's Lower East Side boasted high quality materials such as oak floors, brass light fixtures and a landscaped courtyard.[8] On December 3, 1935, New Yorkers lined the streets as the First Houses were dedicated by LaGuardia, New York Governor Herbert H. Lehman, and First Lady of the United

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[4] Stephan Nessen, "Housing Generations | Life in the Projects: Meet the Alston Family " *WNYC News*. WNYC, 18 Dec. 2012. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. <http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2012/dec/18/housing-generations-life-projects-meet-alston-family/>.

[5] "NYCHA at 70 - New York City Housing Authority." *NYCHA at 70 - New York City Housing Authority*. The City of New York, n.d. Web. 01 Feb. 2013. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/nycha70_timeline.shtml>.

[6] Joel Schwartz, The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1993.

[7] Nicholas D Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 19-21

[8] Ibid. pp. 27-29.

States Eleanor Roosevelt.[9] The presence of the First Lady at the dedication was a clear signal that public housing was now on the federal government's radar. If such high quality housing was to continue, new sources of funding would need to be established.

Federal Housing Act of 1937

If New York City was to continue to build high quality public housing, they would need federal support. While high quality amenities made the First Houses a desirable place to live, these amenities added up and the City was footed the bill. On one hand, there was no way that the City could afford to do this on a large scale at this price. Then again, there was nowhere in the United States that had such broad support for public housing. NYCHA used this in order to garner more support and funds, appealing to the success of European public housing as a model for what New York City could be.[10] And with broad public support, the Federal Housing Act of 1937 was passed, creating the United States Housing Authority (USHA) that would work in conjunction with President Roosevelt's Public Works Administration (PWA) and local housing authorities, such as NYCHA, to set the course for large scale, long term housing development. More importantly, the Act also created jobs in cities that continued to recover from the Great Depression. In addition to using City funds, NYCHA was now able to successfully rely on federal support as well. This is what made New York City different compared to housing authorities in other major cities who mistakenly relied mostly on federal funds to stay afloat.

Public Housing in the United States

Despite the passage of federal legislation, public housing across the United States developed much differently than it had in New York. As with any piece of legislation, there were conditions

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[9] "NYCHA at 70 - New York City Housing Authority." *NYCHA at 70 - New York City Housing Authority*. The City of New York, n.d. Web. 01 Feb. 2013. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/nycha70_timeline.shtml>.

[10] Nicholas D Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 27-29.

that had to be met before any money would be given to state and local housing authorities. The federal government had different views than City's about what amenities should be included in future developments and thus set limits on how funds could be spent.[11] Congress required that projects built with federal funds "not be of elaborate or expensive design or materials and [that] economy being promoted both in construction and administration."[12] This policy did not go over well with NYCHA administrators. Therefore, many of NYCHA's earliest developments were built entirely using separate city and state funds. However, the City knew that this was not a sustainable model. As a result, NYCHA would be forced to comply with federal regulations if they were going achieve the size and scale of housing that they desired.

High Rise Projects

During the 1940s, NYCHA constructed high rise housing developments with an emphasis on high quality and low cost. For example, skip-stop elevators, bathrooms without tile and closets without doors would mean that NYCHA could build taller buildings. By minimizing ground coverage, NYCHA could built up and avoid high land costs.[13] These cost cutting measures did not go over well with tenants. Eventually, these cost cutting measures were eliminated in developments constructed after the 1950s due to tenant protest. Nevertheless, early high-rise developments had been designed to withstand heavy use and were well maintained. The Red Hook Houses would be one of these developments.

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[11] Michael H. Schill "Public Housing: Where Do We Go from Here?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 60.2 (1993): pp. 499-503

[12] Ibid. pp. 503

[13] Nicholas D Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 45-46.

Chapter 2: The Red Hook Houses

The future of New York City housing involved the high-rise brick buildings that transformed communities. Enter Red Hook: a community located just across the East River from Manhattan and a bustling maritime port at the time. There was great need in the community for stable and affordable housing for longshoremen and their families. In 1938, only one year after the passage of the Federal Housing Act, construction of the Red Hook Houses began. The first development to be built using federal funds, the Red Hook Houses was constructed on a tremendous scale in accordance with NYCHA's new vision. The site was chosen in part to accommodate the great demand for stable housing for immigrant families who worked on the docks.. Although the Red Hook Houses was built to provide stable, middle class housing, changes in NYCHA's changed the demographic of the Red Hook Houses, and thus the Red Hook community as well.

The Cost of Housing: Construction of the Red Hook Houses

Combining taller buildings and fewer amenities, a new chapter in NYCHA's history was born. In other words, NYCHA believed that it could accumulate enough savings by reducing amenities and start building on a larger scale. When complete, Red Hook Houses boasted 27 six-story brick buildings containing 2,545 apartments in total. In 1955, three more residential buildings with 346 apartments were added.[14] The apartments were mostly three- and four-rooms and were praised for including amenities such as refrigerators, central heating and gas ranges. The starting monthly rent was about five dollars, which was lower than rent in private housing at the time. As a result, one would not be surprised to find out that applications poured in at over 1,200 a week.[15] In order to achieve a cost savings, common amenities such as skip-stop elevators became standard. Therefore, NYCHA to clear sites like Red Hook the cost equaled about $1.00 per

[14] Jennifer Bleyer. "Beyond the Buzz, Red Hook Remembers." *New York Times* 20 Aug. 2006.
[15] Nicholas D Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 6-7.

square foot, whereas the Vladeck Houses on the Lower East Side were about $3.76 per square foot. This was certainly not something that NYCHA could do on a consistent basis, yet the variety of designs, structures and tenant ratios promoted sustainability of public housing. High rise construction and minimum amenities proved to be the right combination, providing stable residential housing for those working on the docks.[16]

Tenant Selection

As the second largest development in New York City, the Red Hook Houses could house anywhere from 6,000-8,000 residents when first complete. If you worked on the docks, you wanted to live in the Red Hook Houses. During the tenant selection process, there was a clash between NYCHA and the federal government. NYCHA argued in favor of developing heterogeneous population, where Congress feared that such housing should only be used for those on welfare. The reason for such strict requirements was to support annual maintenance and labor costs, since they could no longer rely on federal assistance. New requirements stated that the cost per room had to be under a certain amount in order to qualify for federal assistance under the Housing Act. However, potential Red Hook tenants appealed to President Roosevelt regarding the cap on earnings for those in public housing. As a result, the Red Hook Houses became a mosaic of diversity, whereby Black, White and Hispanic families lived together in the same building.

Competing Visions: Tenants vs. Urban Planners

When first built, reviews of some of the very first residents were mixed. For example, one former resident writes: "The grounds had Rose bushes and other greenery" and tenants were

[16] Nicholas D Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 6-7.

multiracial, predominately working and middle class.[17] Even Jerry Krase, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College, remembered it being "the place everyone wanted to live."[18] At that time, the community was mostly Irish and Italian immigrant families that were working on the docks. African American, Jewish and Latino were also a small minority in the houses. When they first moved in, Hispanic families experienced the greatest discrimination . Lydia Bellahcyne, whose family first moved into the Red Hook Houses in the mid 1940s, remembers . When she first arrived, Bellahcyne felt like she "was in prison."[19] This was also a feeling that Bellahcyne's mother[20] shared, but as first generation Puerto Rican immigrants, they could not afford to live anywhere else. These first impressions, as these former residents describe, quickly evolved as NYCHA began to change its policies. As long as housing remained at a low cost, this posed a serious threat to the private housing market. In the 1950s, housing authorities around the country were forced to consider evictions of those who made above a certain limit. As a result, those who could afford to move went to the suburbs and the demographic of public housing forever changed. The changing demographic in Red Hook is reflected by examining how industry has changed over time.

[17] Miranda Lin. "A Day in the Life at Red Hook Houses." *Brooklyn Ink* 24 Dec. 2009. Web. 26 Mar. 2013. <http://thebrooklynink.com/2009/12/24/6406-a-day-in-the-life-at-the-red-hook-houses/>.
[18] Jerry Krase. Personal interview. 23 Jan. 2013.
[19] Lydia Bellahcyne. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2013.
[20] Stacy Bellahcyne. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2013

Chapter 3: A History of Industry in Red Hook

From the 1850s - 1950s, Red Hook was a thriving industrial neighborhood of Italian and Irish immigrant dockworkers. In these years, working and middle class families settled in Red Hook for the very reason that working on the docks was a stable job. The Red Hook Houses were initially built to provide housing for these immigrant families. Therefore, one must examine how Red Hook's industrial history influenced the changes in the demographic that occupied the Red Hook Houses. Red Hook's economy is mostly focused in two main areas: manufacturing and port activities. During the Civil War, the Red Hook gained the reputation as being one of the best ports on the east coast. During the twentieth century, port activity was scaled back and there was an increase focus on manufacturing. Then 1950, bulk shipping declined rapidly and Red Hook's economy stalled. Many of these shipping businesses that once docked in Red Hook moved to New Jersey, and the jobs followed them. Lastly, the construction of the Bronx Queens Expressway (BQE) effectively severed Red Hook from the rest of mainland Brooklyn. Despite continued efforts to revive the port, the focus is now on local businesses to maintain the economic vitality in Red Hook.

The Beginnings: Civil War – Turn of the Century

Prior to the Civil War, Red Hook's economy relied squarely on shipping and trading. Despite Manhattan's abundant waterfront space, Brooklyn controlled most of the grain business and spurred further development along the waterfront. For example, the Union Army had a number of warehouses commissioned, which brought local jobs to residents.[21] In addition, Red Hook served as a critical destination for transatlantic ships in need of repairs, even during the post-war period. The waterfront was transformed into thriving industrial port. Thousands of Italian and

[21] Ward Dennis, Benjamin Baccash, Eleanor Cox, Leah Lanier, Allison Lyons, Kett Murphy et. al., "A Preservation Plan for Red Hook, Brooklyn", Columbia GSAPP, HP Studio II, Spring 2009

Irish immigrants flocked to Brooklyn in search of work. Red Hook rose to prominence, and as the docks in Manhattan became increasingly congested, an industrial boom took hold along the waterfront.

Twentieth Century Red Hook: 1900-1950

At the turn of the century, the lively waterfront had been somewhat scaled back but continued to provide jobs for residents living in the neighborhood. Accentuated by World War I, ship repairs continued to be a steady source of business.[22] In an effort to revive local industry, the Red Hook Grain Terminal was built in 1922 and its responsibilities included receiving and storing shipments, but more importantly, promoting the redirection of grain shipments through Red Hook.[23] However, the grain shipping industry declined as the advent of rail transportation proved easier and more efficient. Despite the decline in grain trade, the New York Dock Company bought piers and soon became the largest employer in Red Hook, as warehouses were retrofitted for general cargo and stevedoring purposes.[24] The dock company continued this trend, recruiting longshoremen from all over New York City. By 1950, the number of longshoremen peaked at 21,000, many of them living in the Red Hook Houses. However, even ship repairs from World War II would not be able to prevent Red Hook from a downward economic spiral. Even as working class families moved from Manhattan to seek stable housing and employment, the seasonal natural of longshoring and stevedoring made supporting a family difficult. Containerization—the process of shipping bulk goods in large metal containers—eliminated the need for smaller ports like Red Hook. As a result of this economic downfall, the community of Red Hook changed.

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[22] *Red Hook History*. Ed. David Sharps. Waterfront Barge Museum, n.d. Web. 8 Apr. 2013. <http://waterfrontmuseum.org/red-hook-history>.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ward Dennis, Benjamin Baccash, Eleanor Cox, Leah Lanier, Allison Lyons, Kett Murphy et. al., "A Preservation Plan for Red Hook, Brooklyn", Columbia GSAPP, HP Studio II, Spring 2009

Economic Downfall: 1950s – Present

The fact is that Red Hook's port simply never recovered to what it was in during the Civil War era. With the advent of containerization, Red Hook was effectively eliminated as a major port center. For example, the New York Dock Company abandoned their property in Red Hook and moved to New Jersey coastline, which boasted better access to railroads and interstate highways. In just a few years, a place of industrial prosperity and growth was left deserted. During the 1960s-1990s, the neighborhood was consumed by both the heroin and crack epidemics. The country was on the brink of war with Vietnam, and several Red Hook residents enlisted. At that time, an informal economy was the only real source of revenue for Red Hook. In the past decade, Red Hook's economy has primary been sustained by local businesses. Two franchise stores, IKEA and Fairway, are also major source of employment for residents. There is also a true community feeling whereby "chefs buy from the local farm, bartenders buy from the local distilleries and restaurants retweet other restaurants' promotions in the neighborhood."[25] It is this type of community support that is vital for Red Hook to be prosperous in the future.

[25] Pete Wells. "Treasures on Every Block." *New York Times* 26 Mar. 2013. Web. 4 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/27/dining/eating-and-drinking-red-hook-brooklyn.html>.

Chapter 4: Movin' Out: White Flight and Racial Segregation

During the 1950s, NYCHA demonstrated some very provocative and potentially dangerous precedents that in turn fundamentally changed the demographic within Red Hook Houses. NYCHA calculated that it would be possible to house working poor families in its developments and keep welfare families at a capped percentage. NYCHA then realized that many residents seemed determined to make public housing a permanent residence. This represented a major threat to the private housing market, resulting in local and national eviction pressures. [26] Further, low-income African American families were migrating from the South at the same time, and experienced widespread variation in housing availability. NYCHA's polices regarding tenant selection and racial segregation were the first signs of that historically well-managed public housing could be in jeopardy.

Changing Complexion

NYCHA administrators understood that if at any time public housing became a place to serve only the minority population public support in a white majority New York City would fade. From NYCHA's early beginning, the goal was to create a public housing system that reflected the City's diversity. The federal government fundamentally disagreed with NYCHA on this very point from the very beginning, arguing that public housing should only be going to the neediest residents.[27] The federal government pushed NYCHA and other housing authorities on this issue as an influx of working class African American and Latino families migrating from the South

[26] Stephan Nessen, "Housing Generations | Life in the Projects: A Shift to Violence " WNYC News. WNYC, 19 Dec. 2012. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2012/dec/19/housing-generations-life-projects-shift-violence/

[27] Ibid.

needed affordable housing. This was a direct challenge to NYCHA's founding principles and they were forced to enact certain official policies and a blurry line when it came to race.[28]

Racial Segregation

As the balance of black and white residents grew apart, the African American community was well aware of NYCHA's racialist program. According to Connelly, "the essential characteristic of black demographic distribution was segregation. A number of [housing projects] were constructed during the 1950s soon became mini-ghettos surrounded by a predominately white and frequently unfriendly population."[29] In 1940, NYCHA reported integration in all projects and a color-blind admissions policy. One year later, however, a NYCHA administrator admitted that racial steering remained a policy despite state laws preventing such discrimination in public housing. Therefore, as a result, NYCHA used token integration as its unofficial policy in order to avoid any direct challenge.[30]

The practice of separation and token integration continued and its affect was most felt within New York's two largest housing projects—Queensbridge and Red Hook. In 1940, the Authority could boast that Blacks now occupied 12.4 percent of units in comparison to the city-wide Black population of 6 percent, but these figures obscured racial divisions.[31] In 1941, the First Houses had no black families compared to the Harlem River houses which only housed black families. Furthermore, between the initially opening of Red Hook in 1939 and 1943, the black population went up the most dramatically compared to all other projects, from 31 families

[28] Nicholas D. Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 85-89.
[29] Harold X. Connolly. *A Ghetto Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: New York University Press, 1977. pp. 132
[30] Nicholas D. Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 85-89.
[31] Ibid.

to 106 black families.[32] Shifting demands caused NYCHA to slowly decline, and tenant selection policies became the quickest way to manage the current residents.

Bad Policies

Several key changes in NYCHA policies during the late 1940s and 1950s only exacerbated the problem of racial segregation in housing developments. For example, in 1947 NYCHA began evicting tenants whose income was over $3,000, resulting in lower income residents in public housing citywide. The once multiracial housing developments even saw working class whites move out as public housing became more stigmatized. In 1953, NYCHA began screening families based on certain criteria such as being single parents or poor housekeeping. At the same time, heavy vandalism was already reported in nearly 40 percent of housing developments.[33] Prior to the 1950s, something as small as littering or causing excessive noise could get you or your family fined. Jerry Krase remembers the period distinctly. "If you were a problem family you were out," Krase recalls. Krase and his family grew up in Red Hook and lived in Red Hook East until 1953. His family was forced to move because his family's income exceeded NYCHA's limit.[34] Housing experts say that a more dramatic racial shift at this time had it not held apartments vacant, a practiced NYCHA claimed that it had abandoned. Overall, this trend was not only in New York City, but it was occurring in housing authorities across the country.

Conclusion

Today, it is easy to condemn the racial insensitivity on the part of NYCHA. However, the roots of these problems were set in place by policy decisions that were ultimately ignored and

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[32] Nicholas D. Bloom. *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 56.

[33] Stephan Nessen, "Housing Generations | Life in the Projects: A Shift to Violence " WNYC News. WNYC, 19 Dec. 2012. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2012/dec/19/housing-generations-life-projects-shift-violence/

[34] Jerry Krase. Personal interview. 23 Jan. 2013.

neglected at the federal level as well.[35] City officials knew that as soon as public housing became perceived as minority housing, it would lose broad political support. This was not only in New York City, but every city to varying degrees across the country. Chicago, Detroit and Washington D.C., were all affected as many World War II veterans returned home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and little hope of finding a steady job.[36] Businesses moved out of the city, investors withdrew money from the urban centers and invested in the suburban periphery and residents chose to move out to escape the face of new migrants. The combination of heroin and Vietnam created an urban crisis.

[35] Margery A. Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings. *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation.* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2009. pp. 3

[36] Ibid. pp. 5

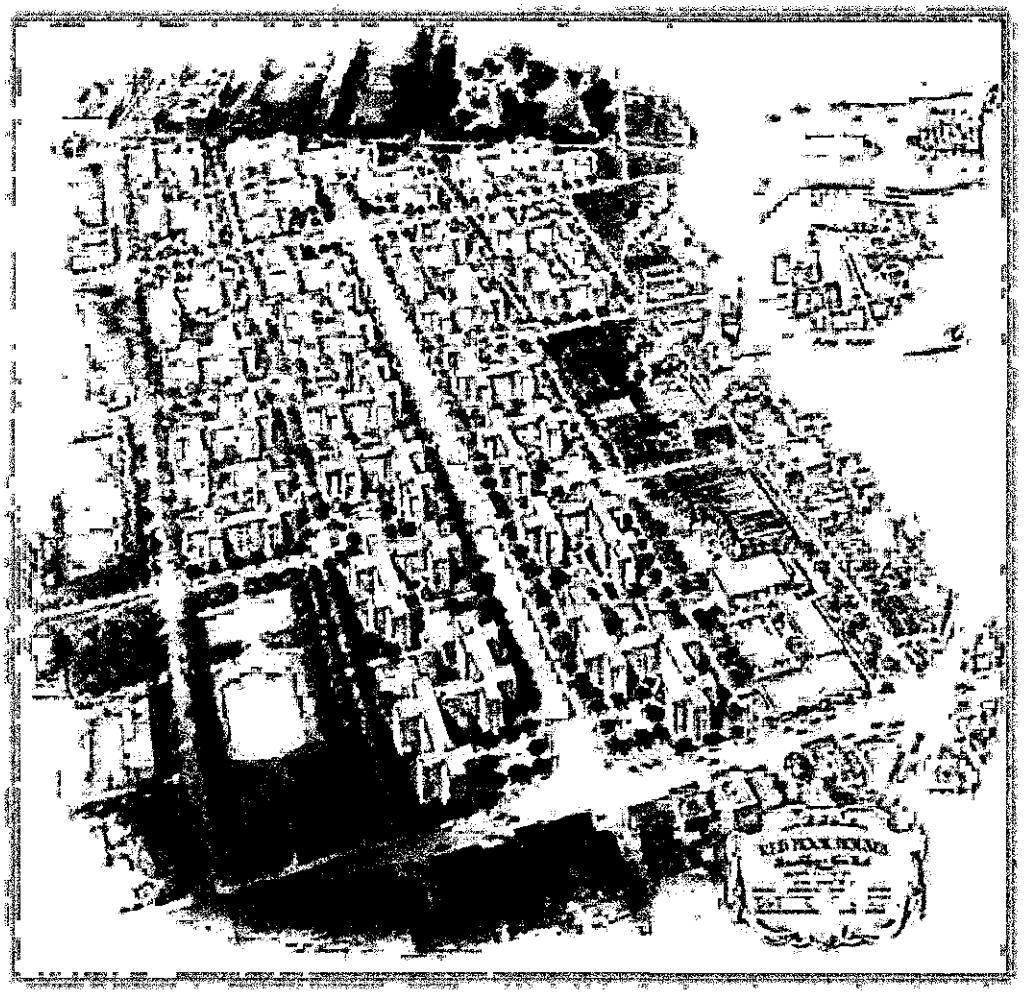

Figure 1: A rendering of the design for the Red Hook Houses, c. 1930 (William T. McCarthy Collection, Brooklyn Historical Society Photograph Collection)

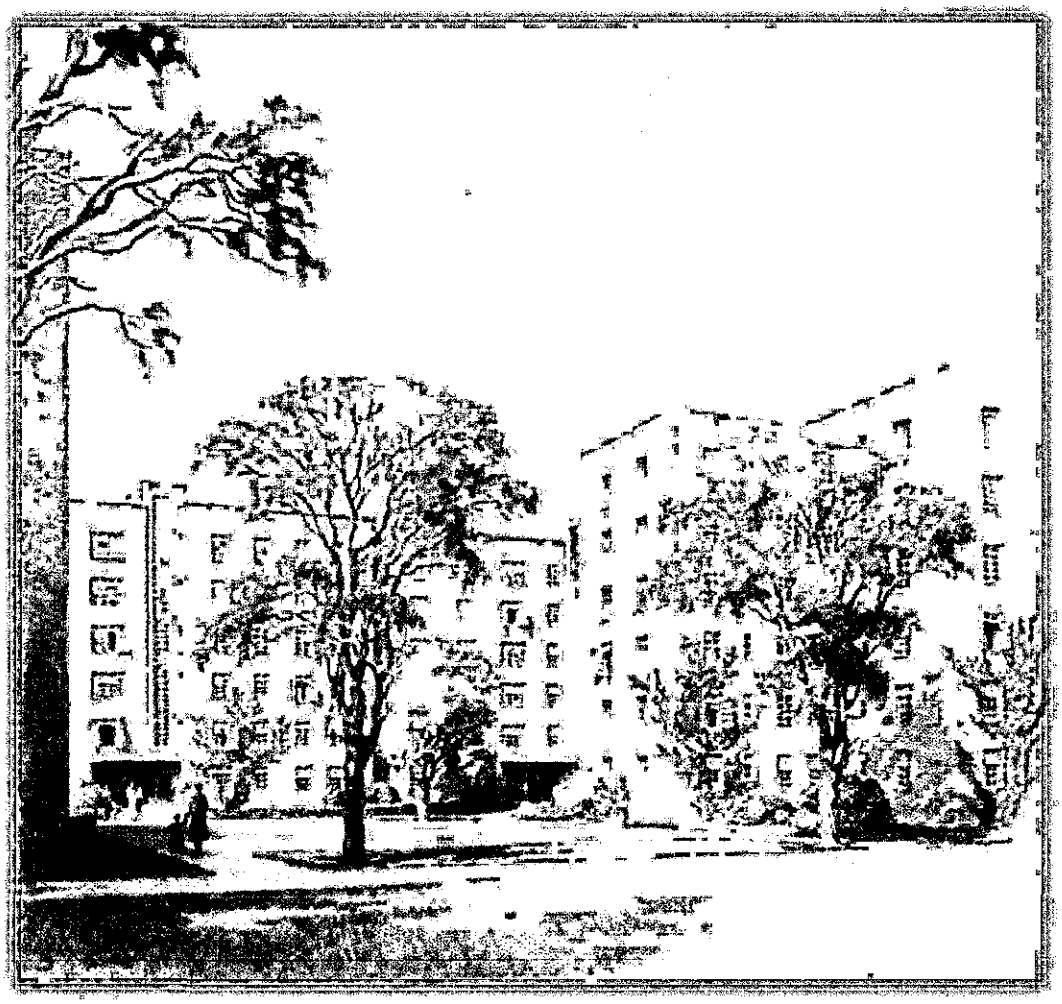

Figure 2: A rendering of the Red Hook Houses, c. 1930. (William T. McCarthy collection, Brooklyn Historical Society Photograph Collection)

Figure 3: Workers put the finishing touches on First Houses, the City's first public housing development on New York's Lower East Side, 1935. (NYCHA)

Figure 4: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt cuts the ceremonial ribbon at the landmark opening of First Houses, first public housing development in the United States. New York State Governor Herbert H. Lehman (far left) and New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia (right) stand beside her during the historic moment (NYCHA)

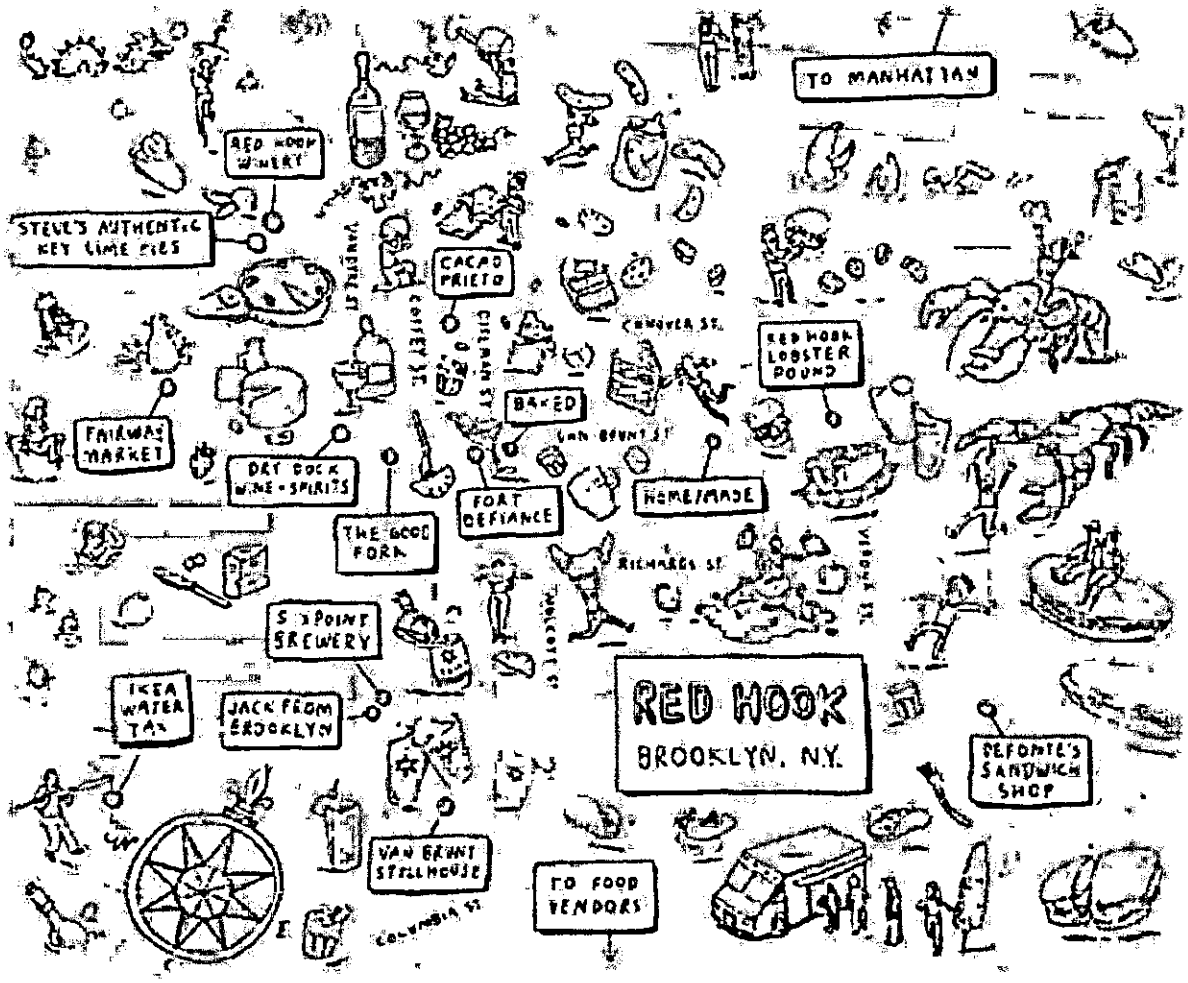

Figure 5: A diagram of the places to eat and drink in Red Hook, as well as other local landmarks (Victor Kerlow/New York Times)

Figure 6: A family living in the Red Hook Houses looks out their window after it was shattered with stray bullets (Eugene Richards)

Figure 7: The entrance of the Red Hook Houses is guarded by armed lookouts for crack cocaine dealers (Eugene Richards)

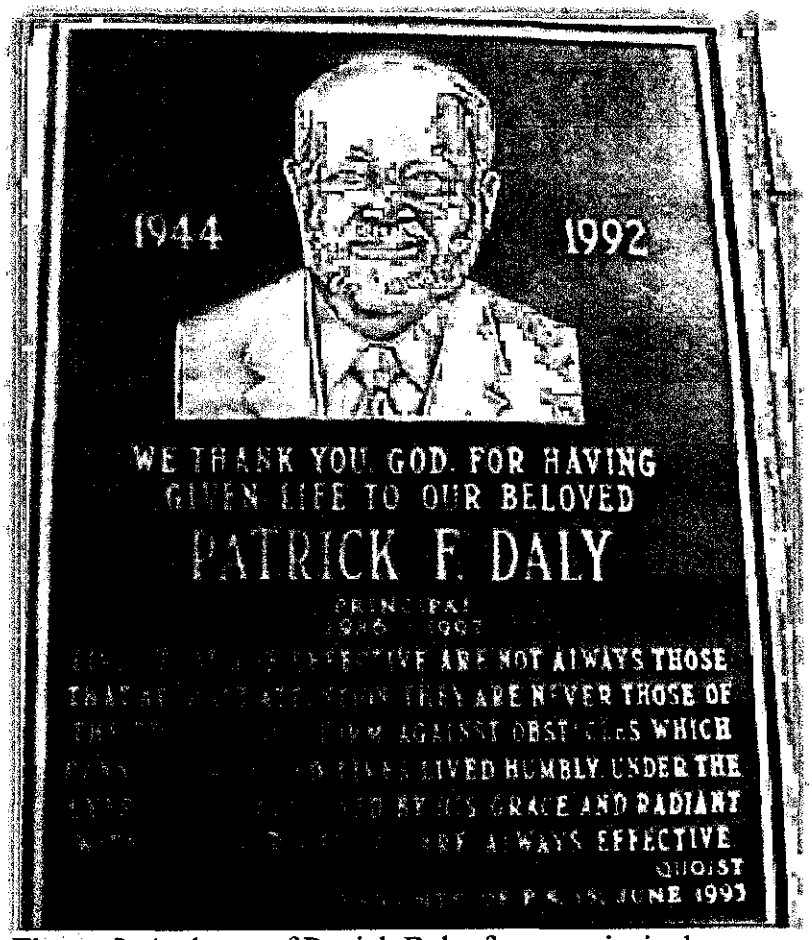

Figure 8: A plaque of Patrick Daly, former principal, displayed outside the main office at PS 15. Daly was killed in the Red Hook Houses while looking for a student December18, 1992 (Michael Kavanagh)

Figure 9: The end of Van Brunt Street in Red Hook still flooded one day after Hurricane Sandy devastated New York, New Jersey and Connecticut (Ben Hallman/Huffington Post)

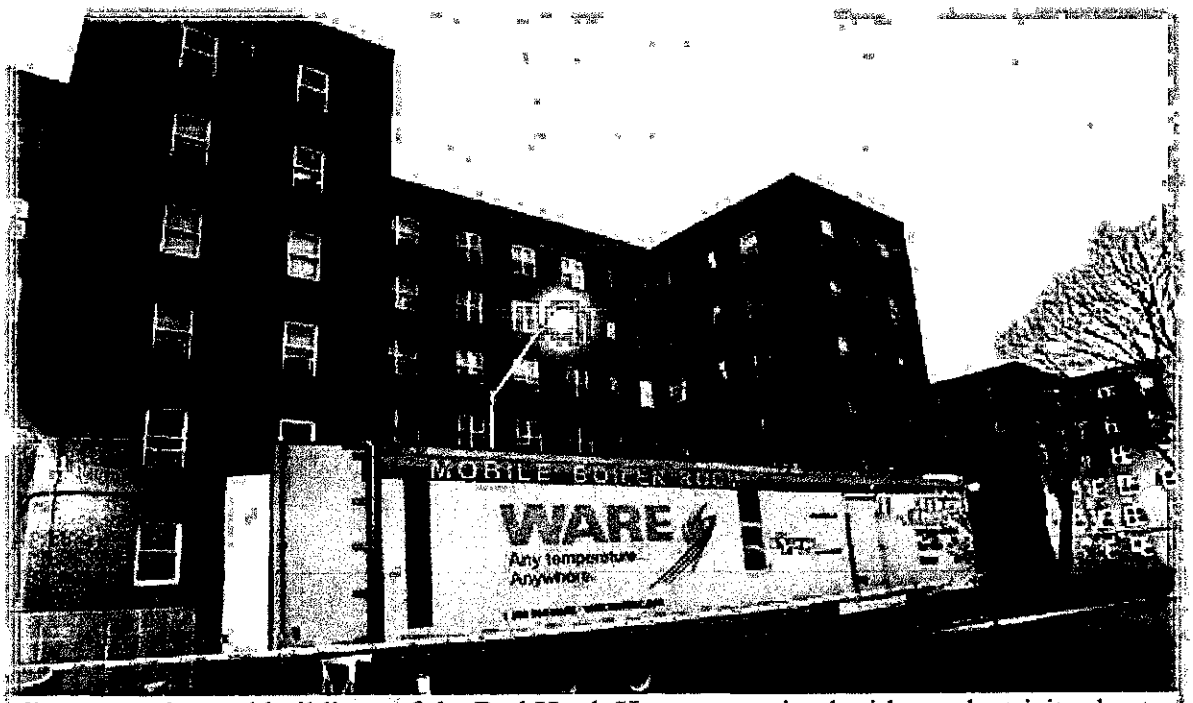

Figure 10: Several buildings of the Red Hook Houses remained without electricity, heat or hot water weeks following Hurricane Sandy. While power has been restored, trailers like the one above have remained. Residents want them removed (NYCHA)

Chapter 5:The Epidemic Hits Red Hook, Part I: Heroin and Vietnam

During the late-1950s and early 1960s, the Vietnam War and introduction of heroin into cities changed the face of public housing around the country. In New York City, wherever you lived, you probably knew someone who that had tried it, if not already addicted. Heroin was funneled through an international trading system into a national one when it arrived in New York. The City served as the central place that controlled the entire market, as other cities served as regional and local distribution centers. Nationwide, heroin disproportionately affected marginalized African American and Latino populations, the very same population that had just become concentrated in to public housing developments. With heroin, street crime exploded and life in the Red Hook Houses was changed.

Defining an Urban Crisis

At the advent of the heroin epidemic, if you were living in New York City public housing chances are you probably knew at least one person who that was affected. If you were African American or Latino, it was worse. For example, according to federal authorities, approximately fifty percent of the nation's heroin addicts lived in New York City, and African Americans and Puerto Ricans comprised about three-quarters of the city's users.[37] In Red Hook and other urban neighborhoods, the availability and persistence of drug use contributed to the crisis. Young adolescents who wanted to start using narcotics did not have to go far. Not only was the drug immediately available, it was nearly unavoidable.[38] I will describe major events in three waves: post-World War II, 1955-1965 and 1965-1975.

The First Wave: Post World War II

[37] Eric C. Schneider. *Smack: Heroin and the American City.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 119-21

[38] Ibid. pp. 131

Despite disruptions in supply during World War II, demand for heroin in cities rebounded quickly. At the same time heroin was introduced northern cities, African American and Latinos to cities migrated to them. With the introduction of heroin to cities, one must understand how "race, class, and place intersected to shape people's experience with the drug," according to Schneider.[39] In addition, the social setting of the inner city was a critical factor in determining who used and who did not. The gangs of New York were breeding grounds for addicts and even part of gang initiation. As a result, most of those first time users ended up addicted in their late teens. The drug epidemic had fully infiltrated public housing developments by the 1950s as American involvement in another war made heroin even more accessible.[40]

The Second Wave: 1955-1965

Between 1955 and 1965, the Vietnam War was a contributing factor to the surge of illegal heroin to cities. Heroin was truly and international market, making hierarchal organization key to the trade. Furthermore, during World War II, dealers had learned to identity certain markets that could be tapped into should there be a shortage in supply. In addition, the fact that soldiers had found heroin easily accessible in Vietnam only made their situation worse when soldiers returned home. The debate continues as to what degree the United States government was involved in the international trade. According to Booth: "the US government and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were complicit in the increased availability of heroin in cities throughout the time yet the government disputes this claim." Regardless of who was responsible, the second wave cemented New York City as the heroin capital of America.

Third Wave: 1965-1975

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[39] Eric C. Schneider. *Smack: Heroin and the American City.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 119

[40] Michael Wilson, "Under One Roof, Trial, Penalty and Civics Lesson." *New York Times* 22 Aug. 2006: Web. 5 Feb. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/22/nyregion/22court.html>.

By 1975, New York City was viewed as the heroin capital of America. For example, one study showed that nearly 90 percent of America's heroin addicts lived within 180 miles of Manhattan.[41] The drastic rise in addiction, however, was also met with treatment centers. Yet most addicts first ended up going to jail first, delaying their access to care. As federal, state and local authorities tried to halt the epidemic, United States drug laws shifted as the government declared a War on Drugs.

Punitive Measures

In response to the epidemic, federal and state drug laws were passed that disproportionately affected African American and Latinos. This is illustrated by the increase in the prison population from the advent of the heroin epidemic until today. For example, in 1974, there were 500,000 inmates in federal, state and local jails combine. Today, the total is 2 million, and the average length of sentence has increased. In New York, surely the passage of the Rockefeller drug laws played a part. However, these punitive measures were not enough to halt another drug from being introduced into the cities. While cocaine would be introduced into almost every American city, the cheap, smokable form called crack is what affected public housing developments in New York City the most.[42]

A New Drug In Town

There reached a point where heroin was simply no longer profitable and a new drug hit the streets: cocaine. Cocaine was often too expensive, but crack was a quick, available and as cheap as $5 a rock.[43] Anybody with a microwave oven, some baking soda and the basic drug knowledge meant that you did not have to have a high school diploma to start your own business.

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[41] Booth, Martin. *Opium A History.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. pp. 205

[42] Ibid.

[43] Troy Duster. "Pattern, Purpose and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice." *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice.* Ed. Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. pp. 283

In contrast, heroin was an international operation which required many levels of organization before it finally hit the streets.[44] What made cocaine different: "the potential profits from the new drug were readily available to inner city youth with little money and a willingness to enter this risky business."[45] Before 1980, crack cocaine gripped the projects.

[44] Eric C. Schneider. *Smack: Heroin and the American City.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. pp. 131

[45] Troy Duster. "Pattern, Purpose and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice." *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice.* Ed. Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. pp. 283

Chapter 6:The Epidemic Hits Red Hook, Part II: Crack, Crime and Violence

"Cocaine true, cocaine blue, cocaine have been lying to you
It makes you happy when you sad, it make you steal from your mom or dad.
Make you smile for a while send you on the floor like a child.
Specks here, white specks there, you even look in your sister hair.
You see the time, you look at the clock, tell you it's time for another rock.

Cocaine true, cocaine blue, cocaine get the best o' you.
I sold my stereo and TV, now I have nothing left for me.
I lost my children and my wife now I don't care what happen to my life.
Chasing the dragon on a cloud, people talk about you out real loud.
What can you do, what can you say because it won't chase your cocaine blues away"[46]

In the 1980s, American's urban areas steadily declined as a result of failed economic policies and the loss of well-paying, low-skill manufacturing jobs. Simultaneously, a relatively cheap and highly addictive form of cocaine was introduced into every major American city. Unlike the heroin epidemic, with crack there was a dramatic increase in seemingly random homicides that almost always involved the organization, regulation and control of the crack business. Early on, however, the violence was not primarily drug-induced, but nevertheless, crime escalated.[47] However, soon violent and nonviolent crimes alike increased dramatically as the addicts themselves tried to generate cash to buy more drugs. While the heroin epidemic reached an unprecedented scale in New York City, the crack epidemic affected Red Hook much worse.

Crack in Red Hook

Throughout the 1980s, public housing in New York was consumed by the crack, crime and violence. Just as New York City was considered the heroin capital of the world, Red Hook garnered the infamous distinction as "the crack capital of America."[48] In the early 1990s, Eugene

[46] Danny J Aperture. In Eugene Richards, *Cocaine Blue, Cocaine True.* New York: Aperture Foundation, 1994.
[47] Eugene Richards, *Cocaine Blue, Cocaine True.* New York: Aperture Foundation, 1994
[48] George Howe Colt, and E. Barnes. "Downfall of a Neighborhood: Crack." *Life* (1988): 92.

Richards went into the Red Hook Houses and captured how crack had affected the community. One resident said: "I don't know what keeps you from dying, really. With crack, you get so isolated and you want another hit, one right after, right after, right after. The more people that come here, the more drugs we do. It depends. And all they've got to do is throw us a little and they can get off her, so usually that's what they do."[49] Another resident replies: "I would like to get away from this life I would, but I just got nowhere to go right now? Where would I go? I'm on welfare, two hundred and one dollars. So I'm at home in my mother's house, what's left of it at least."[50] One parent says: "I have to live with the fact that there is no place safe to play. I pray every day to protect the kids from the environment. They build the schools like jails because that's what they expect for the kids."[51] Red Hook was hardly recognizable to those who moved in when it was first constructed. Crime and violence escalated and there was nothing the residents could do. If you confronted a dealer, your life was at risk. As one person I spoke with said: "You walked home from school everyday thinking this could be your last."[52] Then on one dreary rainy December day, violence reached a tipping point as the neighborhood was forced to come together and confront its tough reputation.

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[49] Eugene Richards, *Cocaine Blue, Cocaine True.* New York: Aperture Foundation, 1994, pp. 15
[50] Ibid. pp. 14
[51] Ibid. pp. 22
[52] Lydia Bellahcyne. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2013

Chapter 7: Tipping Point: The Murder of Patrick Daley

From 1985-1991, crime soared not only in Red Hook, but every public housing development across New York City. In the 1970s, previous sources of informal economy became less profitable and people turned to drug deals. Drug dealing and drug-related crime would become commonplace until December 18, 1992 when Patrick Daley, Principal of PS 15 on 71 Sullivan Street, was killed in the crossfire of two rival gangs.[53] That day, Daley went into the houses looking for a student who had been a fight in school that same day had made it home safe. The tragedy put Red Hook in the national spotlight, once again, for all the wrong reasons. Teachers at PS 15 could not help feeling a sense of anger, betrayal, and sadness. As the residents grieved, the community demanded an end to the violence.

The Tipping Point

With drug dealing and gang violence at record levels in the New York City's projects, the violence took Red Hook's own. On December 18 1992, Patrick Daly, a 48 year old principal of Public School 15 in Red Hook was shot and killed while looking for a nine year old student in the Red Hook Houses.[54] The student had left school in tears after a fight with a fellow classmate. Mr. Daly was well known by the community and he would often walk students home if the student was not feeling well. On this day, just before noon, residents remember hearing eight or nine gunshots, and then watching Mr. Daly fall to the ground. Bleeding profusely, neighborhood residents came to his aid to try to stop the bleeding as well as perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until an ambulance arrived. Mr. Daly was taken to Long Island Community

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[53] Robert D. McFadden. "Brooklyn Principal Shot to Death While Looking for Missing Pupil." *New York Times* 18 Dec. 1992: n.p. Web. 5 Feb. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/18/nyregion/brooklyn-principal-shot-to-death-while-looking-for-missing-pupil.html>.

[54] Ibid.

Hospital, where he was pronounced dead. A neighborhood where shooting and violence were once common was forever changed.

Tragedy and Outrage

As news of Mr. Daly's death spread, a collective expression of sadness and mourning were felt throughout the City. From the Mayor of New York City, David N. Dinkins, to the Chancellor of New York City Schools, Joseph A. Hernandez; each acknowledged Daly as someone who went the extra mile for his students and beloved by the community.[55] Within Red Hook, feelings of sadness were mixed with outrage. Residents deserved and demanded better, and were willing to fight to clean up the neighborhood. Some threatened to leave the community, while others circulated a petition calling for stricter penalties for those who possess and carry firearms illegally.[56] It was clear that residents did not want to continue living in fear.

Red Hook Justice

Less than one week after Mr. Daly's death, police arrested three suspects in connection with the brutal killing. Shamel D. Burrough, 17, Khary Bekka, 18, both of Red Hook, and Jermaine D. Russell, 18, of Staten Island were all charged with murder under New York State law. However, the indictment did not make it clear which defendant fired the bullets that killed Mr. Daly, which was still being investigated. While this brought a sense of closure to some, those who worked at PS 15 felt differently. "It was horrific [for me]. We educated them," said Denise Leonard, a third grade teacher at the time who currently still works at the PS 15.[57] When hearing that two of the

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[55] McFadden, Robert D. "Brooklyn Principal Shot to Death While Looking for Missing Pupil." *New York Times* 18 Dec. 1992: 1+. Web. 18 Mar. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/18/nyregion/brooklyn-principal-shot-to-death-while-looking-for-missing-pupil.html>.

[56] Gonzalez, David. "Life in Brooklyn's Forgotten Section: In Red Hook, 3-Year-Olds Hear Gunfire and Duck for Cover." *New York Times* 20 Dec. 1992: 1+. Web. 18 Mar. 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/20/nyregion/life-brooklyn-s-forgotten-section-red-hook-3-year-olds-hear-gunfire-duck-for.html>.

[57] Denise Leonard. Personal interview. 1 May 2013.

suspects grew up in Red Hook and were educated at PS 15, Leonard remembers feeling along with her colleagues as though "[the murders] had betrayed our trust."[58] Despite the violence, there was a trust among students, teachers and residents that the school was a safe haven. Thus, as educators worked to repair the repair their community's trust, the City stepped up police in an effort to stop crime.

Bringing the Community Back Together, Stronger

In the wake of the Daly murder, Red Hook as a community came together. People began to trust again and allow their kids to walk school alone. Some residents credit the Housing Authority police force while others credit New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for getting tough on crime. In an act of local government, the Community board in conjunction with the Red Hook community created a plan to specifically address the challenges facing Red Hook. Entitled *Red Hook: A Plan for Community Regeneration*[59], the plan addressed issues from housing, economic development, and quality of life, among several others. I will discuss these three in more detail below.

Housing, Economic Development and Quality of Life

The main topics addressed by the plan was housing, economic development and better quality of life. With regards to housing, the plan cited the need for more affordable and mixed-income housing. The emphasis was given to repairs and security improvements that needed to be back in the Red Hook houses. The plan also called for the creation of jobs and job training programs. Perhaps more importantly, residents wanted to be able to promote local business or determine what industry might be compatible with longer term growth in Red Hook. One proposal was that one percent of all public investment in Red Hook goes toward economic development. Another

[58] Denise Leonard. Personal interview. 1 May 2013.

[59] Ward Dennis, Benjamin Baccash, Elenor Cox, Leah Lanier, Allison Lyons, Kett Murphy et. al., "A Preservation Plan for Red Hook, Brooklyn", Columbia GSAPP, HP Studio II, Spring 2009

proposal, supported strongly by the community, was the expansion of funding for commercial revitalization along Van Brunt Street, Columbia Street and Clinton Street. To improve quality of life, the community asked that Coffey Park be rehabilitated with a community center. The plan asked that Red Hook's Belgian block streets be preserved and historic lighting installed. Several buildings were identified as potential New York City Landmarks, including the Red Hook Grain Terminal, the Red Hook Pool and Recreation Center, Coffey Park, Red Hook Houses, New York Shipyard, New York Dock Company Warehouses. In addition, it was recommended that sidewalks be installed and maintained throughout the neighborhood in addition to upgrading the bus stops with shelters and bus schedules. Overall, a combination of these proposals would allow for much needed changes in the community of Red Hook.

Implementation

The Community Board proposal was submitted in 1994 and adopted on September 11, 1996 by the City Planning Commission. The Commission received many letters of support from members of the community including activism groups, private landowners, artists, parishes, a not-for-profit development corporation, local businesses, the Red Hook Business Improvement District, state assemblypersons, and Red Hook residents. However, more than a decade later, despite some implementation of some of these recommendations, many of the issues which this plan sought to resolve remain.[60]

Community Centers

The murder of Patrick Daly brought Red Hook into the national spotlight for all the wrong reasons. Yet, because of the work of leaders and local government, a stronger community was formed. While not formally mentioned in the Community Board 6 proposal, specific community

[60] Ward Dennis, Benjamin Baccash, Elenor Cox, Leah Lanier, Allison Lyons, Kett Murphy et. al., "A Preservation Plan for Red Hook, Brooklyn", Columbia GSAPP, HP Studio II, Spring 2009

centers were also created to address residents' concerns. One of these organizations was the Red Hook Initiative (RHI), a clinic established in 2001 in response to the lack of accessible medical services in the area. It has since evolved into less of a medical clinic and more of an educational services organization. According to their mission, "their goals are the overcome systemic inequities that begin with empowered youth." The RHI had certainly Red Hook has a 45% high school graduation rate, young adults coming through RHI's pipeline show a 85% graduation rate. Of those who did not graduate, almost all of them are still working toward a degree.[61] This is the picture of a community rebuilding.

[61] Frances Medina. Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2013.

Chapter 8: The Future of NYCHA: Gentrification and the New Tenements

After being launched into the national spotlight, what the future holds for Red Hook is not clear. With the violence and crime on the decline, public housing in New York City is incredibly vulnerable. Even before Sandy, inadequate funding and mismanagement were rampant. This was only magnified by the devastation caused to the Red Hook Houses by Hurricane Sandy. Sensible twenty first century policies need to be enacted that ensures public housing gets back the principles on which it was founded.

Funding

Inadequate funding and divestment in public housing threaten the progress that has been made since NYCHA's founding. For example, estimates suggest that before Sandy, NYCHA needed $6 billion to retain stock in more than 178,000 of its apartments.[62] By 2015, the agency projects a $13 billion deficit if no new revenue is generated. NYCHA Chairman John Rhea has proposed a plan that he anticipates will close the budget deficit by selling land to private developers. With residents fearing that NYCHA is on the verge of privatization, Rhea assures that this will not happen under his plan. Nevertheless, reports surfaced in 2012 that NYCHA had misused federal grant money totaling $1 billion to conduct roof, heating and plumbing repairs. Rhea refutes the claim that funds were misused. He acknowledges that his agency could benefit from restructuring and eliminating wasteful spending.[63] If this is true, there needs to be a focused effort on how this can happen, with or without its current staff.

Hurricane Sandy, Part I: The Management

[62] Stephan Nessen, "Housing Generations | Life in the Projects: An Uncertain Future" WNYC News. WNYC, 19 Dec. 2012. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2012/dec/19/housing-generations-life-projects-shift-violence/

[63] Ibid.

Historically, NYCHA always took pride in being the best run housing authority in the country and they gained a positive reputation. However, their reputation has steadily declined, markedly in recent years. An example of this is to address the issue of repair requests in a timely manner. The majority of the Red Hook developments are in need of major structural repairs, including elevator replacement and roof repair.[64] Community organizations such as the Red Hook Initiative and the Red Hook Community Justice Center (RHCJC) have taken the lead to make sure NYCHA does its job. According to Frances Medina, Executive Coordinator at the Red Hook Initiative says: "At the end of the day, it is about accountability. We need to make sure that we hold NYCHA accountable."[65] Medina grew up in the Red Hook Houses, and is no stranger to having to wait three months or more for NYCHA to make repairs. At the RHCJC, Housing Outreach Coordinator Mr. Albert Barnes who also lives in the Houses makes sure that requests for repairs are processed in a timely manner with the help of his digital camera that stores evidence.[66] Overall, these community organizations provide valuable assistance in making sure that tenets have a safe and healthy home.

Conclusion

As a community, Red Hook has several challenges that need to be addressed together. One is the need for affordable housing and flexible manufacturing space to spark job growth. In addition, residents would like to see more jobs within the neighborhood, or additional public transportation. Currently, only one bus travels in to and out of Red Hook and the 9th Street subway station is currently being renovated. An effort to create jobs through IKEA and Fairway, which increase foot and car traffic, could work, but some residents are skeptical. The true test of

[64] Stephan Nessen, "Housing Generations | Life in the Projects: An Uncertain Future" WNYC News. WNYC, 19 Dec. 2012. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2012/dec/19/housing-generations-life-projects-shift-violence/

[65] Frances Medina. Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2013.

[66] Albert Barnes. Personal Interview. 10 April. 2013.

this community is whether it is able to bridge the gap between those in public housing and those who live in other parts of the community. There no question that some of the new immigrants are laying the same foundation in Brooklyn that other immigrants did generations before. Brooklyn had always been an incubator, pumping out athletes, political leaders, impresarios and entertainers.The extraordinary diversity and support for others was witnessed in the aftermath of Sandy. And when I ask people why they live in Red Hook, they always reply, "the community."

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