

A City Within a City: Community Development and the Struggle Over Harlem, 1961-2001

By Brian Goldstein

Ph.D. Candidate, Program in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Planning
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

bgoldst@gmail.com

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While Harlem, New York found itself deep in the midst of “urban crisis” in the mid-1960s, by the late 1990s commentators invoked Harlem’s rich past to describe its apparent resurgence, or “Second Renaissance.” Harlem’s transformation came about in an era of profound global, national, and local political economic shifts, but residents themselves played a crucial role in negotiating and effecting the redevelopment of their neighborhood at the scale of its buildings and streets. My dissertation, “A City Within a City: Community Development and the Struggle Over Harlem, 1961-2001,” examines the grassroots response of residents in Harlem to questions of development in the last four decades of the twentieth century. While most historians have considered citizen activism as the conclusion of the major postwar American project of urban redevelopment, or the large-scale, government-led reconstruction of cities, this study contends that such community-based activism also marked the beginning of a new era in urban history.¹ By using one exemplary place to tell this story, I explore the world’s best-known predominantly African-American neighborhood as both an exceptional and representative case among American cities in the aftermath of federally funded urban renewal.

Beginning in the 1960s, Harlemites faced the most severe poverty and physical dilapidation their neighborhood had ever seen, but nonetheless expressed ambitious visions of

what Harlem could become. Such visions overwhelmingly prioritized the objective of community control, projecting an ideal of Harlem as a place whose very strength grew from its identity as a product of economic and racial segregation. However, if the 1960s gave rise to utopian alternatives in response to the top-down order of modern urban redevelopment, notions of how to achieve this ideal often differed dramatically in the following decades. In focusing on community design centers, self-help groups, community associations, and community development corporations, I explain that the forms of Harlem at the end of the twentieth century, including new commercial structures along 125th Street, and mixed-income, rehabilitated housing on its residential avenues, were not simply imposed by outsiders on an unwitting neighborhood, but were the often ironic outcome of the drive for community control. The indirect path leading to this urban landscape—and the uneven benefits that arose from its formation—underscores the complex legacy of the struggle for a built environment determined by community members.

Though the public sector's involvement in cities transformed dramatically in this era, it remained the major intermediary in development in Harlem. Federal, state, and local officials played varying roles over time, and Harlemites responded pragmatically, assembling a patchwork of support amidst an ever-changing policy landscape. If public support—increasingly coupled with private investment—enabled the physical realization of plans, however, it also fundamentally altered the spatial vision that community-level actors pursued. While community control had brought the ideal of a financially self-reliant Harlem, in reality Harlem lacked the economic self-reliance that activists sought. Consequently, I explain that while efforts in this era were pitted against the top-down approach to development that prevailed at midcentury, many of the same dilemmas of that preceding period remained in this one. For instance, though

community control proponents prioritized the goal of inclusive participation, decision-making continued to be dominated by leaders wielding disproportionate power through resources they obtained from outside partners.

Yet while urban renewal persisted as both a foil against which activists argued, and as a specter that reappeared in new forms and approaches, I contend that community control remained a fundamentally transformative force in this period, though in ways that proponents often did not anticipate. To some extent then, my dissertation offers a story of ideals falling short, and of dreams of an alternate order failing in the face of overwhelming counter winds. However, if the highest aspirations of community control failed to become material reality, development—and the physical form of Harlem itself—undoubtedly changed in the wake of activism. New community-based organizations came to be major players in urban development and residents gained new influence in the transformation of their neighborhood, if not the equal representation they had sought in the late 1960s.

Reconstructing this story involves understanding the goals and plans of community-based organizations that vied to shape the built environment of Harlem in these decades, a task for which a research visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) was essential. The role of the Rockefeller family and their associated foundations in the postwar urban redevelopment of New York is well-known, in such landmarks as the United Nations, Lincoln Center, and the World Trade Center. Increasingly, scholars have also come to recognize the important support that foundations under the Rockefeller umbrella provided to redevelopment's critics, such as Jane Jacobs. My research explores the more limited, but no less important support that the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) provided for neighborhood-scale, sometimes radical planning and design experiments of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. While the

RBF and the RF played only a small part in funding the organizations in my dissertation, their aid proved nonetheless crucial alongside federal government support and that of other foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, the New York Foundation, and the Vincent Astor Foundation. The records that foundations kept are essential to researching this history at the grassroots level, moreover, for they provide a paper trail documenting the work of often short-lived organizations without extant archival collections of their own.

The Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem, or (ARCH), the central focus of my first and second chapters, is one such organization. RBF maintained correspondence with ARCH from the first months of the organization's inception in late 1964, until its last weeks of existence in early 1975. During this period, ARCH served Harlem as the first community design center in the country, a resource that residents could tap for assistance in planning alternatives to state-led redevelopment projects that threatened to displace large numbers of low-income Harlemites. In its early years, ARCH opposed disruptive urban renewal plans but not renewal itself, arguing that Harlem could use public resources to reconstruct neighborhoods for the benefit of existing residents.

Newsletters in the RBF collection help explain ARCH's gradual success in taking on major efforts in West Harlem and in the East Harlem Triangle, a neighborhood north of 125th Street and east of Park Avenue, and throughout Harlem. "When we started our work in Harlem a year and [a] half ago, we found no neighborhood groups specifically concerned with community planning or prepared to make real use of our voluntary services," ARCH staff wrote in the spring of 1966, but now, they wrote, "we are nearly overwhelmed by serious groups wanting assistance in programming for community facilities, building rehabilitation and renewal planning."²

The late 1960s proved transformative for community organizations in Harlem, as they were for the Civil Rights Movement in general. As the influence of Black Power and the associated goal of community control became prevalent in calls for decentralization of Harlem's schools, they likewise became evident in the work of ARCH. In 1967, the organization shifted dramatically to African-American leadership, took a more militantly oppositional stance to urban renewal, and began to focus on bringing new opportunities for the direct participation of Harlemites in the design of their neighborhood.

The RBF played a key funding role in one major initiative that ARCH launched in 1968, a training program for young Harlemites who had not completed high school. Named "Architecture in the Neighborhoods," the program focused on teaching design skills for the purpose of enabling residents to intervene in their own community. "Specific emphasis will be given to developing skills which can be used not only in traditional planning or architectural studios, but also by advocacy planning groups (such as ARCH), by community groups, or in the implementation of governmental programs in urban areas," ARCH staff wrote.³ In approving funding, the RBF especially highlighted the program's effort "to prepare and motivate young people to enter a new profession,"⁴ but the \$12,500 RBF grant also enabled more substantial goals, such as racial equality. "None of these students are working as 'Office Boy' or any other marginal position," ARCH's Arthur Symes reported to the RBF in 1969, of the apprenticeship component of Architecture in the Neighborhoods. "They are all working on drawing boards—involved with the projects in the offices as the other employees are."⁵

The Harlem Commonwealth Council (HCC) marked a second effort through which ARCH sought to create new opportunities for Harlemites to exert direct control over their neighborhood. In partnership with some of the leading figures in the Black Power movement in

Harlem, ARCH helped form the HCC in 1967. The Harlem Commonwealth Council represented a new kind of entity in Harlem, a community development corporation that aspired to develop businesses in the neighborhood that would be collectively owned by residents. HCC sought the RF's support soon after its inception, outlining an ambitious portfolio of the businesses it hoped to develop—including an automotive diagnostic center, a gas station, a data processing service, and a pharmacy.⁶ Though initially funded through a grant from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, HCC found an ally in the RF that they hoped could provide a broader base of funding until the organization was able to become self-supporting. Donald Simmons, HCC's director at the time, explained to the RF representatives that “he did not mind receiving federal assistance, but does not want to remain dependent upon Washington.”

The \$50,000 that the RF provided to HCC in mid-1968 funded an organization with an orientation towards economic development and an appreciation for expertise, but one with aspirations toward broader political transformation as well. “HCC is looking at any method which will get community participation,” RF staff noted. HCC hoped to change the nature of business ownership in Harlem, which was so often controlled by those outside the neighborhood. “HCC wants to help Harlem to ‘get control of institutions in our community so they will be accountable to us,’” RF staff wrote, quoting Simmons.⁷ Though the RF remained interested in HCC's activities, the foundation determined that it was unable to provide further support of profit-making ventures.⁸ HCC became increasingly dependent on federal funding. Under a new director following Simmons's departure, the organization failed to sell the shares it had long promised to Harlem residents.

HCC developed a range of businesses through federal support, but the curtailment of that support in the early 1980s undermined most of the organization's activities. Likewise, this

dramatic diminution of public support altered the work of the Harlem Urban Development Corporation (HUDC), which had grown out of community protests over the State Office Building that Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) had proposed for Harlem in the late 1960s. Though officials initially intended that HUDC would be a broad-based development entity encompassing both the radical and moderate wings of Harlem's leadership, power struggles led to the organization's control by establishment moderates. As a result, HUDC typically pursued large-scale commercial projects like a trade center for 125th Street. When the public support it depended upon ceased to fuel such plans, the organization turned to private funding sources.

The RBF played an important role in helping to reshape HUDC by providing \$225,000 over three years to bolster its efforts to attract private financing, especially for housing development. David Rockefeller's New York City Housing Partnership became increasingly involved in the work of HUDC. RBF staff expressed confidence in the potential of HUDC's new efforts. "In light of the excellent relationship that has been established between HUDC and the New York Housing Partnership, prospects are good for expanding HUDC's outreach to other private-sector organizations," they wrote.⁹ Yet RBF records also confirm a pattern that arose repeatedly in HUDC's work. The organization made big promises, but often proved self-interested and ineffectual. "[T]he project was not very successful," RBF staff admitted in 1987. "The leadership at HUDC is weak and the political people who have the influence to improve the situation don't take the time, or don't have the time, to take the necessary steps to make HUDC into something more attractive."¹⁰

The records at the RAC provide a cross-section of some of the most significant efforts to accommodate demands for community control in the post-urban renewal era. Likewise, they offer an often frank portrait of the uneven results of such efforts, and the many different

approaches that community-based organizations took. Lastly, both the RBF and the RF archives reveal the tremendous role that Rockefeller-affiliated individuals and groups played in shaping the nature of urban development in New York City, not only in the postwar era, but also in the recent past.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ See, for example, Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

² "ARCH News," 6 April 1966, Folder 714, Box 106, Record Group (RG) 3.1, Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, New York. Also see "ARCH News," 1 February 1966, Folder 714, Box 106, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.

³ "ARCH-Cooper Union Training Program," c. February 1968, Folder 714, Box 106, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.

⁴ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Inc. Executive Committee, "Docket Memorandum: Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem, Inc. (ARCH)," 27 June 1968, Folder 715, Box 106, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.

⁵ Letter to Gerald Davenport from Arthur L. Symes, 27 January 1969, Folder 715, Box 106, RG 3.1, RBF, RAC.

⁶ "Interviews: KWT, JEB, LCD," 27 June 1968, Folder 356, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation (RF) Archives, RAC.

⁷ "Interviews: WCO, JEB," 22 July 1968, Folder 356, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, RF, RAC; "Interviews: WCO," 24 July 1968, Folder 356, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, RF, RAC; "Allocation #2, Amount: \$50,000," 24 July 1968, Folder 356, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, RF, RAC.

⁸ "Interviews: WCO," 19 June 1968, Folder 357, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, RF, RAC; "Interviews: LCD," 8 December 1969, Folder 357, Box 43, Series 200, RG 1.2, RF, RAC.

⁹ "Economic Growth and Stabilization: Harlem Urban Development Corporation," 30 June 1983, Folder 7855, Box 1265, RG 3.2, RBF, RAC; "Economic Growth and Stabilization: Harlem Urban Development Corporation," 15 February 1983, Folder 7855, Box 1265, RG 3.2, RBF, RAC.

¹⁰ Memo to RBF Files via EV from Thomas W. Wahman, 5 October 1987, Folder 7865, Box 1265, RG 3.2, RBF, RAC.