

# Building Momentum: An Ethnographic Study of Inner-City Redevelopment

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives.** One factor contributing to the decay of inner-city areas, and to consequent excess mortality, is the massive loss of housing. This report studied the effects of a redevelopment project on social functioning in an inner-city community.

**Methods.** This ethnographic study included the following elements: a longitudinal study of 10 families living in renovated housing, repeated observations and photographing of the street scene, focus groups, and informal interviews with area residents. The project was located in the Bradhurst section of Harlem in New York City and was focused on a redevelopment effort sponsored by local congregations.

**Results.** Those who were able to move into newly renovated housing found that their living conditions were greatly improved. Neighborhood revitalization lagged behind the rehabilitation of individual apartment houses. This uneven redevelopment was a visual and sensory reminder of "what had been." Residents missed the warmth and social support that existed in Harlem before its decline.

**Conclusions.** Rebuilding damaged housing contributes greatly to the well-being of inner-city residents. The current pace and scope of rebuilding are insufficient to restore lost vitality. (*Am J Public Health*. 1999;89:840-844)

A significant number of inner-city communities in the United States have gone through a period of decline since the 1960s. The loss of jobs and the growth of an underground economy based on the sales of illicit drugs are both well documented for their contributions to this decline.<sup>1,2</sup> A growing body of literature has documented the contribution of a third force—the collapse of the environment—to inner-city decay. Dear, a geographer working in Philadelphia, documented how the abandonment of housing was contagious—forsaking one house led to the abandonment of nearby structures.<sup>3</sup>

This process spread like a wine stain on a tablecloth throughout inner-city areas. Abandoned houses were likely to be destroyed by fire, leading to the "hollowing out" of large areas of such cities as Newark, Detroit, and New York City.<sup>4-6</sup> This widespread physical destruction of urban areas displaced people from their historic locations, creating a split in the sociogeographic nature of affected communities. Those who remained in the depopulated and physically denuded areas were subject to many health problems, including excessive rates of injury, violence, addictive disorders, and AIDS.<sup>7-9</sup>

Central Harlem, a New York City neighborhood, experienced this process of sociogeographic disruption following the loss of a substantial proportion of its housing. In 1986, Harlem religious leaders realized that without revitalization of the area, they would soon have no one left in their congregations. They formed an organization called Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, Inc, and took the leadership for developing a reconstruction plan that addressed housing, employment, and health. The plan focused on rebuilding a particular area of Harlem known as the Bradhurst neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> In addition to renovating and rebuilding housing, Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement envisioned stimulating economic development and strengthening family functioning.

Our objective in this study was to observe the effects of the redevelopment process. We were particularly interested in examining the impact that stable housing might have on area residents, particularly as it affected their interactions with their physical and social environment.<sup>11-13</sup> A number of specific research questions guided our observations: How do people adjust to a new apartment and a new social setting? How, and to what degree, do newcomers build social ties with individuals and families in a new building and a new neighborhood? What efforts, if any, do people make to protect or enhance the physical environment in their apartments, in their buildings, and in the surrounding community?

## Methods

### Site

The redevelopment project was located in the Bradhurst area of Harlem, between 139th Street to the south, 155th Street to the north, Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard to the east, and Edgecombe and Bradhurst Avenues to the west. This area had lost a substantial proportion of its buildings; every block in the area had lost 1 or more buildings, and some blocks had been entirely abandoned. In total, there were estimated to be 2885 vacant or abandoned housing units, representing more than one third of the area's housing stock. According to the redevelopment plan, 64% of the residents had a family income below

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\$10000, 35% lived below the poverty line, and 13% of adults were unemployed.<sup>10</sup>

### Data Collection

Ethnographic methods were used to document the evolution of the Bradhurst redevelopment project from October 1994 to July 1998. A trained ethnographer lived and worked in the Harlem area, documenting its history and the process of redevelopment. She immersed herself in the setting, creating opportunities to informally interview, observe, and interact with area residents. The goal was to provide a descriptive understanding of the process of repopulating the Bradhurst area. The ethnography was an ideal study method because it emphasized systematic documentation of behaviors and patterns of thought in context. Data collection included recording detailed narrative field notes, mapping and photographing the streetscape, holding periodic focus groups, and conducting a longitudinal study of 10 families residing in the newly renovated housing. The study procedures were approved by the Harlem Hospital Institutional Review Board.

### Subjects: Families

Ten families currently living in newly renovated or newly built buildings in the Bradhurst community were asked to participate in the study. The families were selected with the assistance of Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement's social service department. The sample was designed to include families living in different buildings, families in different stages of development, and families of different socioeconomic levels. Participating family members ranged from a 7-month-old infant to a family consisting of 2 adults in their late 60s. Seven of the 10 families included adults who were lifetime residents of Harlem.

Letters describing the study and asking families to participate in a series of 4 interviews were distributed. Each of the families that we approached accepted this invitation. Once families agreed to participate, the initial interviews were scheduled by telephone and took place in the respondent's apartment. The interviews were designed to obtain detailed information about the families' experiences as residents of Central Harlem and as participants in the redevelopment project. Questions were designed to elicit information about issues related to the physical environment, as well as to the mental and physical health of respondents. Families were asked about their housing histories, their feelings about their new home, and their experiences as Harlem residents. Fami-

lies were recontacted and reinterviewed at approximately 6-month intervals over 7 rounds of data collection.

### Subjects: Focus Group Participants

Three focus groups were conducted with Harlem residents. Participants were recruited through flyers posted in buildings and through word of mouth among tenants' organizations. One group had 10 participants, another had 8, and the third had 5. One group consisted entirely of women participants while the other groups had both women and men respondents. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 60 years, and the majority of each group's participants had been in Harlem longer than 10 years.

Questions posed to focus group participants were based on a set of issues identified during the family interviews. These questions focused specifically on the problems of living in a community that had experienced serious deterioration and was in the process of renewal. Group participants were asked to describe problems and positive experiences and to discuss ideas for addressing problems that were identified. Focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed.

### Observational Data

In addition to family interviews and focus groups, systematic street-level observations were conducted to assess neighborhood conditions and to identify current and potential community environmental problems. Our objective was to describe everyday habits, living behaviors, and rituals associated with the daily lives of the neighborhood's residents. Photographs of the area documented important alterations in the landscape, including the erection of new buildings, the opening of stores, and the cleaning of vacant lots.

### Analysis

The analysis included several tasks. First, a précis of each family was created, integrating material from the 7 interviews. Second, these précis were examined to outline the process of resettlement and, in particular, to delineate the formation of attachments to the new home and new community. Third, family interviews and focus group interviews were coded for themes suggested by the research questions, as well as others that arose from the data itself. The photographs and street-level observations were examined for information describing the changing landscape and its new uses.

## Results

### New Roots

For the 10 families followed during the course of this study, the newly renovated apartments created by Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement were a marked contrast to previous living conditions. Some had never had a fully functional apartment. Others had been caught in the cross fires of the drug wars. One elderly woman, who had been besieged by drug dealers while living in a semiabandoned building on 148th Street, said she thought she had "died and gone to heaven" when she moved to her new home. In the new building, she and her husband relished their clean and safe apartment. They became active in the tenants' association, watching with concern for any signs of deterioration in the new setting.

The adjustment to the new living arrangements varied from family to family, but all turned from concerns about shelter to other life issues. Those families facing welfare cuts were able to make plans for work or job training. Working families were able to spend more time with children or in social activities. Families struggling with domestic violence or addiction had the opportunity to confront those problems: one young woman was able to divorce her husband, who had become addicted to crack, and enter job training, while another was able to leave a domineering husband and prosper in an independent business.

Interpersonal dynamics within buildings had a powerful influence on families' experiences in the new setting. The tenants of one building were able to start and maintain a tenants' association that supported communal life and negotiated problems with management. The association helped all the residents in that building develop a sense of connection and security within the building. Each of the 5 other buildings we observed organized a tenants' association but could not keep it functioning. In those buildings, residents did not become as well acquainted, nor were the buildings as well regulated. Interviewees complained that children were allowed to "run wild in hallways" or guests were permitted to wander in the buildings without supervision. These complaints reflected an ongoing concern that the forces of destruction might enter and undermine the safety and serenity of the new housing. Such an incursion of negative activities did occur in one building, making life there extremely difficult.

For many families we interviewed, crisis and despair were never far beneath the surface. Those who were doing well themselves often felt like they were drowning in

the sorrows of others. One young woman became very emotional at the close of an interview. As she related the devastating impact that crack cocaine had on “all but 2 of her childhood friends,” she wept and asked the research interviewer, “What’s in [crack], what’s in it that makes people behave as they do?” Another woman described a week in which she succored 2 little children whose grandmother had severe mental illness and a teenager who wanted an abortion but was afraid to tell her mother. It was not unusual for ethnographic field note entries to begin with families’ concerns about a current crisis, ranging from rats in the building to welfare cuts. Some families, as they began to prosper, dreamed of relocating to other neighborhoods to escape the instability and danger in Harlem.

Certainly, the 3 years of rebuilding that we observed had not been sufficient to create areawide vitality and safety, and this posed problems for family adjustment to the larger Bradhurst neighborhood. One woman pointed out that inside her apartment it was possible to forget what was outside, but looking out the window broke the illusion. The longing for a rejuvenated landscape was such that each advance in the rebuilding process was greeted with joy—the arrival of Dunkin’ Donuts and Popeye’s Chicken, for example—and quickly incorporated into the pathways and stopping points of Bradhurst residents. In some respects, the geography of the area changed radically. One woman told us, “In the past I didn’t even go on 145th Street or Eighth Avenue. You couldn’t even walk on Eighth Avenue, it was the most horrible place. You went out of your way to avoid coming on Eighth Avenue.” But, in other respects, the scattered redevelopment left much of the area in a dilapidated condition. Pictures and maps collected by the research team provided ample documentation of the contrasts remaining in the landscape: it was common to see new buildings standing next to abandoned, trash-filled lots. To understand the meaning of this pockmarked landscape, we used field notes and focus group transcripts to augment data in family interviews.

### “Harlem Lost”

A central theme that emerged from this larger analysis was that the fractured landscape represented the conjunction of the grim present and a deeply mourned past. In fact, it is impossible to understand the meaning of the present without an appreciation of the transformation that had occurred in the setting.

“Harlem Lost,” as we might call it, was remembered as a friendly place. According to

one area resident, “You could walk through Harlem and know everybody because everybody knew you. They knew your momma, your daddy, your brother.” Study participants were generally positive in their descriptions of Harlem before its collapse. Their recollections were touched by a nostalgic longing for a community in which neighbors took care of one another, streets were well maintained, and children were reared collectively. They spoke of that Harlem with a mixture of pride in what the community once was and sadness for what exists today. In the past, they noted, there was a cohesiveness that created a sense of stability and belonging. One focus group participant explained, “There was moral pride and moral dignity. It was something that moved around to everyone who was living here. It was electric. The network, it was a spiritual network. Remember, Harlem is a collection of people from some place else but people came with the same spiritual background.”

As focus group members informed us, the strong families and tight-knit social networks provided support during difficult times and helped residents meet the challenge of surviving in a poor urban community. Neighbors provided financial assistance, guidance, and emotional support. Families pooled meager resources when necessary and joined in united action when the neighborhood was threatened. They did not fear losing their homes, and many families could point with pride to the fact that they had resided in the same apartment for generations. One young woman grew up in an apartment originally occupied by her grandparents. She felt that were it not for a fire, she and her mother would have been living there still. Another resident said she had moved into her grandmother’s and aunt’s building when their neighbor moved out; she then lived there for 22 years.

Group members spoke proudly of a time when every adult on the block had permission to reprimand the area’s children. One resident recalled, “All you had to do is say ‘I’m going to tell your mother.’ Oh boy! I was scared before I got there. People spanked me and sent me upstairs to tell my mother, and I got another one when I got home. All that’s gone.” These long-term residents had witnessed the gradual decline of their community. The loss of housing in Central Harlem had a devastating impact on its residents. The physical abandonment of buildings forced many to move from the area, created a large number of homeless people, ruptured social networks, and changed how residents moved in and through the area. As a result, people became isolated from one another. One informant told us:

[Frederick Douglass Boulevard] became a desolate area. We’re talking from 148th Street to 155th Street, basically, on both sides of the street, for a 10-year period there was no housing. It was sad. I remember the first time I really noticed it. I was walking down the street, it was like: what’s different? And I’m walking and I said to myself, “God, I haven’t said ‘Hi’ to anybody.” Then I stopped and I looked around and I said, “Because no one can possibly live here anymore.” And I really looked and I thought about it, people lived in these buildings and [the buildings] don’t exist anymore. [My] building went down horribly. All the people moved out. Other people came in. The city took over the building. We had a lot of cold winters, a lot of no heat, a lot of no hot water. The last few years were really bad. The door never stayed locked downstairs. Drugs were in the building. A couple of apartments were evacuated and then they would have crack in and out of them. And you know it’s really deteriorated, drugs are being sold right in the hallway.

When people described “Harlem Present,” they used terms like “dirty,” “not connected,” and “disrespect.” These words represented the opposite of the values of the community that had lived in Harlem Lost: the past was the standard for measuring the present. The landscape of the present was alienating to the extent that it continued to symbolize the loss of a treasured and supportive sociogeographic community.

### Renovation and Movement

Despite the drawbacks of dysfunctional building dynamics and area instability, there is no question that renovation of the area was a powerful and positive experience in the lives of area residents. The transformation of 140th Street, between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, is an example. In the early 1990s, that area was avoided by area residents and given over to the drug trade. In 1995, a field worker with our group was warned not to walk down that block because it was too dangerous. That same year, the Urban League called it the “worst block in New York.”<sup>14</sup> A massive investment in revitalization restored the gravely deteriorated area to viable urban housing for working people. By 1998, when we resurveyed the area, it was possible for our team to move without fear through the block (see Figure 1).

Such improvements have occurred, albeit in a scattershot manner, all over the Bradhurst area. They have raised spirits, restored hope, and improved daily living conditions. The balance of interactions has swung toward more positive social exchanges and away from the dominance of the drug culture. The geography of danger has been

undone to some extent, permitting freer movement and exploration within the Bradhurst area. One resident summed up the changes this way: "Everyone is in a new environment. People have a different attitude. People have a new outlook."

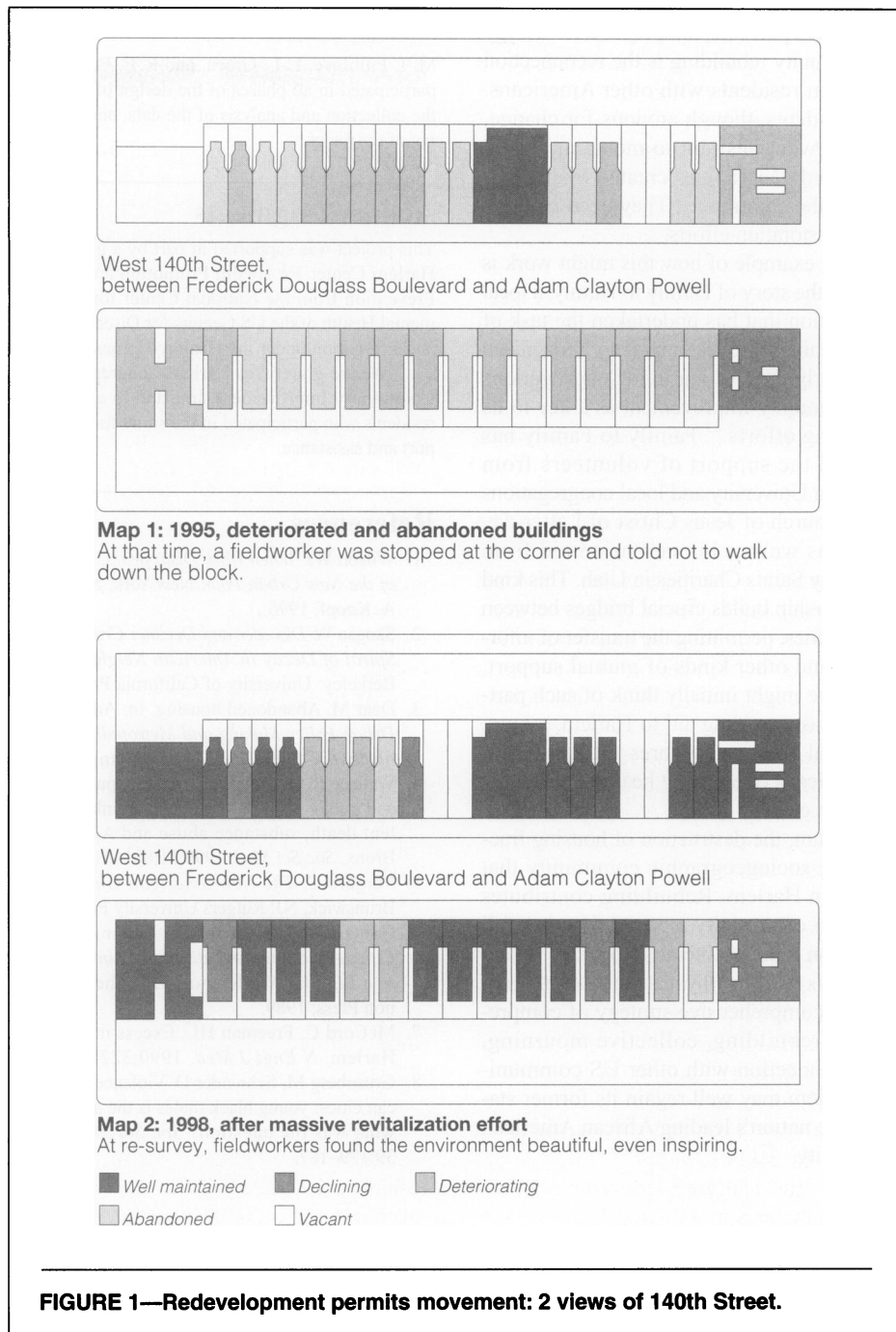
**Discussion**

On the basis of the data presented here, we hypothesize that each restored home or store augments motion within the community. This motion gives people opportunities to interact in positive ways, thereby recreating social cohesion and place attachment. While it may seem paradoxical that buildings generate momentum, that is what we observed in Harlem.

One way to understand this seeming paradox is to contemplate the hierarchy of needs, first articulated by Abraham Maslow.<sup>15</sup> The survival needs, which include those for shelter and physical safety, must be satisfied before the existential needs for growth and spiritual life can be fully realized. Cohen and Koegel, in an ethnographic study of people who were homeless and mentally ill, found shelter and subsistence strategies to be pre-occupying issues.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, we found that the physical effort and emotional strain of living in deteriorated, unsafe housing consumed a great deal of time and energy. By contrast, an expanding zone of residential comfort and general safety unleashed area residents, making it possible for them to engage in a wider variety of life activities. We conclude that repairing the physical infrastructure of the community permits movement, and the resulting momentum can be built into a greater force for community revitalization.

Many tasks remain, in addition to the revitalization of housing. First, the years of decline have produced a form of alienation<sup>11</sup> in which faithful Harlemites reject the degraded landscape of the present. This disconnection from place is aggravated by the loss of social cohesion, that is, a disconnection from people. Having lost a world composed of broad social networks embedded in closely packed tenements, people have withdrawn into more individualistic approaches enacted in smaller areas. They move carefully through a geography of danger; they may adopt passivity, aggression, or drug use to manage painful emotions, and they try to gain support from a limited number of interpersonal relationships.

The re-creation of social cohesion and place attachment will require more strenuous community organizing efforts in the future. Further, it is essential to recognize that the old Harlem is truly lost and a new socioge-



graphic community is coming into being as a result of current rebuilding efforts. This new Harlem may be more gentrified, and less welcoming to poor people, than was Harlem in the past.<sup>17</sup> The failure of 5 out of 6 tenants' associations—and the constant eruption of crises—are telling signs that the synergy of new networks in new homes has yet to be fully realized.

Second, the consequences of disintegration—homelessness, victimization, family dysfunction, and drug addiction—have been extremely traumatic for a great many of the survivors.<sup>18,19</sup> Like other survivors of trauma,<sup>20</sup> injured residents of Harlem have difficulty in reestablishing open and trusting

relationships. Thus, the psychological trauma resulting from disintegration is an obstacle to renewing community. The growing literature on communities affected by disaster suggests that individual recovery and community stabilization require a transformational process that will allow the disillusioned citizens to mourn their losses, join in a new search for meaning, and commit to rebuilding efforts.<sup>21</sup> One of the most dramatic examples of such a process is the memorial erected to veterans of the Vietnam War in Washington, DC.<sup>22</sup> That monument created an opportunity for healing not only for the badly traumatized veterans' community but also for the larger society that had struggled for and against the war.

A final part of a comprehensive strategy of community rebuilding is the reconnection of Harlem residents with other Americans. Area residents, though anxious for change, are somewhat hesitant to move out of the constricted geographies created by the collapse of the community. They need partners in their restoration efforts.

One example of how this might work is found in the story of Family to Family, a local organization that has undertaken the task of strengthening families, a strategy recognized in the early days of Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement as a key to its rebuilding efforts.<sup>23</sup> Family to Family has received the support of volunteers from Columbia University and local congregations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as humanitarian aid from Latter-day Saints Charities in Utah. This kind of partnership builds crucial bridges between communities, permitting the transfer of information and other kinds of mutual support. While one might initially think of such partnerships as providing aid to Harlem, a more ecological view underscores the benefits to all Americans of ensuring healthy habitats in our urban centers.

In sum, the destruction of housing fractured the sociogeographic community that existed in Harlem. Rebuilding contributes greatly to community regeneration, but full restoration requires attention to social reintegration as well as physical reconstruction. Given a comprehensive strategy of comprehensive rebuilding, collective mourning, and reconnection with other US communities, Harlem may well regain its former status as the nation's leading African American community. □

## Contributors

M. T. Fullilove, L. L. Green, and R. E. Fullilove all participated in all phases of the design of the study, the collection and analysis of the data, and the writing of the paper.

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