



Neighborhood Change and the Right to the City

Adam Tanaka

Reviewed: Rachael A. Woldoff, Lisa M. Morrison and Michael R. Glass. 2016. *Priced Out: Stuyvesant Town and the Loss of Middle-Class Neighborhoods*, New York: New York University Press, 240 pages.

New York City's Stuyvesant Town is the largest housing development in Manhattan, and also one of the most controversial and most studied. Adam Tanaka reviews the latest contribution to studies of Stuyvesant Town, by Rachael A. Woldoff, Lisa M. Morrison and Michael R. Glass. Gentrification and rent deregulation have changed the composition of the development, and longtime renters now coexist with younger and wealthier households. Woldoff et al. explore this coexistence using ethnographic methods, and situate the transformation within a broader shift to a neoliberal housing policy.

Stuyvesant Town: between myth and reality

Seventy years after opening its doors to World War II veterans, Stuyvesant Town remains by far the largest housing development in Manhattan. The project looms over the Lower East Side, with its 35 red-brick towers, 8,755 apartments and superblock design providing a marked contrast to the surrounding urban fabric. Stuyvesant Town also remains one of the city's most controversial real-estate developments. In its early years, the project was a maligned symbol of urban renewal and racial segregation. More recently, the development sparked heated debates about the viability of middle-class housing in Manhattan as it was bought and subsequently foreclosed upon in the largest real-estate transaction and mortgage default in American history.

The project has also been the subject of considerable research. Historian Samuel Zipp's *Manhattan Projects* explored the politics of development and the culture of early occupancy, while real-estate journalist Charles Bagli's *Other People's Money* drew attention to the financial speculation that drove the highly leveraged purchase of the complex in 2006 and the subsequent post-recession fallout. *Priced Out: Stuyvesant Town and the Loss of Middle-Class Neighborhoods*, co-written by Rachael A. Woldoff, Lisa M. Morrison and Michael R. Glass, also examines the most recent chapter of the Stuyvesant Town story. But rather than studying the elite politicking of private investors and public officials that animated Bagli's book, *Priced Out* shifts its focus to the politics of everyday life within the complex.

In particular, the authors explore the impacts of rent deregulation on the social composition of this previously "stodgy" middle-class neighborhood. As younger, market-rate residents have gradually replaced older, rent-stabilized tenants, a "curious menagerie" has come to occupy Stuyvesant Town's anonymous red brick towers (p. 3). Using ethnographic methods, the authors examine the intergenerational and class conflicts between the project's various subgroups, and the role of management in exacerbating tensions. Criticizing the economistic focus of much housing scholarship, Woldoff *et al.* argue that it is impossible to fully understand transformations in the

city's housing market without examining how these changes affect the social dynamics of specific communities.

The book is structured in four parts. First, the authors provide a brief historical overview of Stuyvesant Town's origins. The authors then describe Stuyvesant Town's evolution from a racially segregated veterans' community focused almost exclusively on child-rearing to an increasingly disparate mixture of rent-stabilized seniors and new market-rate renters, comprising students, professionals and young families drawn to the project's convenient downtown location.

Inset chapters describe the policy context driving the deregulation of the city's middle-income housing stock. The authors pinpoint New York State's Rent Regulation Reform Act of 1993 and Vacancy Decontrol Law of 1997 as watershed moments in the transformation of Stuyvesant Town from a relatively stable middle-class community to a so-called "luxury rental" development. They situate these changes within a broader paradigm shift from a managerial urban housing policy with state-enforced rent controls to an increasingly neoliberal agenda promoting the "invisible hand" of the market at the expense of permanently affordable housing.

Daily life in a community in flux

The authors' principal focus, however, is on how the transformation of Stuyvesant Town from community to commodity has impacted daily life. "What is it like for such different groups to live in Stuy Town together?" they ask. "Are all of these residents happy here? How long do they plan to stay?" (p. 3). These questions are explored through interviews with 49 residents across the range of subgroups living in the project. In-depth "vignette" chapters describe the experiences of representatives of the two resident groups perhaps most at odds with each other.

Chapter 3 tells the story of Ruthie, who has lived at Stuyvesant Town since 1948. Ruthie describes the transformation of the neighborhood from an age- and income-homogeneous community to a diverse set of groups with competing interests and expectations. While Ruthie herself is relatively indifferent to these changes—and highlights moments of collaboration between young and old—she relates anecdotes of other senior citizens who feel victimized by managerial decisions that they feel promote the interests of young residents at their expense.

Chapter 7 explores life at Stuyvesant Town from the perspective of Kara, a senior-year student at nearby New York University (NYU). Kara is emblematic of the trend of "studentification" in Lower Manhattan's private rental sector. Pre-existing residents argue that they cannot compete with students willing to subdivide apartments and split the rent, particularly when such practices are encouraged by revenue-maximizing landlords. With college-based social networks and a short-term view of her residency, Kara's relationship to Stuyvesant Town differs from that of long-standing residents. Like Ruthie, Kara does not recount any out-and-out conflicts between her and her elderly neighbors. She views the area without sentimentality, as a temporary housing solution rather than a community in which she has a deep stake.

Change at Stuyvesant Town: a neoliberal story?

While *Priced Out's* ethnographic research is balanced and precise, giving equal weight to the various constituents in Stuyvesant Town's "curious menagerie," the book stumbles when trying to tie the story to broader political-economic and theoretical concerns. The authors situate Stuyvesant Town's transformation from rent-regulated to market-rate housing within a structural shift from a Fordist–Keynesian to a neoliberal urban-policy paradigm. At first glance, this appears to be a plausible analytic framework. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the authors' use of a neoliberal framework is more of a hindrance than a help.

Critiques of neoliberalism tend to romanticize either the state or the community as the appropriate scale of social management; *Priced Out* does both. The authors contend that “New York City’s policies in the mid-twentieth century were in keeping with larger societal ideals grounded in justice and pragmatism, in which housing was viewed as a right” (p. 101). But the early history of Stuyvesant Town itself directly contradicts such a thesis. Not only did the project benefit from significant public subsidies to clear a low-income neighborhood in favor of a racially homogeneous, middle-class enclave—hardly a policy of “justice and pragmatism”—but its contractual arrangements guaranteed only 25 years of rent controls, tied to ongoing tax abatements, after which MetLife, a life-insurance company turned developer, could charge market rents—hardly a vision of housing “as a right.” While the authors argue that Stuyvesant Town was built due to “a need for middle-class families to have access to affordable housing in the city,” they fail to acknowledge that the project was as much—if not more so—driven by a rationale of fiduciary profit and the upgrading of Manhattan’s property values: nothing short of state-sanctioned gentrification.

It is not only the state’s historic role in social welfare provision that is uncritically embraced, however. *Priced Out* also romanticizes the notion of *community* as an ahistorical and morally upright social unit, without unpacking its complexities. Many scholars have explored the question of whether community—particularly middle-class community—is a necessarily exclusionary concept, a literature with which Woldoff *et al.* do not engage or even acknowledge (see Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners*; Suzanne Keller, *Community: Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality*; and Robert Nelson, *The Private Neighborhood*, among others). Instead, they lament the disintegration of a previously homogeneous urban neighborhood, implicitly suggesting that cities work best when composed of a mosaic-like fabric of introverted communities.

Whose “right to the city”?

The authors deploy urban theorist Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “the right to the city” to assert the primacy of existing residents’ claims to the neighborhood over the rights of newer, richer tenants. The authors assert that, historically, “Stuyvesant Town provided a sense of place” and a “sense of stability,” qualities currently being eroded by market pressures (pp. 38–39). But who qualified for entry into that community in the first place? The authors admit that MetLife’s original leasing procedures were hardly meritocratic. Beyond the racial restrictions, many early tenants had professional or personal connections with the life insurers that fast-tracked their applications and left others to languish on the waitlist for years, if not decades. What of their “right to the city”?

In contrast to the original tenants, who apparently came in search of “the promise of community,” the authors castigate new, market-rate residents for using the development “as a foothold to begin an ambitious life in New York City, or as a stepping stone on the way to an aspirational, higher-status residence” (p. 184). This is also a simplistic dichotomy. Many of Stuyvesant Town’s early tenants were driven into the project by a desperate postwar housing shortage as much as any romanticized notions of community life—arguably exactly the same reasons why so many people are willing to pay exorbitant market rents to live in Stuyvesant Town’s institutional tower blocks today.

Many of the project’s early tenants also benefited from rent controls to build up savings and later purchase a home, using Stuyvesant Town as both foothold and stepping stone to homeownership—possibly the prime function of urban rental housing. There is nothing wrong—and indeed, much right—with arguing that pre-existing residents should have a greater right to the community by dint of longevity of tenure. But the authors do not grapple with the thorny issue of how to evaluate, let alone rank, rights-based claims to shelter, and they tend to romanticize the motives that drew residents to Stuyvesant Town in the first place.

Neighborhood politics: possibilities and constraints

The book's most intriguing moments come when the authors engage with the multifaceted meanings and uses of Stuyvesant Town to different resident groups. They describe how Stuyvesant Town is appropriate for senior living; single-floor apartment layouts and elevators are convenient for mobility-impaired residents, while proximity to major hospitals in "Bedpan Alley" make trips to the doctor less stressful. At the same time, the authors show that many aspects of Stuyvesant Town's design and location are convenient to younger residents. Students from nearby universities and young professionals working in Midtown are drawn to the walk-to-work location, while young families appreciate the lack of through traffic and the plentiful recreational facilities.

In the book's closing pages, the authors also acknowledge the importance of politics—or the process of collectively binding decision-making—to the future of increasingly age- and income-diverse urban neighborhoods. "In order to achieve community in the city, the heterogeneous groups who inhabit the same space must establish strong relationships and unify politically in pursuit of their best interests," they write, in a statement that could apply to urban governance more generally (p. 192).

Whether the pursuit of disparate interests can be achieved through political action is a promising avenue for further research, and arguably more fruitful than the authors' reliance on an orthodox neoliberal framework. That said, any analysis of political organizing at the neighborhood scale must also engage with the role of both public and private sectors in structuring outcomes. After all, in the recent October 2015 sale of Stuyvesant Town to private equity giant Blackstone and Canadian pension fund Ivanhoe Cambridge, the new landlord's pledge to maintain affordable rents in 5,000 apartments for another 20 years was as much a product of closed-door negotiations between investors and politicians as it was a result of direct community action.

Bibliography

- Bagli, Charles. 2013. *Other People's Money: Inside the Housing Crisis and the Demise of the Greatest Real-Estate Deal Ever Made*, New York: Penguin.
- Gans, Herbert. 1982. *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Keller, Suzanne. 2003. *Community: Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nelson, Robert. 2005. *Private Neighborhoods and the Transformation of Local Government*, Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Zipp, Samuel. 2010. *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold-War New York*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Adam Tanaka is a PhD candidate in urban planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, specializing in housing policy and real estate. For the 2015/2016 academic year, Adam is the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies John R. Meyer Dissertation Fellow and is based at the New York University (NYU) Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, conducting his dissertation research. Adam's writing has been published by the Harvard Kennedy School, Van Alen Institute, Data-Smart City Solutions, *Archi|DOCT*, and *Time Out London*.

To quote this article:

Adam Tanaka, "Neighborhood Change and the Right to the City", *Metropolitiques*, 29 March 2016. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Neighborhood-Change-and-the-Right.html>.