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# “Power to the Neighborhoods!”

## New York City Growth Politics, Neighborhood Liberalism, and the Origins of the Modern Housing Crisis

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**“Power to the Neighborhoods!”:  
New York City Growth Politics, Neighborhood Liberalism,  
and the Origins of the Modern Housing Crisis**

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## **Abstract**

Around 1970, an unprecedented movement emerged across major American cities calling for returning control of urban government to the neighborhood level. Although conservatives had long embraced “neighborhoodism,” a distinguishing feature of this political trend was its newfound appeal to Democrats who were disillusioned by the turbulent urban transformations of the first postwar decades. Using New York City as a case study, this white paper shows how this new “neighborhood liberalism” reordered the priorities that urban liberals expected of their elected officials and, in so doing, remade American cities to a degree that scholars are only beginning to understand. On no issue was this influence clearer than that of urban growth. Whereas large-scale pro-growth projects had been at the heart of the mid-century liberal vision, the new generation of neighborhood liberals saw growth as an outdated obsession that had wreaked self-evident harms on vulnerable urban communities. Subsequently, New Yorkers enacted laws and implemented processes that slowed the pace of growth by requiring neighborhood input in the real estate development process. By the eighties, anti-growth politics and neighborhood protection had become the common dialects through which New York liberals tried to make sense of, and stake claims within, their city’s shifting political environment. Yet neighborhood liberalism’s achievements were not necessarily those that its initial proponents anticipated or desired. Although the devolution of land-use policy brought stability to city life for a fortunate few, the restrictions on urban development that marked the era of neighborhood liberalism set the stage for the severe housing shortages that New York and similar cities would experience in the twenty-first century.

“I am more inclined to believe that most of these people are sincere and for some reason have just suspended, in the present context, their normal analytical and intellectual abilities.”  
– Mario Cuomo, on the Forest Hills crisis (1974)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low-Income Housing* (New York: Random House, 1974), 71.

Norman Mailer's house was the sort of building that people thought of when they thought of Brooklyn Heights: a tasteful façade of red brick, restrained but elegant neoclassical ornamentation, capped by a charming Mansard roof. It was a very different atmosphere from the cookie-cutter rowhouses around which Joe Flaherty had grown up in Windsor Terrace, the largely Irish Brooklyn neighborhood where he had dropped out of high school to work as a longshoreman before gaining an improbable foothold as a writer at the *Village Voice*.<sup>2</sup> Flaherty did not find himself in Brooklyn Heights that day in 1969 to admire the architecture, however. Mailer had invited him to a get-together to discuss the writer's potential candidacy for mayor of New York City. And when you were invited to one of Norman Mailer's parties, you didn't decline.

Inside, the drinks and conversation were already flowing—though the scene was considerably more orderly than some of Mailer's other gatherings, the most infamous of which, in 1960, had ended with the writer stabbing his wife with a penknife and being involuntarily committed to the Bellevue Hospital psychiatric ward for seventeen days. That party had also been intended to launch a Mailer campaign for mayor.<sup>3</sup> But a lot had changed in America—and in New York in particular—in the ensuing nine years. The idealism of the sixties was dead and buried underneath the “grim, high-rise, new-slum prisons on every city horizon,” as Mailer characterized New York's postwar housing projects.<sup>4</sup> As one television commentator observed, “New Yorkers have elected liberal-minded mayors for years, and for years New York's problems have just got worse.”<sup>5</sup>

Among those gathered at the Brooklyn Heights townhouse, the pervasive cynicism toward New York's liberal establishment was palpable. “When we get on TV with them, we'll just tell them they're full of shit,” declared the *New York Post* columnist Jimmy Breslin, another son of the city's Irish neighborhoods, from one corner of the room. “...Fuck them and their Mickey

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<sup>2</sup> William G. Blair, “Joe Flaherty, Writer and Newspaperman Noted for His Humor,” *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), Oct. 27, 1983; “Year: 1940; Census Place: New York, Kings, New York; Roll: m-t0627-02582; Page: 14B; Enumeration District: 24-1396,” Ancestry.com, 1940 United States Federal Census (Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Evan Hughes, “Norman Mailer Runs for Mayor, Stabs Wife,” *New York Magazine*, March 30, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Mailer, “Why Are We in New York?” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> “1969 Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin Campaign for Mayor | Kinolibrary,” The Kino Library, accessed Aug. 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkbTdkqYbG0>.



**Figure 1: A poster for the Mailer/Breslin mayoral ticket in the 1969 New York City mayoral election**

The two writers finished in fourth place in a crowded Democratic primary, but their ideas proved more enduring. (Original print in the author’s possession.)

Mouse issues—the city is lost.”<sup>6</sup> Flaherty believed, as well, that the moment was tailor-made for Mailer’s politics. As early as 1963, Mailer had bristled when an article in *Playboy* had described him as a “liberal.” His preferred label was “left conservative,” he retorted, and, similarly, his intent with his mayoral campaign was to bring together a “hip coalition of the left and right.”<sup>7</sup> At his campaign launch a few weeks later, having chosen Breslin as his running mate, he explained the values for which he stood. “Breslin and myself were not manufactured in large corporations,” he quipped to the journalists assembled. “We were, in fact, put together by piece work. And if

<sup>6</sup> Joe Flaherty, “The Mailer-Breslin Ticket: Vote the Rascals In,” *Village Voice*, April 24, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, “Political Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature: The Left-Conservative Vision of Norman Mailer,” *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 625.

you wish to look at us as products, then think of us as antique. Because we are very sentimental about the past.”<sup>8</sup>

Flaherty had doubts about Mailer’s seriousness as a candidate, but he shared the novelist’s disillusionment with the city’s old-guard liberals. Before joining the *Voice* full-time, he had done a stint in New York City government at the Human Resources Administration and had come away none too impressed with the “super-agencies,” as he called them, that were the hallmark of liberal governance under the New Deal Order. He agreed to serve as Mailer’s campaign manager.<sup>9</sup> Any lingering uncertainties he might have had about the depth of his new employer’s commitment were put to rest the following month when Mailer published his manifesto in the *New York Times Magazine*. The title, “Why Are We in New York?” was a pointed reference to his National Book Award–nominated 1967 novel, which had asked the same question about Vietnam.

“How is one to speak of the illness of a city?” Mailer began. His beloved New York was, in his estimation, “not too far from death.” Pollution blotted out the sky and gridlock blocked the streets. Rents and crime were up. The municipal government’s finances were increasingly precarious. Subway service had gotten worse and the trains were dirtier. Unlike Detroit or St. Louis, New York wasn’t hemorrhaging people—in fact, the city’s population had grown modestly over the course of the decade. But residents of New York—as in other American cities like it—seemed, for lack of a better word, more desperate. One-eighth of the city’s inhabitants relied on welfare payments, and many more sat just above the poverty line. Even among the better-off, there seemed to be a more fundamental decline in empathy and tolerance. “We are like wards in an orphan asylum,” Mailer wrote of his fellow citizens. “The shaping of the style of our lives is removed from us.”<sup>10</sup> But despite the perilous state of city life, the solution was, to Mailer, equally clear: “Power to the neighborhoods!” This was to be the watch-cry of his mayoralty—a near-complete devolution of municipal government up to and including the police, schools, and fire department. The possibilities were limitless. Some areas, such as Gravesend or Canarsie, would be reconstituted around their old white-ethnic identities. In African American neighborhoods like Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, training programs would teach unemployed

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<sup>8</sup> John J. Goldman, “Odd Couple of Candidates Liven N.Y. Mayoral Contest,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Flaherty, “The Mailer-Breslin Ticket.”

<sup>10</sup> Mailer, “Why Are We in New York?”



men how to renovate their crumbling tenements room by room and the dream of Black Power would become a reality. After all, said Breslin, “all we managed to do was make a mess out of their lives. Let them handle it themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Mailer’s campaign attracted support from an array of New Yorkers united by their left-of-center politics and their lack of association with—or overt opposition to—the city’s Democratic establishment. His message was most persuasive in the highbrow circles of Greenwich Village, Brooklyn Heights, and the Upper West Side.<sup>12</sup> Beyond Mailer’s cultural milieu, however, support for his candidacy declined precipitously. Mainstream newspapers, like the *Times*, remained skeptical of his seriousness. The writer did them no favors with his constant swearing, which rendered large portions of his stump speeches as well as his campaign slogan—“No More Bullshit”—completely unprintable.<sup>13</sup> Mailer also reneged on his promise to stop holding his infamous parties, only to find that as a mayoral candidate he could no longer count on stories about his drunken antics being confined to the society pages. By the time the Democratic primary rolled around, he was no longer competitive. He finished fourth out of five candidates, his strongest support coming from Manhattanites, who gave him just 10 percent of their vote.<sup>14</sup>

### **The New Neighborhoodism**

If voters’ reaction to the idea of a Mailer mayoralty was chilly, however, their view of his platform was warmer. In 1977, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran a series of articles on a “groundswell movement of citizens calling for the return of political and economic power to the local level.”<sup>15</sup> A nationwide Gallup poll conducted that year found only 8 percent of city dwellers wanted to move to the suburbs. Eighty-five percent, by contrast, said they took pride in

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<sup>11</sup> Flaherty, “The Mailer-Breslin Ticket.”

<sup>12</sup> Mailer received endorsements from, among others, the feminist activist Gloria Steinem, the prominent *Voice* reporter Jack Newfield, and the poet Sandra Hochman. In addition to Flaherty, he counted among his staff the journalist Peter Maas, later known for his biography of NYPD whistleblower Frank Serpico, as well as Joe Ferris, cofounder of the Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats. (“Independent Democrat,” in the New York context, being the term of art for liberals unaffiliated with Tammany Hall.) Sam Roberts, “Mailer’s Nonfiction Legacy: His 1969 Race for Mayor,” *NYT*, Nov. 18, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, “Mailer’s Nonfiction Legacy.”

<sup>14</sup> Our Campaigns, “New York City Mayor,” accessed Aug. 6, 2023, <https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=79294>.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 3.



their neighborhoods and their cities. Over 40 percent wished to join or already belonged to a neighborhood organization, and a majority said they would take “direct action in defense of their neighborhood when it is threatened.”<sup>16</sup> In places as diverse as Brooklyn and Boston, Pittsburgh and Portland, St. Louis and San Francisco, mayoral candidates and down-ballot politicians found that touting their neighborhood bona fides was the surest path to elected office. Baltimore, where neighborhood groups had killed a plan for an interstate highway and redirected its funds toward a new community nonprofit, began to host a “Parade of Neighborhoods” in 1970 as part of its first annual “city fair.” After just three years, the event already drew sixty-eight participating neighborhoods and 1.3 million attendees—a figure substantially higher than the population of the city.<sup>17</sup> By the end of the seventies, the National Commission on Neighborhoods—a group convened by the Carter administration to demonstrate the president’s support for the movement—counted at least eight thousand community organizations operating nationwide. New York City alone boasted thousands of block associations by the end of the seventies and tens of thousands of nonprofits, many of which had not existed a decade earlier.<sup>18</sup> Nor were these groups politically impotent. Between 1970 and 1977—a year after Gerald R. Ford declared the country’s bicentennial to also be the “year of the neighborhood”—more than forty cities across the country devolved some sort of formal governance role to neighborhood organizations.<sup>19</sup> Two hundred and fifty-two American cities changed their governmental structures between 1970 and 1981; of these, more than 70 percent moved from exclusively at-large elections toward decentralized systems featuring districts or wards.<sup>20</sup> Along with environmentalism and Ralph Nader’s consumer protection crusade, one journalist concluded, the neighborhood movement was quickly becoming “one of the most significant citizens’ movements of the 1970s.”<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Stewart Dill McBride, “Gallup: Neighborhoods Vital to Americans,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 23, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, 3; Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 240.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Bell and Virginia Held, “The Community Revolution,” *The Public Interest* no. 16 (Summer 1969): 143–44.

<sup>19</sup> Suleiman Osman, “The Decade of the Neighborhood,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Shulman and Julian Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 123; Richard Rich, *Participation and Representation in New York’s Community Boards*, working paper series, Center for Responsive Governance (Washington: CRG Press, 1983), 4–5, fig. 1; Tracy Neumann, “Privatization, Devolution, and Jimmy Carter’s National Urban Policy,” *Journal of Urban History* 40, no. 2 (2014): 286.

<sup>20</sup> Author’s calculations based on survey data in International City/County Management Association, “Municipal Form of Government 1981,” 2019, Harvard Dataverse, V1, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/S1B7MG>.

<sup>21</sup> John Hamer, “Neighborhood Control,” *Editorial Research Reports*, Oct. 31, 1975.

*New Yorker* writer Calvin Trillin, observing the street scene around the Greenwich Village townhouse that he and his wife had bought in 1969, coined a word to describe the phenomenon: “neighborhoodism.” “What some people are seeking in the low-rise neighborhoods of New York is not adventure or the bright lights,” he wrote of his fellow Villagers, “but some qualified urban version of what people in other parts of America would consider a normal life.”<sup>22</sup>

Neighborhoodism had its right-wing theorists, such as the sociologist Robert Nisbet, and its right-wing practitioners, such as pundit William F. Buckley Jr. and school integration opponent Louise Day Hicks, who ran for the mayoralties of New York and Boston, respectively, in 1965 and 1967.<sup>23</sup> The sixties and seventies, however, saw the neighborhood become an influential political trope on the left as well. There, the politics that emerged—what might be called neighborhood liberalism—drew on discussions about devolution that had first taken place a decade earlier among Great Society administrators, urban planners, and New Left thinkers. This ancestry could be seen in the many neighborhood organizations across the country whose leaders were veterans of the student movement and the civil rights movement. It was also visible in the many urban Democrats, such as New York’s Ed Koch, Boston’s Kevin White, and San Francisco’s George Moscone and Harvey Milk, who ascended to high office on platforms that praised neighborhood life and railed against the “downtown interests.” Above all, it was evident in the neighborhood advocates’ rejection of bureaucratic structures that were, to them, redolent of New Deal liberalism. “I no longer look back on the New Deal with nostalgia and now see that it was the beginning of the Imperial Presidency,” wrote Mary Perot Nichols, an influential editor at the *Village Voice* who advised Koch and White before becoming head of the public broadcasting station WNYC. “The best bulwark we have against fascism in this country is in small, difficult-to-penetrate units—small businesses and low-rise neighborhoods where people know each other, where they experience family and close friends.”<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of the turbulent urban transformations of the first postwar decades, the neighborhood thus became both the physical site and the conceptual foundation on which liberals

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin Trillin, “U.S. Journal: Manhattan: The Bubble Gum Store,” *The New Yorker*, July 21, 1975, 82.

<sup>23</sup> See Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); William F. Buckley Jr., *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966); Matthew F. Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Mary Perot Nichols, “Buildings Are Judgment—II,” *Ramparts*, May 1975, 50.

rebuilt their urban policy for the sixties, seventies, and beyond. As part of this process, the idea of the neighborhood ultimately changed liberals' ideas of the way that government should relate to its citizens, the institutions that ought to be empowered to mediate that relationship, and the social formations around which public policy should be designed. It also changed the basic goals that liberals sought to achieve through their urban policy. In an age of depersonalization and anonymity, liberalism would promote solidarity at the smallest scales of the city: the family, the home, the block, and the neighborhood. In an age when interpersonal relationships seemed smothered by government, corporate, and cultural bigness, liberalism would champion that which was grassroots, artisanal, local, and natural. In an age of instability wrought by a relentless gaze toward the future, liberalism would explore whether nostalgia and stability might guide cities toward more progressive ends—whether, in fact, nostalgia and stability might be liberal values in and of themselves. Such ideas behind neighborhood liberalism aligned closely with the political values of the young, white-collar, culturally cosmopolitan city dwellers whose numbers were growing across the Northeast and the West Coast. Among the most prominent nodes of neighborhood activism were Washington, DC's Adams Morgan, Boston's South End, Chicago's Lincoln Park, and San Francisco's Castro District.<sup>25</sup> Nowhere was this shift more evident, however, than in New York City. There, neighborhoodism blossomed amid the pervasive pessimism about the city's future that Mailer had described, which culminated in a fiscal crisis that itself was a turning point in New Yorkers' sense of social possibility.<sup>26</sup>

### **Making the Anti-Growth Machine**

But what did these changes mean in practice? First, neighborhoodism brought tangible reforms to the structure of New York's municipal government that not only devolved power to the community level but also chipped away at the dominant models of urban governance. In

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<sup>25</sup> See Christopher Lowen Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco: Policing and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Liberal Politics, 1950–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 233–34; Daniel Kay Hertz, *The Battle of Lincoln Park: Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Chicago* (Cleveland: Belt Publishing, 2018); David Morris and Karl Hess, *Neighborhood Power: The New Localism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Benjamin Looker, "Visions of Autonomy: The New Left and the Neighborhood Government Movement of the 1970s," *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 577–98.

<sup>26</sup> For a book-length study of New York's fiscal crisis, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017).

older cities across the United States since the nineteenth century, chief among these had been the political machine, known in New York politics as Tammany Hall. The machine system was an intricate web of reciprocal ethnic, geographic, and economic alliances whose central objective was to control the distribution of government power. Although successfully challenged on occasion by various coalitions of “good-government” reformers, Tammany had remained a persistent and successful force in the city’s politics for more than a century. By the seventies, however, its model of urban governance had faltered as fiscal retrenchment and racial animus caused Democrats of all stripes to conclude that they were now getting less out of the machine than they were putting in.<sup>27</sup> It was no coincidence that, at this pivotal moment, the neighborhood movement came to the fore, offering a vision of city government in which decision-making authority would rest neither with the network of machine bosses and underlings nor with aloof technocrats but rather would be returned to the community level. Through changes to the New York City charter, most notably the formalization of the powers of the city’s community boards, neighborhood activism redesigned city government and helped hasten the end of the machine era of New York politics.

Second, neighborhoodism encouraged a reordering of the policy priorities that liberal New Yorkers expected of their politicians. The New Deal Era focus on broad-based efforts to boost the economy, secure labor rights, build a welfare state, and erect major public-works projects diminished in importance. In fact, to many such liberals, that old style of “big” liberalism—

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<sup>27</sup> For more detailed studies of Tammany Hall and other urban machines, see Michael Kazin, *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* (New York: Picador, 2022); Jessica Trounstine, *Political Monopolies in American Cities: The Rise and Fall of Bosses and Reformers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York: Liveright, 2014); Peter McCaffery, *When Bosses Ruled Philadelphia: The Emergence of the Republican Machine, 1867–1933* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Thomas M. Guterbock, *Machine Politics in Transition: Party and Community in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Bruce M. Stave, *The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh Machine Politics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970); John Christopher Walter, *The Harlem Fox: J. Raymond Jones and Tammany, 1920–1970* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); David C. Hammack, *Power and Society: Greater New York at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982); Daniel O. Prosterman, *Defining Democracy: Electoral Reform and the Struggle for Power in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Charles LaCerra, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Tammany Hall of New York* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997); James Duane Bolin, *Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky, 1880–1940* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow’s End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840–1985* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

which endorsed strong federal intervention in urban affairs and the physical remaking of neighborhoods to effect social progress—now seemed dubious if not discredited entirely, a chief cause, perhaps, of the diminishing quality of city life that Mailer and his supporters identified.<sup>28</sup> Instead, urban liberalism’s new priorities reflected smaller-scale, community-centered concerns: garbage collection, availability of local green space, and access to other amenities that were seen as essential to keeping the city a desirable place to live in an era of explosive suburbanization. There was no issue on which neighborhood liberalism’s influence was clearer, however, than that of growth and development. Whereas support of large-scale urban development and redevelopment projects intended to keep cities desirable and competitive had been at the heart of the mid-century liberal vision, neighborhoodism instead offered a nostalgic assurance that a purer kind of progress could be realized through a patchwork of self-governing, small-scale polities, each charged with charting its own future. This new generation of neighborhood liberals saw growth as not only far from an unalloyed good but, in fact, an outdated obsession that had wreaked self-evident harms on vulnerable urban communities and was incongruent with the goals of their movement.

That opposition to growth and support for neighborhood power would go hand in hand came as little surprise. In cities like New York, old-fashioned machine politics and the related but distinct concept of the urban “growth machine” had always been inextricably intertwined.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For a study of New York City under this previous liberal regime, see Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> In 1976, the sociologist Harvey Molotch first articulated his theory of the “city as a growth machine,” which he expanded upon some years later with John R. Logan. In their view, members of cities’ business communities (and particularly real estate developers) collude to form a boosterish “growth consensus” that glorifies the use of government for urban expansion and wealth accumulation above all other possible state functions, aided by trade unions, utilities, a handpicked cadre of politicians, and a favorably disposed local press. Although Molotch and Logan rejected the traditional Marxist view that the neighborhood cannot form the basis of class consciousness as such and workers are thus incapable of organizing against capitalists on a neighborhood basis, they dismissed anti-growth community groups as “naturally disorganized” because of their disinterest in profit. Variations of the growth machine thesis subsequently appeared in other scholars’ work, such as Clarence Stone’s study of twentieth-century Atlanta, which used the term “regime politics” to describe the delicate balance of Black and white pro-growth interest groups. See Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (Sept. 1976): 309–32; John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989), especially chaps. 1, 3, 8. For an overview of the Marxist interpretation, see John Emmeus Davis, *Contested Ground: Collective Action and the Urban Neighborhood* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), chap. 1. For a revision of the

Machines had been the means through which pro-growth liberals had carried out their ambitious renewal schemes at the local level. In turn, the core constituents of the machine—labor unions, bureaucrats, politicians, and certain local business owners—had prospered from the tax revenue and increase in demand for city services that urban growth invited. Into the seventies and eighties, however, New York and cities like it began to see liberals ground their demands for neighborhood quality-of-life improvements in a broader spatial argument about the *undesirability* of growth and its deleterious effect on the urban environment. The popularity of neighborhood thinking thus provided a conceptual seedbed in which antidevelopment attitudes could not only germinate but also grow into a progressive mold. To these Democrats, the party machine’s aloof attitude and undesirable physical changes in the “low-rise neighborhoods,” as Nichols and Trillin had both put it, were interrelated products of the same pro-growth tendencies of centralized urban governance. By contrast, decision-making at smaller scales of the city would guarantee the community stability and *absence* of growth and change that they believed were essential to the achievement of other liberal goals. Mailer’s campaign literature illustrated this belief, suggesting that New Yorkers “achieve local control of education, housing, sanitation, parks, and police” and, in so doing, “kiss off the boredom of the Democratic Machine!” (Figure 1).

Other scholars have described the emergence of neighborhood-oriented white-collar liberals in cities like New York as a challenge to machine dominance of Democratic politics.<sup>30</sup> Connecting that story to the city’s growth debates of the seventies and eighties, however, sheds new light on how the issue of community control reconfigured the Democrats’ urban voter base and helped forge a broad-based and enduring governing coalition of its own—what might be called an *anti-growth machine*. In upper-middle-class areas like Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village, neighborhood activists fought projects as varied as high-rises, hot dog stands, and any other developments that threatened their Jane Jacobs-esque ideal of city living. Meanwhile, in middle-class white neighborhoods whose residents once formed Tammany’s rank and file, neighborhoodism became a cudgel wielded to resist racial integration and affordable housing. If the bulldozer had symbolized the great ambitions of machine liberalism as well as its

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“growth machine” thesis, see William A. Fischel, *The Homevoter Hypothesis: How Home Values Influence Local Government Taxation, School Finance, and Land-Use Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> See Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119–63.

tendency toward creative destruction, the low-rise neighborhood then came to symbolize the alternative: a politics that was not only skeptical about physical renewal but believed the insatiable quest for urban growth was the fundamental reason that the Tammany coalition had become unworkable in the first place. Subsequently, New Yorkers enacted laws and implemented processes that slowed the pace of development by requiring neighborhood input. In the parts of the city where the anti-growth vision was most appealing, these reforms became the neighborhood liberals' most pressing goal; today, it remains their most enduring legacy.

By the eighties, anti-growth politics and neighborhood protection had become the common dialects through which New York liberals of various ideological persuasions tried to make sense of and stake claims within their city's shifting political environment. And their work did, indeed, resemble a machine in its eventual ability to dictate distribution of a widely sought-after government power—control of land use—to an array of neighborhood groups in exchange for their fealty to a central cause. This quality ultimately proved essential to neighborhood liberalism's persistent popularity. Just as the Tammany machine had collapsed because of its own internal contradictions, however, it would also inherently limit the anti-growth machine's redistributive potential through its tolerance of forms of community control that were illiberal or even downright discriminatory.

### **Scaling Down Government in New York City**

Such was the environment in which Norman Mailer burst onto New York City's political scene in 1969. Even before Mailer's failed campaign, New Yorkers were, in fact, already familiar with a version of a smaller-scale, more neighborhood-based liberalism. In the previous mayoral race, the then congressman John V. Lindsay had made decentralization a key plank of his successful campaign platform, pledging to create a network of "little city halls" across the five boroughs. After taking office in 1966, however, most of Lindsay's efforts did not end up meeting his grand ambitions. A recalcitrant Democratic city council refused to allocate funds for the liberal Republican's scheme, even going so far as to override the mayor's veto of a budget that did not include money for the little city halls.<sup>31</sup> When Lindsay tried to run an end-around on the council by opening three offices—one each in Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the

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<sup>31</sup> Charles G. Bennett, "Democrats Spurn Little City Halls," *NYT*, Feb. 2, 1966; Clayton Knowles, "Lindsay Pressing Little City Halls," *NYT*, Feb. 17, 1966; Terence Smith, "Lawmakers Bar Little City Halls," *NYT*, June 24, 1966;



South Bronx—thanks in part to a private donation, Comptroller Mario Procaccino refused to sign off on even a \$500 expense report submitted by them.<sup>32</sup> Despite this opposition, the program managed to hobble into 1968, even opening new bureaus in Harlem and Corona, Queens.<sup>33</sup>

After winning his reelection bid against Procaccino (who had defeated Mailer in the Democratic primary), Lindsay continued to prosecute the devolution issue against all odds. His next attempt, in 1972, resulted in the creation of the city's Office of Neighborhood Government (ONG). Like the little city halls that preceded it, ONG was tasked with coordinating services like firefighting, city planning, and trash collection through an array of new local offices, now called "district service cabinets." Funded in part by a federal grant, ONG proved surprisingly popular among bureaucrats. More than 80 percent of the civil service believed the cabinets were a useful idea, one poll found, and 60 percent of local civic leaders and politicians approved of ONG as well. At the same time, however, the researchers found that the quality of city services had not measurably improved and New Yorkers outside of government barely knew of ONG's existence at all.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, ONG was not able to overcome the same opposition from the borough presidents and the city council that the little city halls had faced. Lindsay's announcement in 1973 that he would not seek a third term sounded the program's death knell. His successor, Abraham D. Beame, cut ONG's budget by two-thirds before eventually ending it in the mid-seventies with little fanfare.<sup>35</sup>

Lindsay's devolution battles were proof of the roadblocks that supporters of decentralization still encountered into the early seventies. Yet, these struggles arose, in large part, because of the particular *kind* of neighborhood liberalism that Lindsay's vision represented. Fundamentally, ONG and the little city halls were an attempt to make it easier for New Yorkers to access constituent services, normally the responsibility of the city's Democratic machine. A typical case was Evelyn Blacknall, a Brownsville mother of four, who successfully appealed to the service director at her local little city hall after she was denied welfare assistance by a more distant administrator. In all, the South Bronx little city hall received more than thirteen hundred written

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<sup>32</sup> Sydney H. Schanberg, "Procaccino Turns Down Bills for Lindsay's Little City Halls," *NYT*, Dec. 24, 1966.

<sup>33</sup> Charles G. Bennett, "Lindsay Steps Up City Halls Drive," *NYT*, July 13, 1968.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Pecorella, *Community Power in a Postreform City* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 152–65; Roger Sanjek, *The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 46–49.

<sup>35</sup> Steven R. Weisman, "Beame to Reshuffle Neighborhood Unit," *NYT*, Dec. 14, 1974; Robert McG. Thomas Jr., "Local City Offices Soon to Be Closed," *NYT*, Oct. 19, 1974.

complaints between December 1966 and May 1967 on matters ranging from trash collection to crime. Although local volunteers showed up on occasion to help process the complaints, the offices were run by professionals with prior experience in the Lindsay administration.<sup>36</sup>

The structure of Lindsay's devolved-bureaucracy approach was reflected in the political debates over its future. Its supporters, such as the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the Ford Foundation, were a bipartisan who's who of reform interests in city politics. Meanwhile, its opponents—Procaccino, most of the borough presidents, and the city council—represented their own awkward coalition of anti-Lindsay Republicans and machine Democrats. In Lindsay's scheme, the latter group sensed an effort to undermine its traditional position as a bridge between City Hall and New York's neighborhoods. This role historically involved the distribution of patronage jobs; more broadly, however, it was to grease the wheels of local governance, ensuring that city services were delivered in a manner that satisfied residents. Debating the matter in the council chambers, Republican Joseph Modugno of Queens summed up this view. "What we have here," he said, gesturing to his fellow councilmen, "is thirty-seven little city halls."<sup>37</sup> In Lindsay's argument that neighborhood offices would "humanize" municipal government, Modugno and like-minded Democrats heard an accusation that the machine had finally run out of oil—or, at least, that only some neighborhoods had access to the mechanics. The fact that Lindsay put four of his five initial little city halls in majority-Black parts of the city—communities that at best had been junior partners in Tammany governance—likely did little to assuage their fear that the program represented an attempt by Lindsay and his reformers to create a new, more radically redistributive machine of their own.

Like so much of his political career, Lindsay's vision for neighborhoodism thus represented a halfway house between an era of liberalism that was rapidly ending and one that was just beginning. On the one hand, the mayor's desire to put bureaucrats on the front lines—particularly in Black neighborhoods—acknowledged that the divide between such areas and City Hall was a pressing problem. On the other, Lindsay's effort still showed that faith, characteristic of the mid-century liberalism in which he had come of age, in the power of the bureaucracy to help people if only the bureaucracy could be brought closer to them. Although the positive

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<sup>36</sup> "Three Little City Halls Helping Thousands Fight City Hall as Opposition Mounts in the Council," *NYT*, June 9, 1967; Maurice Carroll, "4 District Heads Named by Mayor," *NYT*, Jan. 5, 1972.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, "Lawmakers Bar Little City Halls."

reception that the idea received from some quarters showed that there was a constituency for his approach, it was one of diminishing size and political influence. For the neighborhood movement to take root in New York or anywhere else, it would need to do so on a more broadly appealing platform, around different issues from the ones that had motivated Lindsay.

### **The Rise of the Community Boards**

ONG and the little city halls represented just a fraction of the many ideas that were emerging at this time for some sort of formalized neighborhood role in New York's civic life. In 1968, as the little city halls were struggling to survive machine Democrats' strict scrutiny, the city council passed a bill subsequently designated Local Law 39. The legislation granted New York's community boards the power to hold hearings, create development plans, and advise elected officials about neighborhood affairs. None of the city's major news outlets reported on the law's passage, but the omission was understandable. Not many New Yorkers had heard of, much less cared about, the obscure bodies to which Local Law 39 referred. The few who did knew that their history was not exactly the stuff of bestsellers. In 1951, Manhattan borough president and future mayor Robert Wagner had established twelve "community planning councils" across the island following a proposal published four years earlier by the Citizens Union, a good-government group. A revision of the city's charter in 1963 expanded these committees, renamed "community planning boards," to cover the entire city, with membership comprising the local city councilman and volunteers appointed by the relevant borough president. But the boards' role—to the extent they had any at all—had always been vague and strictly advisory. Even some of their own members rejected the notion that they should have any real authority. One, from Manhattan's Community Planning Board 7, wrote in 1966 that he was "frightened...that volunteer, citizen groups like ours should be entrusted with decision-making responsibility like deciding zoning variances."<sup>38</sup> By the late sixties, borough presidents eager to hand out ceremonial titles to friends and allies had caused the size of some boards to swell to as many as

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<sup>38</sup> State Charter Revision Commission for New York City, *Community Boards* (New York: State Charter Revision Commission for New York City, 1974), 18–21; Subcommittee on Coterminality of the Mayor's Charter Implementation Committee, "Recommendations for a Preliminary Community District Map," Sept. 1976, folder "Community Planning Board #2," box 4, Brooklyn Heights Association Records, Brooklyn Public Library – Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn, NY (hereafter BHA); Untitled document labeled "Office of the Pres. Borough of Manhattan," folder 14, box 14, Records of the Washington Square Association, Inc., MC 94, New York University Archives, New York University, New York, NY (hereafter RWSA).

seventy-three members. Sometimes, these appointees did not even live in the neighborhoods they purportedly represented.<sup>39</sup>

Besides giving them the less cumbersome name of “community boards,” Local Law 39 clarified the boards’ powers and drew renewed attention to their existence. But it did not endow them with any significant influence. The year after the law’s passage, one city council member was still referring to the groups as “toothless” and lamented the “virtually meaningless responsibilities” they had been given.<sup>40</sup> Still, the fact that politicians now cared about the boards at all indicated a level of incipient interest in a devolved municipal governance that differed from Lindsay’s schemes.<sup>41</sup> Because their responsibility was largely unrelated to the provision of city services, the community boards did not infringe on the machine’s bailiwick. And because the borough presidents, with the advice of the city council, controlled appointments, they could rest assured that the boards’ existence did not represent an attempt by the mayor to undermine their authority. The boards “are comparable to the New England town meetings,” noted a young Greenwich Village councilman named Ed Koch with approval, “and the most immediate way for New Yorkers to maintain a voice in local government.”<sup>42</sup> Although it may have been clear what the community boards were *not* expected to do, however, what their “voice” meant in practice was less certain—and sure to vary, depending on the community in question. “I have always thought that when one of the new tree-planting, block-party-holding, neighbor-meeting block associations is scratched deeply, what scratches back has some attributes of the old, exclusionary, property-crazed homeowners associations,” wrote Calvin Trillin. “On the other hand, I like the block parties.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “City Leaders Fight for Control of Community Planning Boards,” *NYT*, Feb. 20, 1968.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas P. Ronan, “Local Planners Held ‘Toothless,’” *NYT*, Feb. 2, 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Lindsay was, in fact, a supporter of expanding the boards’ authority and would later try to incorporate their input into decisions made by ONG. He was largely unsuccessful, but certain community boards were given the authority to hold up/down votes on some funding decisions. See Edward C. Burks, “Lindsay Proposes 62 Local Boards to Help Run City,” *NYT*, June 5, 1970; Ralph Blumenthal, “Community Board Spending \$525,000 as It Wishes,” *NYT*, Nov. 15, 1971; Glenn R. Singer, “Rockaway Neighborhood Group Gets \$750,000 to Spend,” *NYT*, Aug. 19, 1973.

<sup>42</sup> “City Leaders Fight.”

<sup>43</sup> Trillin, “The Bubble Gum Store,” 82.

## Controversy in Forest Hills

On the opposite end of the city from the Village, one incident illustrated Trillin's point with particular clarity. In 1966, the Lindsay administration announced its intention to build about eight hundred units of low-income housing across seven new buildings in Forest Hills, a middle-class, suburban, and largely Jewish neighborhood in eastern Queens.<sup>44</sup> The project—one of the last of the “scatter site” plans that constituted the final wave of mid-century public housing construction—had originally been intended for the nearby neighborhood of Corona, which was majority-Italian and somewhat less affluent. But residents there had objected, causing housing officials to set their sights instead on a vacant lot at the corner of 108th Street and Sixty-Second Road, just on the other side of the Long Island Expressway.<sup>45</sup> The announcement of the move was so quiet that the chair of Queens Community Planning Board 6, which served Forest Hills, learned of it only from reading a local newspaper.<sup>46</sup> Immediately, he and his fellow board members passed a resolution in opposition, though it carried no force of law.<sup>47</sup>

For several years, it seemed as though the public housing might not be built in Forest Hills anyway, as disputes over funding, design, and even soil conditions at the site threatened to derail the project. In 1971, however, as it became clear that Lindsay intended to move forward with the plan, a grassroots opposition began to coalesce. Although several community groups and local religious leaders supported the new housing, others suspected—not entirely unreasonably—that Forest Hills had been chosen on the assumption that a neighborhood of reliably liberal Jewish voters would be less likely to fight the project than the borough's other ethnic enclaves.<sup>48</sup> Jews had long been disproportionately represented within the ranks of New York's progressive establishment. In the 1965 mayoral election, a three-way race, the liberal Republican Lindsay had won 45 percent of the Jewish vote citywide and 56 percent in Forest Hills—far more than the Tammany Democrat Procaccino.<sup>49</sup> It was, observed the Queens attorney and future New

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel A. Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point: Race, Public Housing, and the Forest Hills Controversy, 1945–1975” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2005), 249.

<sup>45</sup> Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 11–12.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Victor Gershowitz, “Neighborhood Power Structure: Decision-Making in Forest Hills” (PhD diss., New York University, 1974), 119.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Gill, “‘A Decent Home in a Suitable Environment’: The Struggles to Desegregate Public Housing in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010), 63.

<sup>48</sup> Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point,” 223.

<sup>49</sup> Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point,” 209.

York governor Mario Cuomo, a neighborhood of people “liberally disposed—people who were concerned with sociology, politics, and government.”<sup>50</sup>

By the late sixties, however, Jewish opinion on Lindsay had started to sour. The catalyzing event was the mayor’s handling of the so-called Ocean Hill–Brownsville affair. Intended to give the city’s African American communities more control over their children’s schools, the decentralization effort had resulted in a majority-Black Brooklyn school board firing ten white teachers, nine of whom were Jewish. The political fallout was acrimonious, as the teachers’ union struck in support of its members and charges of anti-Semitism were lobbed against prominent Black community groups, who, in turn, accused the teachers of racism.<sup>51</sup>

Ocean Hill–Brownsville marked a nadir in the relationship between Jewish and Black New Yorkers, once firm allies in the city’s left-liberal political spaces. Its reverberations were felt not just in central Brooklyn but miles away in neighborhoods like Forest Hills as well. There, the simmering tensions over the proposed public housing—whose residents, it was assumed, would be poor and majority-minority—reached a boiling point on November 18, 1971. That night, a mob of locals gathered at the intended site of the housing project and threw flaming torches and rocks at the construction trailers parked there. Two blocks away, an overflow crowd of protesters filled the meeting room of the Annadale Civic Association. One person held a sign: “FOREST HILLS DEMANDS COMMUNITY CONTROL.”<sup>52</sup>

The protesters were ultimately unsuccessful in their fight to stop construction of the housing project. In discussions with Mario Cuomo, however, whom Lindsay had asked to serve as mediator, Forest Hills residents were able to extract significant concessions in terms of the type of project that would be built. By the summer of 1972, the city had agreed to cut the amount of new housing in half, to three towers of just twelve stories each, and to limit residents to those who already lived in Forest Hills and nearby neighborhoods.<sup>53</sup> Still, the project’s most vocal opponents remained undeterred. Nearly one thousand residents attended a community board meeting in September 1972 to discuss the plan; sixty-eight of the seventy residents who spoke opposed it. A few days later, the board voted unanimously to reject the compromise. They were

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<sup>50</sup> Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> For more on Ocean Hill–Brownsville, see Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Murray Schumach, “Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project,” *NYT*, Nov. 19, 1971.

<sup>53</sup> Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point,” 260.

overruled the following month, however, by two higher-level government bodies empowered to make decisions regarding land use: first, the City Planning Commission and, then, the Board of Estimate, an eight-person body whose members included the mayor, the city comptroller, the city council president, and the presidents of the city's five boroughs.<sup>54</sup> As a result of the concessions made in the compromise agreement, when the apartments finally opened a few years later, 70 percent of the tenants were white.<sup>55</sup>

Forest Hills was hardly the most successful or the most violent instance of a majority-white neighborhood opposing postwar public housing, in New York City or elsewhere. Yet many who watched the events in Queens believed it represented a sea change in neighborhood politics in a way that other incidents had not. The New Yorkers who attended the hearings and picketed the construction site were not conservatives. Rather, they were Lindsay's own base of liberals—"middle-aged, ordinarily non-militant people," according to the *Times*—who were turning the reformist mayor's language of community control against him even as he struggled to implement his plans for neighborhood governance in less fortunate parts of the city.<sup>56</sup> As the leader of the housing opponents argued, "Do they mean that community participation is only applicable in East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem and Brownsville and not for the middle-income people of Forest Hills?" Without much effort, it seemed, the Forest Hills debacle had exposed the fatal flaw at the heart of liberal decentralist logic. Observers noted the unlikely parallels they saw between the struggles taking place in Forest Hills and the Black Power movement then ascendant in some of the city's African American neighborhoods. "They're aping the street pattern," remarked an official from the American Jewish Committee, which supported the housing project. "They're not waiting on the Establishment. To the black militants, the N.A.A.C.P. was Uncle Tom. To the Jewish militants, we're Uncle Sam."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 127–28, 135. In 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the board was unconstitutional because the five borough presidents each had one vote even though they represented boroughs that varied greatly in population. In a 1989 referendum, voters approved a revised city charter that abolished the Board of Estimate, transferred most of its land-use powers to an enlarged city council, and gave some new powers to the City Planning Commission. See *Board of Estimate of City of New York v. Morris* (489 U.S. 688) and Alan Finder, "Charter Revision Wins Approval, Shifting Many Powers to Council," *NYT*, Nov. 9, 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Andrea Gill, "'We Will Not Be Forced Out Again': The Scatter Site Housing Controversy in Forest Hills, Queens and the Reshaping of Public Policy" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2004), 122.

<sup>56</sup> Schumach, "Angry Crowd in Forest Hills."

<sup>57</sup> Walter Goodman, "The Battle of Forest Hills: Who's Ahead?," *NYT*, Feb. 20, 1972.



Despite these rumblings of unease, the predominant liberal response to Forest Hills was not backlash but acquiescence. With Lindsay's political career finished following a quixotic try for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination—during which Forest Hills opponents had harassed him at campaign stops from Massachusetts to Florida—the three Democrats most likely to succeed him all declared during the 1973 mayoral race that they would have opposed the original Forest Hills plan as well. Among them, the only difference of opinion was whether residents should have the right to dictate who lived in the housing project, or whether the project should not be built at all.<sup>58</sup> “The community was not consulted about the proposed project until it rose up in protest,” said Comptroller Abraham D. Beame, the eventual victor, who fell into the former camp. “I believe the greatest grievance of the people in the community is their feeling that they have some say in their own destiny.”<sup>59</sup> Even politicians not directly involved in the controversy felt it advantageous to weigh in on the issue. Ed Koch, by then a U.S. congressman, went so far as to travel out to the construction site to express his solidarity with the demonstrators, even though his district covered only Manhattan. “I don't blame them for protesting,” Koch told a journalist there. “These people moved out of the slums because of fear and worked all their lives to do it. This project would turn into a slum in no time.”<sup>60</sup>

### **The Anti-Growth Education of Ed Koch**

Most of the residents on whom Koch was heaping praise probably did not recognize the bald, rather unremarkable-looking Greenwich Villager who had ventured out to Queens to join them that day. But his presence was perhaps the most telling indication yet of the ideological shifts taking place in city politics because of neighborhood liberalism's new prominence. Koch had gotten his start in politics as a cofounder of the Village Independent Democrats, a group of liberals opposed to Tammany Hall's vise grip on the neighborhood's politics. After a disastrous freshman campaign for state assembly in 1962, however, Koch had pivoted away from anti-machine rhetoric and toward a new emphasis on more mundane neighborhood concerns. This focus on “potholes” instead of “patronage,” as a colleague put it, helped him achieve an unlikely

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<sup>58</sup> Emanuel Perlmutter, “Mayoral Aspirants Divide on Forest Hills Housing,” *NYT*, May 14, 1973.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point,” 272.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Wishnoff, “The Tolerance Point,” 288.

victory against Tammany chief Carmine De Sapio in the race for Democratic Party district leader the following year.

Once in office, Koch established a reputation as a politician who was concerned first and foremost with protecting the Village's balance of cultural liberalism and quality-of-life politics. Although consistently left-wing on issues like gay rights and marijuana possession, he also helped start the MacDougal Street Area Neighborhood Association to rein in the raucous nightlife scene of the cabarets and coffeehouses, which helped him curry favor with homeowners and other more conservative residents. The group proposed measures like regulation of restaurant canopies, mandatory closing times for businesses, restrictions on sightseeing buses, an overnight parking ban, and a crackdown on transients and prostitutes loitering in Washington Square Park.<sup>61</sup> His opposition to NYU's plan to build a high-rise library overlooking the park prompted one frustrated university administrator to compare him to Ralph Nader. (The remark was not intended as a compliment, but he took it as one.<sup>62</sup>) When Koch launched his successful campaign for city council in 1967, he recruited none other than Jane Jacobs—who also opposed the new NYU library—to serve as his campaign cochair.<sup>63</sup>

Quickly bored with his seat on the relatively powerless council, Koch opted to run for Congress in 1968. He defeated his Republican opponent by a narrow three-point margin, becoming the first Democrat to hold the seat in thirty-two years.<sup>64</sup> Once in Congress, Koch continued to build his reputation as a defender of neighborhood interests in a wide variety of neighborhoods that were not his own. He supported efforts by the Carnegie Hill Neighborhood Association and the Save Our Neighborhood Committee to introduce more restrictive zoning on the Upper East Side and to protect two small parks in Tudor City, preventing the construction of high-rises in those areas.<sup>65</sup> He even dabbled in historic preservation, throwing his weight behind a successful bid to landmark a turn-of-the-century mansion across from the Metropolitan

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<sup>61</sup> Jonathan M. Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 33–60 *passim*.

<sup>62</sup> “‘Threat’ by N.Y.U. Charged by Koch,” *NYT*, Aug. 27, 1966.

<sup>63</sup> Soffer, *Ed Koch*, 71.

<sup>64</sup> Our Campaigns, “NY – District 17 – History,” April 23, 2006, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.ourcampaigns.com/ContainerHistory.html?ContainerID=556>.

<sup>65</sup> Edward C. Burks, “Transfer of Air Rights Is Key to Downtown Skyscraper Deal,” *NYT*, June 11, 1970; “Plan to Build on Parkland Upsets Tudor City,” *NYT*, July 31, 1972; James F. Clarity, “5 Lawmakers to Oppose Plans to Build in Tudor City Parks,” *NYT*, Nov. 14, 1971.

Museum of Art, which blocked a twenty-five-story apartment building proposed for the site.<sup>66</sup> That part of the city could not have been more different from Forest Hills aesthetically and politically, but this same attitude was the reason Koch found himself in the far reaches of Queens talking with middle-class Jewish protesters early in 1972. There, he was espousing something new: a quality-of-life politics that hybridized localist and reformist, liberal and conservative strains of thinking while pledging no allegiance to any one of those camps. Though raised in the participatory anti-Tammany tradition of the Village Independent Democrats, he had watched Lindsay's failed experiments in neighborhood government and knew the risk of staking too much political capital on decentralization efforts that antagonized the city's entrenched interests. While a proud advocate of civil rights for marginalized groups, he was also keenly aware of the ways in which those rights could conflict with the demands of the middle-class masses who, as the foundation of New York's neighborhood revival, deserved recognition as well. And although the upwardly mobile Koch lacked the elite pedigrees of those who were nostalgic about a long-lost version of Manhattan, he had absorbed Jane Jacobs's teachings about the beneficent power of small urban spaces, properly cultivated and protected. As Koch's career progressed and his ambitions grew, his talent for synthesizing these competing demands on urban liberalism—what his biographer Jonathan Soffer called “selectively countering the counterculture”—would serve him well.<sup>67</sup> They would also have a profound effect on the trajectory of the city and its relationship with growth in the final decades of the twentieth century.

### **“Are We Always Supposed to Be against Things?”**

The way in which Forest Hills prompted politicians like Koch to break from the liberal line on public housing troubled some in the city's Democratic circles. “The idea of absolute community control, while superficially appealing, cannot work in this city,” wrote Cuomo in a diary he kept during his time as negotiator. The young attorney's role in the settlement, as well as in similar disputes elsewhere in Queens, had burnished his reputation as a fair-minded interlocutor between middle-class outer-borough residents and City Hall. But even he foresaw nothing good coming of the city's continuing down the path of decentralization. “Obviously, were each community, like Forest Hills, to have the last word on public projects within its

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<sup>66</sup> Deirdre Carmody, “Ban Asked on Razing of 2 Townhouses for a High-Rise,” *NYT*, July 25, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> Soffer, *Ed Koch*, 58.

boundaries,” Cuomo concluded, “public projects and, therefore, city life would be almost totally stultified.”<sup>68</sup>

The future governor and political rival of Koch likely knew, however, that with each passing day his opinion was held by fewer and fewer of his fellow liberals. In December 1971, Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton remarked on the “deluge” of applications that his office had received to serve on community boards, which he attributed to the events in Forest Hills. A sign of things to come was a meeting of a Bronx community board that same month, where the hot-button agenda item was a proposed home in the district for wayward youths. As the board heard testimony about the plan, a journalist observed an opponent who “stomped up to the microphone.” His statement was a simple question: “How do I get on this board?” The man was handed an application and told he would be welcome as a member. “The scene is being repeated in many of the city’s 62 community board districts these days,” reported the *Times*.<sup>69</sup> One Queens board member observed the role that he and his colleagues were starting to play in city politics with some apprehension. “Even though most of our citizenry are against this, aren’t we obligated to think of the future, of the needs in ten or fifteen years?” he asked of a highway proposal being debated. “Are we always supposed to be against things?”<sup>70</sup>

In a final irony for John Lindsay’s mayoralty, it was the emergence of liberals in the Forest Hills mold that put the cause of neighborhood power in the city on a nearly unstoppable path. When, in 1972, Governor Nelson Rockefeller convened a bipartisan commission to review New York City’s charter, he cited the widespread dissatisfaction with the structure of the city government as the impetus.<sup>71</sup> Polling conducted that year found that only 8 percent of New Yorkers thought the condition of their neighborhood had improved over the past five years, while 80 percent favored some form of decentralization.<sup>72</sup> In a preliminary report published soon after, the commission confirmed that devolution was to be the order of the day. After just a few months of research, its members had concluded that there existed “a pervasive feeling that regardless of who the city’s elective and appointive office holders may be, New Yorkers cannot

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<sup>68</sup> Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 79.

<sup>69</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “Community Boards Draw Growing List of Applicants,” *NYT*, Dec. 13, 1971.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Arnold, “Queens,” part of series “Community Planning Boards: Louder Voice for People,” *NYT*, Jan. 28, 1971.

<sup>71</sup> William E. Farrell, “City Charter Unit Plans Full Study,” *NYT*, Oct. 9, 1972.

<sup>72</sup> Pecorella, *Community Power in a Postreform City*, 126.

get done what they want in their own neighborhoods.” To combat this “sense of remoteness and apathy,” they wrote, they would make recommendations “to bring government closer to the people, to make government more answerable to people, and to grant people more meaningful participation in their government.”<sup>73</sup>

Much of the charter commission’s work focused on the role of the community boards. Members of the commission attended meetings of fifty-nine of the sixty-two boards, sent surveys to some eight hundred board members, and interviewed many of them personally. Although the neighborhood groups had grown in informal influence since the early sixties, the commission concluded, they remained “essentially advisory boards, with no real power to force municipal government to respond to local needs and requests.” On some matters, they found strong commonalities across the five boroughs. Nearly three-quarters of board members they interviewed were Democrats and nearly four in five had lived in New York City for at least twenty years.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the commission found significant differences from neighborhood to neighborhood in how the boards were perceived. In Bushwick, just 5 percent of residents had heard of the community boards at all. By contrast, Manhattan Community Board 8, representing the Upper East Side, had its full complement of fifty members as well as a two-hundred-person-long waiting list of potential replacements.<sup>75</sup>

## **The Charter Reforms**

Over the next few years, the State Charter Revision Commission held more than one thousand hours of meetings and called more than seven hundred witnesses to determine how best to decentralize the city government.<sup>76</sup> In 1975, however, as the commissioners were finalizing their proposals, another crisis threatened to overshadow their work. That year saw New York City teeter on the brink of bankruptcy as a national economic downturn, combined with a persistent shortfall in the city’s municipal budget, invited the sudden risk that Beame’s government would default on obligations to its creditors. As a result, the charter commission, in

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<sup>73</sup> State Charter Revision Commission for New York City (hereafter SCRC), “Excerpts from Introductory Report on City Charter Revision,” *NYT*, April 10, 1973.

<sup>74</sup> SCRC, *Community Boards* (New York: State Charter Revision Commission for New York City, 1974), 2, 16, 26, appendix C-III, p. vii, appendix W, i–ix.

<sup>75</sup> SCRC, *Community Boards*, 35, 82, appendix K-1, iv–v.

<sup>76</sup> SCRC press release, Feb. 6, 1975, folder “Community Planning Board #2,” box 4, BHA.

a bid to remain relevant, rebranded its work as a solution to the city's fiscal insolvency. When it finally published the ten questions to be put to voters that November, the first three comprised a balanced-budget amendment, changes to the process of collective bargaining, and stricter oversight of government spending.

Even if the commission's older decentralization ideas were no longer front-page news, the bulk of them remained intact. Question 4, if approved, would eliminate the citywide master plan and create a new "uniform procedure" through which community boards would be notified in advance about developments in their districts that required changes to the zoning code. Question 6 would empower the boards to devise local development plans of their own.<sup>77</sup> The basis of these proposals was the commissioners' own research, which had found that the reforms community board members most desired were those that increased their decision-making power over changes to the physical fabric of their neighborhoods. In one survey, 71 percent of respondents said that community boards should have greater authority on zoning matters, a larger margin of popular support than on any other issue measured by the survey. Another study found that 62 percent of board members believed the boards and the city government should have equal say over land-use decisions, while an additional 21 percent believed neighborhoods should have "complete control" over land use.<sup>78</sup> The proposals, made public in August 1975, sought to fulfill these desires, by and large. Together, they constituted a fitting vision for a city whose central administration found itself in the throes of a profound crisis of legitimacy. As Election Day approached, the *Times* editorial board sounded a steady drumbeat of support for reform, ultimately endorsing six of the ten questions. Throughout the late summer and fall, the newspaper drew the link between the fiscal crisis and the need for neighborhood self-determination. "Critics...have questioned whether New York City can afford at this time to tinker with its governmental machinery," its editors wrote. "It is more appropriate to ask whether New Yorkers can afford not to act now to reform a structure of government that has so conspicuously failed."<sup>79</sup>

The *Times*'s support for the charter reforms highlighted the about-face that had taken place among liberals on decentralization. A couple of decades earlier, the Old Gray Lady had been one

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<sup>77</sup> "Charter Proposals," *NYT*, Oct. 29, 1975.

<sup>78</sup> SCRC, *Community Boards*, 95, appendix W, i-iv.

<sup>79</sup> "The Charter Proposals," *NYT*, Oct. 31, 1975.

of “master builder” Robert Moses’s staunchest supporters.<sup>80</sup> Now, Robert Caro’s searing biography of Moses had just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and the *Times* was touting neighborhood self-rule as the way to “help the city cope with what will be a prolonged period of enforced austerity.”<sup>81</sup> Yet, not all liberals or liberal institutions agreed. A hastily formed group of forty professors of urban policy signed a letter opposing the measures.<sup>82</sup> The Beame administration was against them as well. “I don’t think you can have a great city when you have this kind of political decentralization,” said Eleanor Holmes Norton, the mayor’s commissioner of human rights. “You just have a lot of little towns warring with each other.”<sup>83</sup> An even larger number of New Yorkers seemed to have no opinion on the matter at all. A workshop on the charter proposals organized for the city council was attended by only thirteen of its forty-three members, which one council member attributed to a “low level of voter interest” in the issue. The consensus among legislators was that the measures would be soundly defeated and required no further attention on their part.<sup>84</sup> They were wrong. Although only about one in four voters turned out on November 4—unsurprising, given it was an off-year election—those who did cast ballots broke decisively in favor of most of the reforms, with the strongest support coming from liberal parts of Manhattan.<sup>85</sup>

### **The Age of ULURP**

Over the course of 1976 and 1977, the reform measures were gradually introduced. On the matter of reviewing and approving new developments, the changes took the form of a new “Uniform Land Use Review Procedure,” known as ULURP (pronounced *you-lurp*). A “milestone in the history of citizen involvement in public decision-making,” in the words of the City Planning Commission (CPC) chairman, ULURP made community boards the first line of defense in New Yorkers’ war against growth.<sup>86</sup> Any project that required changes to the zoning

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<sup>80</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 379.

<sup>81</sup> “The Charter Reform,” *NYT*, July 23, 1975.

<sup>82</sup> Frank Lynn, “City Hall Reported Ready to Fight Charter Revision,” *NYT*, Sept. 28, 1975; Maurice Carroll, “Javits Supports Charter Reform,” *NYT*, Oct. 28, 1975; Ronald Smothers, “Professors Assail Charter Changes,” *NYT*, Oct. 1, 1975.

<sup>83</sup> “Charter Changes Are Decried Here,” *NYT*, Aug. 6, 1975.

<sup>84</sup> Glenn Fowler, “Few Councilmen Discuss Charter,” *NYT*, Oct. 30, 1975.

<sup>85</sup> Maurice Carroll, “Vote on Charter Changes Called Defeat for Beame,” *NYT*, Nov. 6, 1975; Frank Lynn, “Equal Rights Amendments Lose in New York and Jersey Voting; 6 City Charter Changes Backed,” *NYT*, Nov. 5, 1975.

<sup>86</sup> Glenn Fowler, “Community Boards Get Land-Use Role,” *NYT*, June 2, 1976.



code or the city map was now subject to approval of the relevant board, as was any proposal that involved new publicly supported housing. A community board had sixty days to hold a hearing on a given project before casting an up or down vote. The board's recommendation would go next to the CPC, whose members would cast their own vote before submitting the proposal to the Board of Estimate for final approval.<sup>87</sup>

Some neighborhoodists were ecstatic about the changes ULURP introduced. "Visions of open and responsive government of an informed citizenry dance in the head," exclaimed one journalist in the alternative newspaper *The Phoenix*.<sup>88</sup> In neighborhoods where New Yorkers believed a board was insufficiently committed to anti-growth priorities, community groups began to draw attention to the board's lack of concern and agitated for changes to its membership. As the charter commission was preparing its final recommendations, for example, a coalition of Brooklyn neighborhood associations presented it with a report detailing the ways in which Community Board 6 had been "an insult to the communities it is supposed to serve." Most of the groups' complaints concerned the board's lack of opposition to new development. In Park Slope, Community Board 6 had not conveyed homeowners' displeasure at the opening of the area's first McDonald's franchise or the expansion of the Methodist Hospital. In Carroll Gardens, it had done nothing to stop the proposed relocation of the Fort Greene Meat Market to the neighborhood. In Red Hook, the board had supported the plan to create a new container port despite nearly universal opposition from locals. And across Brownstone Brooklyn, the board had failed to advocate for the creation of the historic districts that its white-collar homeowners so desired.<sup>89</sup> The Brooklyn Heights Association, which had helped craft the report, went a step further, calling for some sort of formalized representation on the community board for its own members. In this way, its leaders explained, the organization might "regain its rightful voice" as representative of the interests of the Heights.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> New York City Department of City Planning, *Uniform Land Use Review Procedure: A Guide for Community Boards* (New York: Department of City Planning, 1977), ii-5, v-2. The "city map" is a term of art, specific to New York, referring to the list of streets considered public ways by the government. Large infrastructure projects, such as highways, subways, and skyscrapers, often involved changes to the "map."

<sup>88</sup> Martha Gershun, "New Land Use Procedures under Charter Revision Would Expand Local Planning Board Powers," *The Phoenix*, n.d. (likely 1976), folder "Community Planning Board #2," box 4, BHA.

<sup>89</sup> "Our Communities Must Be Served," 1975, and press release dated June 16, 1975, folder "Community Planning Board #2," box 4, BHA.

<sup>90</sup> "Statement of Brooklyn Heights Association Concerning the Recommendations of the State Charter Revision Commission," n.d., folder "Community Planning Board #2," box 4, BHA; Edwards F. Rullman to James V.

The Brooklynites' complaints had little direct impact in the short term. But they underscored how the effort to make the community boards serve as a wrench in the works of the growth machine took place informally, in the realm of politics, as well as formally, in the realm of law.<sup>91</sup> The charter reforms may have created the structure of decentralized city planning, but the community boards' evolution into the vanguard of the anti-growth machine was a result of neighborhood activists exerting influence on the boards as much as the boards exerting influence on other branches of the city government. A study commissioned by the Citizens Union on variances—the term of art for *ad hoc* exceptions to the zoning code—found that the proportion of requests for such variances in which a community board played an advisory role grew 46 percent from 1973 to 1975. The Board of Standards and Appeals was twice as likely to deny a variance when a community board expressed its opposition, rejecting nearly two-thirds of requests when that was the case.<sup>92</sup> Amid liberal New Yorkers' decentralist fervor, few criticized the new dynamic. Those who did mostly belonged to interest groups that had an obvious stake in the persistence of the growth machine. “Petty, vindictive....generally uninformed and unprogressive” was the verdict of one engineer, who nonetheless felt obliged to omit his or her name from the *Times* letter to the editor expressing such a contrarian opinion.<sup>93</sup> The author was joined by the city's prominent real estate developers, who met with Beame in 1974 to call attention to the boards' obstructionist tendencies. In February of that year, they noted, builders across the city had finished only 189 new homes, the lowest monthly total since the end of World War II. “You have to fight a year for the privilege of building on property you own,” complained Samuel LeFrak, one of the city's most prominent developers and the man behind the massive middle-class apartment complex in Queens known as LeFrak City. The mayor's housing administrator agreed, observing that the drop in supply meant that families making between \$15,000 and \$18,000 per year (\$90,000 to \$110,000 today) could no longer afford to live in the

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Mangano, Jan. 24, 1975, and Edwards F. Rullman to James V. Mangano, April 21, 1975, folder “Community Planning Board #2,” box 4, BHA.

<sup>91</sup> An observation along these lines was first made by Peter Marcuse, writing in the early nineties. See Peter Marcuse, “New York City's Community Boards: Neighborhood Policy and Its Results,” in *Neighbourhood Policy and Programmes: Past and Present*, ed. Naomi Carmon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 146.

<sup>92</sup> Carter B. Horsley, “A New Attack on City Zoning Board's Variance Policies,” *NYT*, Aug. 5, 1977.

<sup>93</sup> Letter to the editor, *NYT*, Dec. 15, 1974.

city's newest buildings. Instead, they had started to outbid poorer families for the homes that already existed.<sup>94</sup>

Such views, however, were increasingly few and far between. As the *Times's* editors noted, preventing the creation of new LeFrak Cities was precisely the point of the neighborhood movement. "A quiet revolution has taken place in planning in New York," they wrote, as "deep-rooted local understanding of the area's character and needs" was replacing the old tendency to "virtually bulldoze all neighborhood character for a homogenized uniformity of disastrous high-rise, open-space formulas."<sup>95</sup> A moment laden with particular symbolism came in June 1974, when the new citywide master plan—several years and several million dollars in the making—was effectively canceled. Instead, the CPC announced it would launch a pilot program of neighborhood-specific "miniplans." "Much of the credit for the new approach," wrote the *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger, "goes to Jane Jacobs."<sup>96</sup>

#### **Community Boards and Racial Politics: The Case of Queens Community District 4**

The high-minded among New York's liberals may have been fighting for decentralization in the name of small-scale urbanism's patroness saint. But the empowerment of the community boards was also enabling those baser tendencies of anti-growth activism that had been visible during the crisis in Forest Hills. LeFrak need only have listened to conversations at his own buildings to see the problem. As a result of ongoing white flight, the growth of New York's Black middle class, and stricter enforcement of fair housing laws, LeFrak City in the early and mid-seventies had seen a substantial influx of African American residents. The demographic succession there became an obsession of Queens Community Board 4, whose district included the nearly five thousand apartments at LeFrak City as well as several surrounding neighborhoods. Board members—who were overwhelmingly male and predominantly Italian, Irish, and Jewish—complained of the buildings "being loaded with welfare cases" who "contribute nothing to society." Their presence, the board's chairman argued in 1974, put the entire district at risk of becoming "another South Bronx." Nor were Black people the only target of Community Board 4's ire. The board also objected to the district's growing number of "illegal

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<sup>94</sup> Owen Moritz, "Builders to Abe: Curb Community Planning Boards," *New York Daily News*, May 20, 1974.

<sup>95</sup> "A Planning Revolution," *NYT*, Jan. 9, 1974.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Goldberger, "Why City Is Switching from Master Plan to Miniplan," *NYT*, June 27, 1974; Glenn Fowler, "Planning Unit Introduces Neighborhood 'Miniplans,'" *NYT*, June 26, 1974.

aliens”—immigrants from Central and South America—who were moving into the formerly Italian neighborhood of Corona, often illegally subdividing homes there so they might live more affordably. Board meetings became forums for complaints about these new “rooming houses” as well as fears that the influx of Spanish-speaking children meant that administrators in the local public schools were on the verge of declaring English a “second language.”<sup>97</sup>

Of course, conspiracy theories about Spanish in the schools had no basis in reality, the vast majority of immigrants to Corona lived in the United States legally, and Black residents of LeFrak City were not “welfare cases”—in fact, the complex had a policy of not accepting tenants on welfare.<sup>98</sup> But these facts hardly mattered to Community Board 4, which expressed its opposition to the demographic changes taking place in its district by flexing its new city planning powers. Approached with a proposal to convert a building in Corona Plaza into a garment factory, some board members were suspicious, noting that the “Hispanic and Oriental” people likely to work there were “probably...illegal aliens.” The real estate agent representing the landlord argued that it was better for such residents to have jobs in a “neighborhood...of Hispanic, Central American origin” than to risk becoming public charges, to which one board member curtly replied that “the neighborhood is Italian.” The board ultimately approved the change the following year after the landlord appeared in person and assured the members that all of the garment workers were legally present in the United States.<sup>99</sup>

Undeterred, the board continued its crusade against newcomers through other channels. Throughout the seventies, Community Board 4 advocated for stricter land-use controls to combat the proliferation of “Chinese houses”—new three-story apartment buildings, often inhabited by Asian or Latino immigrants, permitted under the zoning then in effect. A tour of the area,

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<sup>97</sup> Sanjek, *The Future of Us All*, 56, 70–73.

<sup>98</sup> It is impossible to know the precise mix of Latino immigrants in Queens Community District 4 who were present legally or illegally. There is some evidence that the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico increased dramatically after the 1965 immigration reforms, when the bracero program was ended. Given existing migration patterns of Latin Americans to Queens, however, it seems unlikely that most or even a substantial minority of the Queens residents in question were Mexican. The number of Mexicans in New York City as of the 1970 Census paled in comparison with the number of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians, Hondurans, Ecuadorans, and Peruvians. See Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 575; Sanjek, *The Future of Us All*, 56; Douglas S. Massey and Karen A. Pren, “Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Policy: Explaining the Post-1965 Surge from Latin America,” *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 1 (2012): 1–29.

<sup>99</sup> Sanjek, *The Future of Us All*, 77.

organized by a local civic group for U.S. Senator James L. Buckley, intended to draw attention to illegal immigration. It included as its first stop a “three-family house built within the last year” with seven Spanish surnames taped to one of its mailboxes, the *Newtown Crier* reported.<sup>100</sup> Such headlines contributed to a general sense among Community Board 4 members that the neighborhood was becoming overcrowded. This feeling manifested itself in opposition not only to budget homes like the “Chinese houses” but also to those aimed at the opposite end of the market. Developers had turned to building those relatively cheap “infill” apartments, in fact, largely because of the community board’s reputation for opposing high-rise complexes like LeFrak City. In 1972, the board had rejected a proposal to build two fourteen-story mixed-use towers on the northern edge of the district, which would have included eight hundred apartments aimed at higher-income tenants. “We are choking in density of population, unmanageable traffic and too much housing,” wrote the editors of the *Crier*, declaring their opposition to the project.<sup>101</sup>

The zoning disputes in Community District 4 were small potatoes in a city of eight million, but they highlighted the dialectical relationship between the structure of devolved city planning and the ideology of anti-growth activism. By making the most powerful weapon in the boards’ arsenal their power to kill new development—unofficially, before the charter reforms, then officially, as part of ULURP—the way in which the neighborhood movement unfolded in New York City virtually guaranteed that questions about local change would be funneled one way or another into debates about land use. At the same time, board members and their allies clearly *believed* that undesirable social developments in their neighborhoods produced undesirable physical developments which could be tamed through their planning powers. Thus, the boards’ authority to block new buildings became a way to express opposition to other, less tangible changes in city life.

### **“You Name It. People Don’t Want It.”**

As the community boards solidified their role in New York’s planning process, the sort of discussions that had taken place at meetings of Queens Community Board 4 became a nearly universal feature of the city’s neighborhood politics. A sign of things to come was a proposal to

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<sup>100</sup> Sanjek, *The Future of Us All*, 70–77.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Sanjek, *The Future of Us All*, 97.

create a special zoning district for Little Italy, the subject of one of the first community board hearings to take place after the charter revision. The plan, which would have limited the height of new buildings within the district to seventy-five feet, was touted as a way of preserving the neighborhood's old-world charm and was widely supported by the area's dwindling number of Italians. But residents of neighboring Chinatown, which was expanding northward into Little Italy as Chinese immigration to New York increased and Italian immigration declined, condemned what they saw as a miniature Chinese Exclusion Act. The hearing itself, at which several Chinese speakers were jeered while giving testimony, did little to disprove their fears. The community board had arranged for the proceedings to be translated into both Cantonese and Italian in real time. This attempt at ethnic comity was cut short, however, after the mostly Italian audience shouted down the translators.<sup>102</sup> Yet Chinatown, although more amenable to tall buildings than Little Italy, was not immune to its own brand of anti-growth politics. Twelve thousand mostly Chinese protesters marched against a plan to build a jail there in 1982. That same year, six hundred mostly Black Harlem residents turned out to oppose a homeless shelter, while two thousand residents of a Brooklyn neighborhood home to large numbers of Hasidic Jews rallied against a proposed garbage incinerator in Brooklyn. "Sanitation garages, methadone centers, halfway houses," an aide to the mayor griped. "You name it. People don't want it."<sup>103</sup>

Not every anti-development campaign launched by the community boards was successful. After delaying construction of the Connaught Tower on Second Avenue for nearly a year, for example, Manhattan Community Board 6 lost an appeal to have the building's height reduced. Similarly, the City Planning Commission overruled Community Board 5's rejection of a Sixth Avenue high-rise, though it gave the board a consolation prize by forcing the developer to lop off four of the forty-four proposed floors.<sup>104</sup> Community Board 6 and Community Board 8 also opposed a proposal to convert the space under the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge into shops and restaurants. "Bridgemarket" was eventually built—twenty-three years later—by which point the *Times* called it "an almost legendarily stalled project."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Glenn Fowler, "Preservation of Little Italy Urged," *NYT*, Sept. 3, 1976.

<sup>103</sup> Maurice Carroll, "Community Boards Learn How to Flex More Muscle," *NYT*, Dec. 19, 1982.

<sup>104</sup> Diana Shaman, "Local Boards Now Crucial to the Process of Change," *NYT*, July 1, 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Glenn Fowler, "New York City's Community Boards Growing in Power," *NYT*, May 31, 1976; David W. Dunlap, "Bridgemarket Emerging, After 22 Years," *NYT*, March 7, 1999.

Nevertheless, by the end of the seventies, the community boards had established a reputation as a force to be taken seriously in the city's growth politics. Moreover, they had helped legitimize the broader idea that neighborhood consultation was a natural component of the development process. As one public relations expert with clients in real estate described, "When a developer starts to talk up a project, the first question is 'What will the community board say?'"<sup>106</sup> More and more, those in the real estate industry were encouraged to reach out not only to members of the boards, but also to the relevant block and neighborhood associations, to nonprofits involved in growth politics, such as the Municipal Art Society and the Landmarks Conservancy, and even to specific neighborhood residents known to be particularly vocal opponents of development.<sup>107</sup> Developers who were serious about seeing projects to completion took this advice to heart and started to seek the counsel of community boards, long before any project was announced, as to the sorts of buildings that members would find acceptable.<sup>108</sup> "Essentially, what is evolving is a new kind of grassroots politics in which the elite of the building industry must seek favor in the emotional, unpredictable polis of the neighborhood," one journalist observed. "...A developer now needs to be something of a showman with an advance knowledge of his audience."<sup>109</sup>

There quickly emerged a solution to this novel regulatory problem: concessions, sometimes called "community benefits," intended to placate neighborhood interest groups. The four floors removed from the Sixth Avenue project were one such example. Over the late seventies and eighties, compromises like it became an increasingly common feature of the development process. Some, such as requirements that developers set aside units for rent at below-market rates, had noble goals in mind. A particularly contentious plan to build a mixed-use development at Eighth Avenue and Fiftieth Street—the site of the old Madison Square Garden—was resolved when the builders acceded to Community Board 4's demand to include 132 such apartments.<sup>110</sup> Other requests seemed more arbitrary. In far eastern Queens, Community Board 13 required that

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<sup>106</sup> Carter Wiseman, "Power to the People," *New York Magazine*, Oct. 5, 1981.

<sup>107</sup> Carter B. Horsley, "The 'New Politics' of Development," *NYT*, Sept. 25, 1977.

<sup>108</sup> Philip S. Gutis, "Community Boards Gaining in Power," *NYT*, Aug. 21, 1986.

<sup>109</sup> Horsley, "The 'New Politics' of Development."

<sup>110</sup> Gutis, "Community Boards Gaining in Power."



the owner of a lumber yard who wanted to add a receiving and storage area erect a wooden fence, provide landscaping services, and limit deliveries to certain times of day.<sup>111</sup>

Cases like Bridgemarket and the Queens lumber yard may have been extreme examples of community board intransigence. Nevertheless, they highlighted the extent to which the city's pro-neighborhood policies by the late seventies had diverged from Mayor Lindsay's efforts at decentralization just a few years earlier. The charter reforms had affirmed three trends already in the making: first, that neighborhood power would be the centerpiece of urban liberalism in the seventies; second, that the main forum for neighborhood power in New York City would be the community boards; and, finally, that such power would mainly take the form of the boards' ability to veto physical changes to their neighborhoods. Participation in ULURP was not literally the boards' only legal responsibility; they were also allotted a modest budget for local improvements and had some oversight of municipal services. But board members and their allies made clear that they considered their role in land-use policy to be their paramount purpose. As the chair of Queens Community Board 7 explained, "Community boards oppose development when it has a negative impact on the community; that's what they are for."<sup>112</sup>

The centrality of anti-growth politics to the boards' mission, however, also determined which communities benefited most from their activism. Neighborhoods that were natural targets for developers, which tended to be wealthier and whiter, deployed their newfound regulatory authority with vigor. In poorer parts of the city, however, veto power over new real estate was less of a priority—indeed, often there were few proposals to veto. When the State Charter Revision Commission had surveyed the community boards while crafting its recommendations, it had found that areas with little development pressure, such as the South Bronx and Bedford-Stuyvesant, had boards that barely discussed zoning at all. Instead, their members preferred to debate the use of the remaining federal funding they had received under the now-defunct Model Cities and urban renewal programs. These boards also faced more hostility from City Hall, a separate study found, as bureaucrats openly discriminated based on their perception of each board's competence and its members' level of interest in city planning. "Some community boards just lack the expertise...and intelligence to decide issues," explained one civil servant.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Frank L. Politano, "Community Participation and Reform of the Zoning Process in New York City," *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 597n173.

<sup>112</sup> Shaman, "Local Boards Now Crucial to the Process of Change."

<sup>113</sup> Politano, "Community Participation and Reform of the Zoning Process in New York City," 594–96.

If Lindsay's vision had been to circumnavigate the Democratic machine by bringing city government directly to disadvantaged neighborhoods, New York City under ULURP seemed like exactly the opposite: a system under which the city had, in practice if not in theory, devolved decision-making to a new political network comprising the middle- and upper-class quarters of the city but not the poorer ones. As urban policy scholars conducted the first wave of research into the post-reform boards, their findings highlighted the many ways in which they still fell well short of those much-romanticized New England town meetings. A study found that while nearly a quarter of residents of the fashionable Upper West Side had attended a board meeting, for example, the same was true for only 2 percent of people in the impoverished South Bronx.<sup>114</sup> One researcher could not help but note the irony of the movement for neighborhood power, which on other terms had been supported by radical African American organizations of the sixties, having evolved into such a regressive form in the seventies. "The blacks who showed the most militance for community control," he concluded, "now get the least out of decentralization."<sup>115</sup>

### **"Preferring What Is to What Could Be"**

Perhaps feeling emboldened by the boards' visible shortcomings, the chorus of voices expressing dismay at the direction of New York's neighborhood movement started to grow during the early eighties. Although developers, their allies, and boosters from the business community had never been enamored of the community boards, they were now joined by urban policy experts and government employees unsettled by what they increasingly saw as an experiment in decentralization gone awry. The director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, a major nonprofit, wondered aloud whether the buildings that marked New York's "glorious successes" of the past, such as the United Nations headquarters, would make it past the community boards if they were proposed today. "It seems...self evident that local views will, in concert, be conservative, in the literal sense of preferring what *is* to what could be," he wrote. "It is not that a community board intends to be against change, or even that all individual members oppose change, but the results seem inevitable nonetheless."<sup>116</sup> He was joined in this view by an

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<sup>114</sup> Rich, *Participation and Representation in New York's Community Boards*, 20, 35–40, 45, 59.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Pecorella, *Community Power in a Postreform City*, 178.

<sup>116</sup> Arthur Zabarkes, "Different Decisions, Different Processes," *New York Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1980): 29–30.

official at the city's Department of Housing, Preservation & Development who had recently been involved in a plan to transfer twenty-five vacant homes in southeastern Queens to middle-class families under the federal Urban Homesteading Program. The project had been blocked by the local community board, which demanded the homes be restricted to present residents of the neighborhood and that the board be given the power to determine the individual owners. Some members of the board even suggested that the project was a conspiracy to seize land for the purpose of expanding Kennedy Airport. The entire experience had left the official cynical about the future of the city's housing policy, which she concluded was now subject to "unreasonable obstructionism" and "parochial interests." At the board's public meetings, she had noticed, speakers were sometimes asked by the board how long they had lived in the neighborhood, especially if they appeared to be of a different race or social standing. As a result, newcomers were implicitly discouraged from attending any meetings at all.<sup>117</sup>

Despite the growing objections, however, the people whose opinions mattered most remained dedicated to the idea of devolved city planning. Although some former members of the City Planning Commission (CPC) griped about the once-powerful institution's diminished autonomy, the CPC of the post-reform era rarely contravened the boards' rulings. The most conservative estimates figured that the commission and the boards agreed on zoning decisions 80 percent of the time; other calculations put the number as high as 98 percent.<sup>118</sup> The Board of Estimate, too, was a reliable ally. Of the twenty zoning changes in 1977 and 1978 where the borough presidents reversed a decision made by the lower Board of Standards and Appeals, nineteen were initiated by the community boards.<sup>119</sup>

The support of the Board of Estimate, whose members were not bureaucrats but politicians, highlighted the fundamental reason that even the most well-reasoned criticisms of the community boards fell on deaf ears: decentralization was popular. Or, more accurately, it was not unpopular. Polling revealed that New Yorkers, by and large, split into two distinct groups: those who liked the community boards and those who did not care about them. Although a

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<sup>117</sup> Mimi Ellis, "An Agency Perspective," *New York Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1980): 31–32; Robert F. Pecorella, "Community Governance: A Decade of Experience," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 37, no. 3 (1989): 102–3.

<sup>118</sup> Pecorella, "Community Governance," 103; Pecorella, *Community Power in a Postreform City*, 141, 171.

<sup>119</sup> Joseph F. Zimmerman, "Evolving Decentralization in New York City," *State & Local Government Review* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 1982): 18.

relatively modest 49 percent of New Yorkers agreed with the statement that “their community board had made the community a better place to live,” according to one survey, that number far exceeded the 5 percent who believed that the boards had made their neighborhoods worse. The remaining 46 percent had no opinion one way or the other—the latest example of a persistent strain of apathy that dated back to the city’s first community planning councils and continued through the low-turnout vote on the charter reforms. Although this dynamic may not have made the community boards paragons of democracy in action, it created a fertile environment in which the substantial minority of voters passionate about slowing the pace of local change could achieve their goals.

### **A Village Preservation Society**

Given the powers the community boards did and did not have, the activists most likely to see them as conduits for their political objectives were not spread evenly across the city’s sixty-two community districts. To no one’s surprise, Greenwich Village’s Community Board 2 (CB2) emerged as perhaps the most assertive in the entire city. This had been the case at least since the mid-sixties, when CB2 had been a fierce advocate for the creation of the Greenwich Village Historic District.<sup>120</sup> Into the seventies, CB2 continued to burnish its reputation, often relying on advice and testimony from the Village’s many block associations. The board set up an “early warning system” with the city planning department to alert it of all new permit requests for commercial construction within the district.<sup>121</sup> Each proposal that came over the transom was examined with a fine-tooth comb. A new “gourmet food ‘flea’ market” was rejected on the grounds that “it might set a precedent and usher in the beginning of a new type of inexpensive fast food fad throughout the Village,” a local newspaper described. A developer who wanted to build an apartment tower at 40 Jane Street was turned down because his building was “inharmonious and inappropriate to the specific area” and contained ground-floor retail space that might be rented to “questionable commercial interests.”<sup>122</sup> Even the Board of Estimate—

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<sup>120</sup> Community Board 2 minutes, Feb. 16, 1967, folder 6, box 15, RWSA; Verna Small to Harmon Goldstone, Nov. 13, 1968, folder “Landmarks 1963–1968,” box 4, AVHR.

<sup>121</sup> VHA meeting minutes, Feb. 5, 1975, folder “1970–1979,” box 1, AVHR.

<sup>122</sup> Michael R. Waldholz, “Board 2 Scores Land Use Plans,” *The Villager*, May 22, 1975.

typically sympathetic to the community boards' views—eventually intervened, informing CB2 that it could not, as a rule, reject every application in the district to open a sidewalk café.<sup>123</sup>

Few stories, however, matched that of a restaurateur who was advised to visit the homes of members of CB2 before requesting approval to renovate the façade of his business at 75 Greenwich Avenue. Though he went out of his way to show members examples of the construction materials he intended to use, his proposed design was still rejected. He was shocked, he later wrote, by his experience dealing “not with the community but rather with individuals who are seeking to impose their own personal opinions and demonstrate their accumulations of personal power.” The community board, in his estimate, was nothing more than “Nixonian ego/politics at the grass roots level and not even a sincere attempt at the true democracy of the New England town meeting.” Although he was eventually able to open his restaurant, he did so without the renovations. “The food and service will be remarkable,” he assured, “but one cannot help but see the community as the final and still helpless loser.”<sup>124</sup>

Nevertheless, it was clear by that point that CB2's model of neighborhood liberalism was becoming hegemonic across the city. In white-collar areas like the Village, the community boards were firmly entrenched as the first line of defense against any project that threatened residents' ideas of the low-rise neighborhood as an oasis in the city. In the Coronas and Forest Hills, meanwhile, the boards now used the imprimatur of neighborhood liberalism to stamp out the last vestiges of the mid-century liberal vision. On both fronts, it undoubtedly helped that the neighborhoodists now had one of their own in the mayor's office. Ed Koch had emerged victorious in November 1977 from a grueling three-round election, surviving accusations that he was lying about his sexual orientation. The crowded Democratic primary had been a case study of the different directions in which urban liberalism might be headed. Koch's opponents had included the pro-austerity congressman Herman Badillo, born to poverty in Puerto Rico; Congresswoman Bella Abzug, a reformed ex-socialist; Mayor Beame, making a last stand for the bureaucrats; and Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, scion of the Democratic machine's “Harlem Clubhouse.” Finally, there was Mario Cuomo, a relative neophyte whose biggest claim to fame was his role as the voice of reason in the Forest Hills affair. Though supported by the city's culturally conservative Catholics, Cuomo positioned himself to Koch's left. And although

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<sup>123</sup> Jim Meyer, “Board 2 Takes Action on Sidewalk Cafes,” *The Villager*, April 26, 1977.

<sup>124</sup> Andrew Hoffmann, “One Man's Bout with Community Board 2,” *The Villager*, Dec. 22, 1977.

Cuomo was hardly a pro-growth politician in the Fiorello La Guardia mold, he endorsed the construction of Westway, an underground highway and real estate project proposed for Manhattan's Hudson River waterfront, which Koch and his base in the Village had long opposed.<sup>125</sup>

Koch's politics won the day. The Villager eked out a victory of fewer than ten thousand votes over the second-place Cuomo in the Democratic primary. He proceeded to consolidate the support of the also-rans and beat Cuomo by ten percentage points in the runoff, then one last time, in November, by nine points. The Queens attorney had had one last shot in the general election as the nominee of the obscure Liberal Party. Though Cuomo accused Koch of being a "conservative" and "no longer a traditional Democrat," he also sensed the sort of issues that were fueling Koch's unexpectedly popular candidacy.<sup>126</sup> In August, before the first round of the primary, he had instructed his nineteen-year-old son, Andrew, to establish a new "Neighborhood Preservation Party" under whose banner he could also run because of New York's electoral fusion laws.<sup>127</sup> The city's anti-growth machine had brought about a quick evolution of the elder Cuomo's views on community control from those of the measured, circumspect attorney who had mediated the conflict in Forest Hills. "If I stand for anything in politics, it is that the neighborhoods must live!" the born-again Cuomo now told New Yorkers in a campaign brochure. "...Vote as if your neighborhood depended on it!"<sup>128</sup>

### **The Legacy of Neighborhood Liberalism**

By the late twentieth century, neighborhood anti-growthers had mastered both the ideological and legal aspects of the supply side of the growth equation. Controlling the demand side, however, proved another matter entirely. This discrepancy became especially apparent as the number of young urban professionals participating in a "return to the city," which had started as

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<sup>125</sup> Soffer, *Ed Koch*, 125–28, 138.

<sup>126</sup> Frank Lynn, "Cuomo Says Koch Isn't 'a Traditional Democrat' Now," *NYT*, Sept. 23, 1977.

<sup>127</sup> Bill Mahoney, "Cuomo Quietly Presses to Weaken His Working Families Party Nemesis," *Politico*, Oct. 25, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2019/10/25/cuomo-quietly-presses-to-weaken-his-working-families-party-nemesis-1225974>.

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in George J. Marlin, *Fighting the Good Fight: A History of the New York Conservative Party* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 243.

a trickle in the late fifties and sixties, grew into a flood during the eighties.<sup>129</sup> In New York and other coastal capitals of the ascendant white-collar economy, there was a palpable sense of competition among residents old and new for an ever more restricted supply of homes. A banker or lawyer who could no longer afford a landmarked rowhouse on the Upper West Side, for example, might instead buy a Park Slope brownstone containing several units and convert the building to a single-family home. Across New York City, thousands of apartments were eliminated through this process.<sup>130</sup> Park Slope renters, in turn, might skip across the park to Prospect Heights, where they would displace poorer residents to Crown Heights or Bedford-Stuyvesant. The unfortunate tenants who already lived in those neighborhoods were then left with no choice but to crowd in still-cheaper parts of the city, like East New York or Brownsville, or, perhaps, to leave for a different part of the country altogether. In 1984, which *Newsweek* declared the “Year of the Yuppie,” a feature in *New York Magazine* reported on the “misery of the housing squeeze” in the city.<sup>131</sup> The vacancy rate in Manhattan had dipped below 2 percent, forcing “normal adults over 30” to live with roommates for the first time in memory. One divorced couple agreed to continue living together out of fear that neither would be able to find an apartment as nice as the one they already had; they designated days of the week when each was allowed to have company. Even child custody battles were becoming more drawn out, as family courts tended to prefer that the victor keep the family’s existing home.<sup>132</sup> “I’ve been going around telling everyone that this is your problem,” the chair of the City Planning Commission told the *Times* in 1987. “When the kids can’t afford to rent an apartment or buy a condo and end up moving to the other end of New Jersey, that is not in the best interests of this city.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> The term “return to the city” is most closely associated with Richard Reed’s book of the same name. See Richard E. Reed, *Return to the City: How to Restore Old Buildings and Ourselves in America’s Historic Urban Neighborhoods* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979). See also Herrington J. Bryce, ed., *Revitalizing Cities* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, The Urban Roundtable Series, 1979); Shirley Bradway Laska and Daphne Spain, eds., *Back to the City: Issues in Neighborhood Renovation* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980).

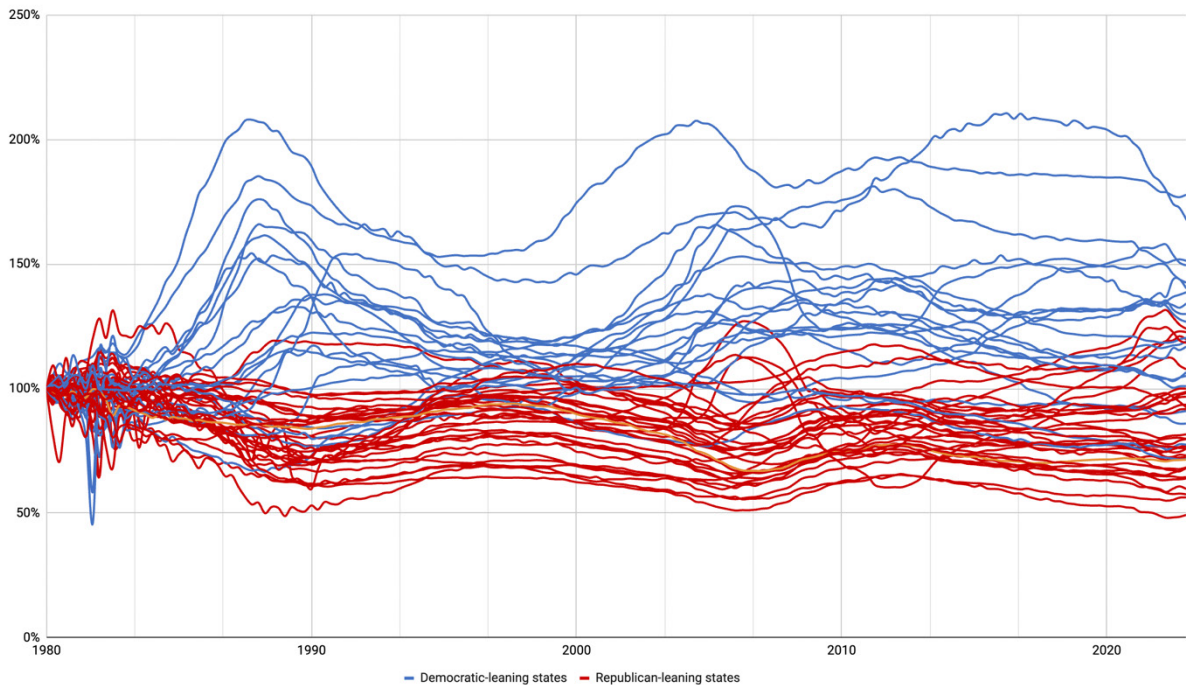
<sup>130</sup> Adam Oscar Brodheim, “Bigger Houses, Fewer Homes: Dwelling Unit Consolidation in New York City” (master’s thesis, Columbia University, 2023), 1–3. Brodheim’s estimate put the total number of New York City apartments eliminated via such conversions through 2023 at around one hundred thousand.

<sup>131</sup> Gottlieb, “Yuppies,” 3; Patti Jones, “Alone Together: Learning to Share the Misery of the Housing Squeeze,” *New York Magazine*, Nov. 12, 1984.

<sup>132</sup> Jones, “Alone Together.”

<sup>133</sup> Iver Peterson, “Downscaling the Avenues on the Upper East Side,” *NYT*, Dec. 6, 1987.

Housing Prices by State Relative to the National Average, 1980–2023



**Figure 2: The price of housing in the fifty states and the District of Columbia relative to the national average, 1980–2023**

All data are indexed to the first quarter of 1980. Lines are colored red or blue to represent each state’s party preference based on the 2022 Cook Partisan Voter Index. The “100%” mark on the vertical axis represents the All-Transactions House Price Index for the United States over the time span shown. Lines above the 100 percent mark indicate state-level home prices exceeding the national average; lines below the 100 percent mark indicate state-level home prices below the national average. (Author’s chart based on U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, All-Transactions House Price Indices, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/USSTHPI> etc., July 27, 2023.)

As the New York political scene of the seventies and eighties made clear, neighborhood liberalism’s public policy achievements were not always the ones that its initial proponents anticipated or desired. Nevertheless, they had a tangible impact on the city and others like it, an impact that, in turn, exerted lasting influence on modern American political economy. Across the parts of the country that are hotbeds of American liberalism today—those with the highest concentrations of Democratic voters, Democratic elected officials, donors to Democratic campaigns, and professions that shape liberal culture—the late twentieth and early twenty-first



centuries were defined by the overwhelming demand to live in such places running up against their legally mandated inability to accommodate that demand (Figure 2). This tension, expressed through the market price of homes and the rents charged by landlords, acted and continues to act as a tremendous gravitational force on modern American life, bending and warping the country's social structure like a black hole at the center of a distant solar system. Restrictions on new housing are a key reason that, despite the country's strong population growth and the wealth generated by the bull markets of the eighties, nineties, mid-two-thousands, and late twenty-tens, per-capita homebuilding in the United States has never surpassed the peak that it reached in 1972 (Figure 3).<sup>134</sup> With wages having grown more slowly than asset values, real estate now constitutes a greater proportion of property owners' overall wealth.<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile, tenants from the Northeast to the West Coast face historically low vacancy rates and exorbitant rents owing to the combination of low supply and high demand.<sup>136</sup> As a result, the percentage of renters nationwide considered "cost-burdened"—that is, who spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing—doubled between 1960 and 2010.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, through their inability to earn enough to buy an ever more expensive home, more and more Americans are effectively excluded from what has become the dominant mode of American wealth-building altogether. Such dynamics have helped produce a country in which regional convergence of incomes has virtually stopped and citizens are less geographically mobile than at any other time in our modern history (Figure 4).<sup>138</sup> In the cities and suburbs that are the heart of liberal America, ownership of valuable land now passes from parents to children, creating, in essence, the very

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<sup>134</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, New Privately-Owned Housing Units Started: Total Units [HOUST], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/HOUST>, July 27, 2023.

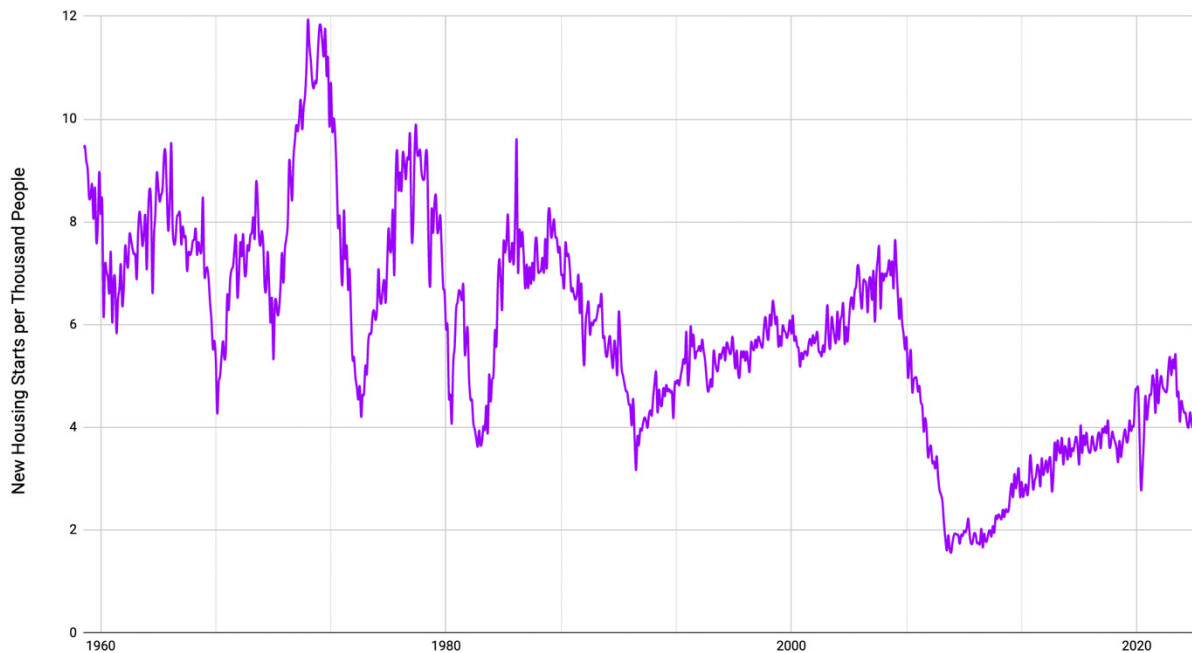
<sup>135</sup> August Benzow and Kenan Fikri, "From Wealthy Enclaves to Asset Deserts: What the Geography of Asset Income Signals about Wealth Distribution in the United States," Economic Innovation Group Inclusive Wealth Building Initiative, Aug. 17, 2021, <https://inclusivewealth.eig.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Geography-of-Asset-Income-Report.pdf>, 5, 7.

<sup>136</sup> Jonathan Spader, "Homeowner and Rental Vacancy Rates Declined During Covid-19 Pandemic," United States Census Bureau, May 12, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/housing-vacancy-rates-near-historic-lows.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Woo, "How Have Rents Changed since 1960?," Apartment List, June 14, 2016, <https://www.apartmentlist.com/research/rent-growth-since-1960>.

<sup>138</sup> Peter Ganong and Daniel W. Shoag, "Why Has Regional Income Convergence in the U.S. Declined?," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 23609, July 2017, doi.org/10.3386/w23609, 2; Nicholas Buttrick and Shigehiro Oishi, "The Cultural Dynamics of Declining Residential Mobility," *American Psychologist* 76, no. 6 (2021): 908.

### The Decline of American Homebuilding



**Figure 3: Per-capita homebuilding in the United States peaked in the early seventies**

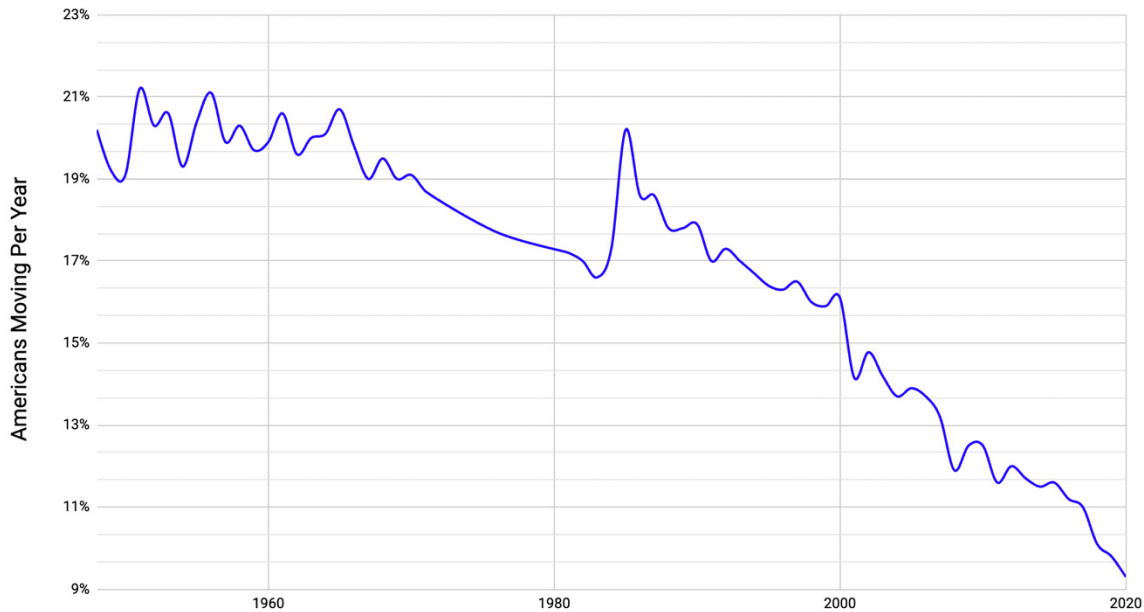
(Author’s chart based on U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, New Privately-Owned Housing Units Started: Total Units [HOUST], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/HOUST>, July 27, 2023.)

sort of gentry long considered inimical to democratic participation and upward social mobility. In this “asset economy,” wealth is derived not from productivity but from extraction of economic rents, which are, in turn, secured by perverting the power of government to help discrete interest groups entrench their competitive position in the real estate market—the phenomenon known in political science as “regulatory capture.” So consequential was the emergence of this regime that one group of sociologists recently argued it should be considered nothing less than a “structural feature of the current phase of capitalism...central to the production of a new social structure of class and stratification that is characterized by a logic of its own.”<sup>139</sup> In ways direct and indirect, big and small, Americans today live in this world—the world of the anti-growth machine. The

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<sup>139</sup> Lisa Adkins et al., “Class in the 21st Century: Asset Inflation and the New Logic of Inequality,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 53, no. 3 (May 2021): 549. For a more comprehensive treatment of this concept by the same authors, see also Lisa Adkins et al., *The Asset Economy: Property Ownership and the New Logic of Inequality* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020). For more on the “asset economy,” see Yakov Feygin, “The Deflationary Bloc,” *Phenomenal World*, Jan. 9, 2021, <https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/deflation->

## A Nation Stuck in Place



### Figure 4: The percentage of Americans moving per year, 1948–2020

The line interpolates data that are missing for 1972–75 and 1977–80. (Author’s chart based on U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement 1948–2020, Table A-1. Annual Geographic Mobility Rates, By Type of Movement.)

two-bedroom house in Greenwich Village that Jane Jacobs bought for \$7,000 in 1947 is now worth nearly one thousand times what she paid for it. Its ground-floor tenant is a luxury real estate agency.<sup>140</sup>

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[inflation/](#); Brett Christophers, “How and Why U.S. Single-Family Housing Became an Investor Asset Class,” *Journal of Urban History* 49, no. 2 (2023): 430–49.

<sup>140</sup> Robert Kanigel, *Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 114; “Contact Us,” Next Step Realty, accessed July 2, 2021, <https://www.thenextsteprealty.com/contact/>; “555 Hudson St, New York, NY 10014 | Zillow,” Zillow, accessed July 2, 2021, [https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/555-Hudson-St-New-York-NY-10014/31501608\\_zpid/](https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/555-Hudson-St-New-York-NY-10014/31501608_zpid/).

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