SPURA Matters: A 40-year Commemorative Map of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area

Discussions, Tours, and Exhibits to get New Yorkers talking about SPURA’s Past, Present and Future
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The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union built the Amalgamated Houses (1929-31) and Hillman Houses (1949-1951). To partner with the city on urban renewal, the union organized the United Housing Foundation (UHF) in 1951 with other unions and nonprofits. UHF built East River Houses (1956) and Seward Park Houses (1962). Ranged along Grand Street, from the East River to Essex St., the union co-ops aimed to improve the lives of members and engage them in striving for a better world. Some contemporaries thought their admirable goals justified the removal of tenements and site tenants; others disagreed.

SPURA in 1963, in its heady first days, showing the buildings to remain and the land to be cleared for new housing. It also shows a complicated wrinkle. The giant, multi-lane Lower Manhattan (aka Broome St.) Expressway would have run alongside, linking the East River bridges and Holland Tunnel, and cutting off SPURA’s northwest corner. One expected result? Massive displacement. Concerted protest helped kill the plan in 1970.

Activists lobbied for more low-income housing in SPURA so some site residents could move back. The city agreed and the Housing Authority (NYCHA) built SPURA Extension East and West (1972). NYCHA invited former site tenants to apply, since a remedy for the pain of displacement was to offer priority in NYCHA housing. But NYCHA also tried to limit the number of returnees, persuaded by the “tipping point” theory that too many people of color would cause white residents to flee. Site residents sued, setting off the Otero v. NYCHA fair housing lawsuit. Eventually, in a mediated settlement, more site residents returned.

The Grand St. Guild, of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York, partnered with the city to build three apartment towers surrounding St. Mary’s Church (1973). Subsidies allowed the Guild to make the rental units affordable to people of moderate and low incomes. This helped a few more former site residents to move back.

This empty land viewed in the 1990s from the northwest corner of SPURA, near Delancey and Essex Streets, is now largely covered with parking. It shows how much space was never fully developed. Parking is only one of many things that might happen here yet.

Lower East Siders rarely wait for others to plan their future for them. When community members grew concerned about gang violence in the 1950s, they formed the Lower East Side Neighborhoods Association (LENA) to organize their neighbors. The first thing LENA did was create a 10-foot, hand-drawn map to help community members identify problems and solutions. Locals responded with unexpected enthusiasm. The map helped them envision the challenge. They supplied the imagination and a willingness to get the job done.

SPURA Matters is also about planning for the future — especially for a piece of the LES called the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area (SPURA). In the 1950s, all around the country, and especially in New York, cities were using federal “urban renewal” dollars to solve their problems. Tax-paying individuals and businesses were leaving urban areas, and cities had less money to work with to care for citizens, meet rising expectations, and update infrastructure. A popular solution was to reclaim valuable land by bulldozing old buildings in poor neighborhoods (the “slums”) to replace them with new, publicly-subsidized apartments and educational and cultural facilities for higher income residents. In NYC, residents and businesses were displaced by the hundreds of thousands. Some of the displacees were re-housed in publicly subsidized low-income projects; others were simply removed. Concerns about displacement and relocation grew so severe that the city was obliged to find remedies. But remedies were often ad-hoc, varying among agencies and mayoral administrations.

One of the city’s most effective private partners was the United Housing Foundation (UHF). In the late 1950s, the UHF developed the Seward Park Houses on the south side of Grand St. and started work on Seward Park Extension — a 20-acre project for the north side of Grand, bounded by Essex, Delancey, and Willett. The UHF withdrew in 1961, but the city went forward in 1967 to take control of the site, clear it, and build new housing.*

Most of the new units would be priced for middle-income pocketbooks, and judging from previous projects, would largely house New Yorkers of European descent. Most of the 7,000 site residents were poor and of Puerto Rican, African American, and Chinese descent. They would never be able to move back. A contest thus emerged: Who would get to live in SPURA? Over the fifties and sixties, NYC had grown more segregated by race and income. Would that continue? Or would New Yorkers find a way to build healthy communities that were inclusive rather than exclusive?

These questions have bedeviled SPURA for four decades. Some things were built, but protests, backroom deals, lawsuits, and political stand-offs have prevented development on the whole site. The private market is re-shaping the LES, but SPURA is still in public hands. Government and citizens can work together here for the public good if we can muster the imagination and political will.

*Eight buildings were to remain: Henry St. Playhouse, Sages of Israel Home for the Aged, St. Mary’s Church & School, a Broome St. apartment building, Beth Jacob School, Beth Hamredash Hagedol Synagogue, Essex St. Market, and Downtown Talmud Torah.
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The Grand St. Guild, of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York, partnered with the city to build four apartment towers surrounding St. Mary’s Church (1973). Subsidies allowed the Guild to make the rental units affordable to people of moderate and low incomes. This helped a few more former site tenants to move back.

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The city settled the case by agreeing Council sued the Guild, claiming the rentals favored St. Mary’s parishioners, the Archdiocese of New York, partnered with NYCHA. NYCHA was quietly making plans to keep site residents to a minimum, persuaded by the “tipping point” theory that too many people of color would cause white residents to flee. Site tenants sued, setting off the Otero v. NYCHA fair housing lawsuit. Eventually, more site residents were admitted.

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Interactive Tour of Seward Park
Ongoing – from Saturday, Oct. 11. A self-guided, interactive tour of SPURA by Field Play, Inc. Discover an info-tag outside a historic site. Send a secret code to an unknown number and receive a text message about the neighborhood’s history. Send in your own story to bring the SPURA chronicles up to date. For info, go to www.kickingoverthetraces.com.

Four Public Discussion & Visioning Sessions
Wednesday, Oct. 22, University Settlement (6:30-9pm); Saturday, Nov. 1, St. Mary’s Church (2-4:30pm); Wednesday, Nov. 12, Grand St. Settlement (6:30-9pm); Saturday, Nov. 22, 227 E. 3rd St. (2-4:30pm). Join your neighbors and Pratt Center for Community Development to re-envision the future of SPURA. Tour the past with planning historian Hilary Botein, Baruch College. Sessions are free and open to the public. Translation provided. Wheelchair accessible except St. Mary’s. RSVP to register@goles.org or 212-533-2541.

Visualizing SPURA

Get Interviewed! The Seward Park Oral History Project
Ongoing – August 2008 to January 2009. Are you a long-term resident of the LES? Get your voice heard. We’ll ask about your memories of the neighborhood, about neighborhood change, and about the place where you live. Contact Kara Becker, karabecker@gmail.com, 908-883-0556

SPURA Matters is brought to you by Good Old Lower East Side (www.goles.org), Pratt Center for Community Development (www.prattcenter.net), City Lore (www.citylore.org), and Place Matters, a project of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society (www.placematters.net). Series funded by the New York Council for the Humanities to support public programs about SPURA, and by the Mertz-Gilmore Foundation and Altman Foundation.

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