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Why Public Housing Did More to Stabilize the Bronx Than Destroy It

By Professor Mark Naison

One of my biggest challenges as a teacher of Bronx History is confronting my students' negative perceptions of public housing. Almost all the authors they read talk about public housing as a failure, both because the urban renewal projects that created them destabilized vibrant neighborhoods, and because the multi-story buildings in most low-income projects were alienating to live in

While some of these arguments may describe the impact of public housing in some cities, and even in some portions of New York City, they do not adequately describe how most Bronx residents experienced public housing when most projects opened in the early 1950's, not do they explain how public housing served as an anchor in Bronx neighborhoods devastated by arson in the 1970's and 1980's.

As someone who has done over 50 interviews with African American, LatinX and a few white residents of public housing projects in Bronx neighborhoods ranging from Mott Haven to Soundview to Castle Hill to Morrisania, Baychester and Highbridge, I can tell you that the portrait of public housing as alienating conflicts sharply with how Bronx residents of the projects described their experiences in from the early 1950's through the mid 1960's. Talking about the Patterson Houses in Mott Haven, Victoria Archibald Good described an environment where people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds shared food and childcare, left their doors open most of the day, and had access to great youth programs and social services. This vision of multiracial, multicultural community life was reinforced by Taur Orange's description of the Bronxwood Houses in Soundview in the mid 1950's, where mothers of different racial backgrounds sat on benches and watched over one another's children. Other people I interviewed, such as Nathan Dukes and Allen Jones from Patterson, described the Projects as places where epic basketball games took place, bringing together star players from all over New York City, and where many different forms of music could be heard, ranging from do wop, to jazz to mambo and salsa, some of it coming from radios in peoples apartments, some of it performed live. More than a few interviewees mentioned the live drums played by Puerto Rican men as a constant fixture of Project life, a nuisance to some, an inspiration to many!

Significantly, this somewhat idyllic portrait of Project life did not last into the late Sixties, when Bronx Projects lost most of their white residents, and received an influx of poorer families than those that moved into them in the 1950's. Since this were also a time when budget cuts undermined the quality of maintenance in the projects, and led to cuts in social services, residents described an environment where trust had been replaced by fear, where heroin overdoses were common, and where you had to be careful coming home from work, getting into the project elevator, or opening up the door to your apartment.

But even in the 70's, when life in the Projects was much harder than it had been a decade earlier, remnants of community life still existed, with tough young people looking out for senior citizens, with project community centers filled with activity, and with outdoor music jams being performed with great regularity during summer months. Most importantly, while the private housing market in the South Bronx tanked, leading to an arson and disinvestment cycle that destroyed housing that one held several hundred thousand people, and left some neighborhoods looking as though it had suffered aerial bombardment, public housing survived intact! Not one public housing building was abandoned, not one project building burned! Indeed, troubled as it had become, public housing was the most desirable outcome for people who lived in Bronx tenement abandoned by their landlords, or under siege from arsonists. It was also an anchor for local businesses who knew that at least some of their customers could not be displaced by the forces destroying privately owned housing in the Bronx's poorest neighborhoods.

Nothing symbolized the stabilizing role of public housing in the most embattled Bronx neighborhoods than the role that public housing community centers played in shaping the rise of hip hop! Legendary DJ Afrika Bambaata's jams in the community center of the Bronx River Houses had global impact as they led to the creation of the Universal Zulu Nation, an organization to promote peace among youth of different backgrounds, which still exists. Hip Hop jams also took place within community centers of the Mitchell Houses in Mott Haven, where Pete DJ Jones spun records, and in the Murphy Houses in Tremont, where the Cold Crush Brothers were the major attraction.

Even today, there are huge waiting lists to get into public housing, as rents soar in privately owned housing in the poorest sections of the city,

When we think of the Bronx, not only its suffering and devastation, but its ethnic diversity, unmatched musical creativity, and ability to revive and rebuild when so many people had given up on it and left it for dead, we should honor the public housing projects of the Bronx as a place where dreams were pursued, community was built, and resilience in the face of hardship nurtured and preserved.

To paraphrase a great slogan from the 1960's public housing in the Bronx was much more part of the solution than part of the problem!