

**“WE WILL NOT BE FORCED OUT AGAIN”: THE
SCATTER SITE HOUSING CONTROVERSY IN FOREST
HILLS, QUEENS AND THE RESHAPING OF PUBLIC
POLICY**

by

Andrea M. K. Gill
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APPROVAL

NAME: Andrea Gill
DEGREE: Master of Arts, History
TITLE: "We will not be forced out again": The Scatter Site Housing Controversy in Forest Hills, Queens and the Reshaping of Public Policy

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Karen Ferguson
Senior Supervisor

Paige Raibmon
Supervisor

External Examiner

Date Approved: April 19, 2004

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ABSTRACT

Throughout 1971 and 1972 New York City officials were locked in a heated battle with residents of Forest Hills, Queens over the construction of public housing for the poor in this middle-class and largely Jewish neighbourhood. The city had approved this project under its scatter site plan, which called for the building of low-income housing in middle-income neighbourhoods in order to foster economic and racial integration. Faced with growing community opposition, Mayor John V. Lindsay retreated from the original scatter site proposal, commissioning an investigation that resulted in the reduction of the project to one half of its proposed size, and its transformation to a low-income co-operative that would house the elderly and white working poor rather than underprivileged African American families.

While this case may appear to simply represent a manifestation of black-Jewish tensions or of white ethnic "backlash," the protests against scatter site housing were in fact more complicated than either of these portrayals suggest. Although Forest Hills residents' fear of poor African Americans certainly informed their opposition to the project, their protests were also directed against a style of government that had shaped New York City politics since the New Deal. In demanding community control and portraying themselves as the victims of totalitarian city planning, Forest Hills residents voiced their objections to the lack of accountability on the part of public authorities whose power allowed them to impose redevelopment schemes on an often unwilling

citizenry, displacing hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers over the course of the previous three decades.

The fact that Lindsay was forced to seek a compromise with the project's opponents, ultimately undermining his aims for integration, illustrates a shift in locus of power in New York City politics; power no longer lay in these centralized authorities, but was seized by local neighbourhoods, white communities in particular. The scatter site controversy therefore denotes the closing stage of an era in public policy and represents a key moment in the reshaping of New Deal liberalism in the years following the War on Poverty.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Kathleen and James, for all of their support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AJC	American Jewish Committee
ATA	African American Teachers' Association
CPC	City Planning Commission
FHRA	Forest Hills Residents Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples
NEGRO	National Economic and Reconstruction Growth Organization
NYCHA	New York City Housing Authority
QJCC	Queens Jewish Community Council
UFT	United Federation of Teachers

INTRODUCTION

On a late autumn evening in 1971, hundreds of angry residents spilled out of a local civic association meeting in Forest Hills, Queens, a middle-class and largely Jewish neighbourhood of luxury and garden apartments ringed by single-family homes on private lots. After criticizing New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay in a number of speeches, these men and women staged a torchlight parade and protest at the site of a proposed low-income public housing project at the intersection of 108th Street and 62nd Avenue, three blocks from their meeting place. Once they arrived at the project's construction site, a number of outraged citizens hurled rocks through the windows of construction trailers and blocked traffic on the Long Island Expressway. The crowd then surged forward toward the chain-link fence surrounding the construction site, some tossing their lit torches over the barrier and exhorting one another to set the trailers ablaze. Sergeant Vincent Gaeta of the New York City Police Department pleaded with the demonstrators to stop the violence, but a number continued to throw rocks and shout angry slogans. When the protesters began to press closer to him, the sergeant stated: "It's a mob. This is a mob. I'm calling for reinforcements."¹

Perhaps no incident in the ongoing struggle against this project more clearly illustrates the depth of local residents' hostility toward the construction of low-income

¹ Murray Schumach, "Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project," *New York Times*, 19 November 1971.

housing in their neighbourhood. But what would drive these largely middle-aged and otherwise peaceable residents to violent actions and open confrontation with police officers? What were the causes of this protest, and, more significantly, what were its broader implications in the political and racial environment of New York City in the early 1970s? To answer this question, we must first consider the decision-making process and the politics of development that would lead the city to build housing for the poor in a white, middle-class neighbourhood in Queens. In 1966, the New York City Housing Authority had announced its plans to build a low-income housing project in Forest Hills after a similar proposal in nearby Corona was defeated. The construction of housing for the poor in middle-income areas of the city was known as scatter-site housing, and formed a significant aspect of the Lindsay Administration's liberal agenda to alleviate poverty through economic and racial integration. Drawing on behavioural and psychological understandings of poverty that cast the poor as culturally deprived, the scatter site plan represented liberal integrationists' aspirations to provide the poor with role models of upward mobility, ending the integration of the allegedly pathological poor with other economically and socially disadvantaged "multiproblem" families, thus intervening in the "vicious cycle" of the culture of poverty. Liberals such as Mayor Lindsay believed that, through careful social integration that relied on both the behavioural sciences and a sense of moral obligation, the city could desegregate public housing while simultaneously allowing the poor to escape the despair and antisocial behaviour that had allegedly impeded their economic and social progress. Under this plan, approximately 2,000 low-income New Yorkers, many of whom were African

American and welfare recipients, would be housed in three 24-story buildings on an 8.5 acre lot in Forest Hills.

From the time it was first proposed, the Forest Hills project was bitterly rejected by area residents and came to dominate discussions of the role of public housing in New York in the early 1970s. As the opposition to the project reached its most fevered pitch in late 1971 and early 1972, protests at the construction site were almost daily occurrences. New civic associations were formed to combat the project, while the city's dailies carried extensive coverage of the growing controversy. Throughout the conflict surrounding the low-income housing development, Forest Hills residents directed much of their anger at two political officials, Mayor Lindsay and New York City Housing Authority Chairman Simeon Golar; project opponents accused Lindsay of everything from elitism to anti-Semitism, vowing to ruin his political career, while Golar's home and office were the sites several of sit-ins and loud demonstrations. Opponents of the scatter site initiative also seized control of a number of public hearings, transforming them into emotional and raucous affairs marked by name-calling and physical conflicts.²

At first glance, it would appear easy and even entirely plausible to dismiss this case as a manifestation of the growing tensions between African Americans and Jews in New York City, or simply as another example of "white backlash," working- and middle-class disenchantment with both African Americans and the liberal politicians who allegedly privileged poor blacks at the expense of hard-working whites. Both racial tensions and a defensive middle-class identity did certainly play a crucial role in the

² See for example Edward C. Burks, "Forest Hills Homeowners Seize Control of a Planning Hearing," *New York Times*, 21 May, 1971; Steven R. Weisman, "Public Housing Is Fought in Forest Hills," *New York Times*, 21 February, 1972; Francis X. Clines, "Forest Hills Compromise Scored at Hearing," *New York Times*, 21 September, 1972.

opposition to low-income housing in Forest Hills and are essential to understanding this controversy; opponents of the project frequently voiced their fear of the poor in racialized terms, characterizing underprivileged African Americans as pathological and even violent criminals who would rob from whites, terrorize the elderly, and lead to the decline of the neighbourhood. In addition, many also exhibited another trademark of this white anti-liberalism, equating the fight against the project with a fight for the American middle class. The struggle in Forest Hills represented to them the efforts of the white middle class to save itself from destruction at the hands of liberals who catered exclusively to underprivileged blacks.

While this “reactionary populism”³ did inform residents’ responses to the project, this explanation does not represent the full spectrum of the opposition to the scatter site initiative. A closer inspection of both the motivations of and the rhetoric employed by those on both sides of the controversy reveals that the battle over scatter site housing in Forest Hills was actually more complicated than these aforementioned portrayals would suggest. In addition to their racial and class-based fears, Forest Hills residents were also responding to the manner in which city officials had proceeded in implementing the scatter site plan. The city, they asserted, had rushed through approval of the project with virtually no consultation with members of the community. The protests against scatter site housing were therefore directed at a style of centralized governance in New York City, one which had historic antecedents in the Progressive era and had flourished under the New Deal. Joel Schwartz has labeled this style of governance “the New York approach,” in which a “self-confident, activist state . . . saw no reason to accommodate

³ Ronald P. Formisano uses this term in his account of the anti-busing moving in Boston. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 3.

the 'little people' in its plans." While the state had greatly expanded the scope of its redevelopment powers, creating new and powerful authorities to implement vast urban transformations, no corresponding increase in power was felt at the level of average New Yorkers, especially those who fell into the categories of lower-, working-, or lower-middle class.⁴

In responding to this method of executing public policy, project opponents attempted to construct for themselves a narrative of victimhood, emphasizing their victimization by uncaring city officials who had exercised this approach, while simultaneously borrowing from both African American and liberal discourse. Those fighting the project argued, for example, that the city's site selection and approval process was undemocratic and had unfairly denied them "community control" of their neighbourhood. In demanding this increased influence, opponents of scatter site housing adopted the language of black protest; the slogan "community control" had been the rallying cry of African American teachers and activists in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a poor, black Brooklyn neighbourhood whose education system had been decentralized and placed under the control of a local board in 1968.⁵ In addition to invoking the rhetoric of greater local consultation, project foes also presented themselves as sympathizers with the urban poor who only wished to look out for the interests of the downtrodden and protect them from the potential "dangers" of the Forest Hills project. In making this last claim, those who opposed the project actively appropriated the liberal language of

⁴ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and the Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993).

⁵ See for example Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002); Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 221-238; Barbara Carter, *Pickets, Parents and Power: The Story Behind the New York City Teachers' Strike* (New York: Citation Press, 1971).

poverty which had been initially used to justify the scatter site project. In arguing that the isolation of the poor in three 24-story "vertical ghettos" would only stigmatize the poor and concentrate the pathological in one small area, project opponents in fact borrowed liberals' behavioural and psychological understandings of poverty to argue against the project.⁶

This appropriation of both black and liberal discourse points to the broader fact that white resistance to low-income housing in Forest Hills went beyond simply an anti-liberal and anti-black backlash. Rather than denigrating or repudiating the demands of African Americans or liberal justifications for aiding the poor, the project's opponents in fact legitimated these demands by appropriating them for themselves. Instead of decrying greater local control for blacks or questioning the need to integrate the poor with the middle-class, Forest Hills residents embraced these ideas in an attempt to prove that they were more committed to these liberal causes than the liberals in City Hall.

Instead of an attempt to attack African Americans and their liberal allies, this appropriation represented Forest Hills residents' attempt to establish their status as victims of unfair planning processes on the part of the city. Further illustrating their dissatisfaction with "the New York approach" and its lack of concern for citizens, many residents of this largely Jewish neighbourhood claimed that they were the victims of discriminatory redevelopment practices on the part of city agencies. Firstly, they claimed, the majority of the scatter site projects presently proposed or under construction throughout the city were slated for Jewish communities. In addition, many middle-aged

⁶ This argument mirrors that found in the works of Kenneth B. Clarke and Michael Harrington, two of the chief advocates of economically integrated public housing. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1965); Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan Company 1962).

and elderly Forest Hills residents argued that this was not the first time the city had imposed its ill-advised social engineering schemes on them; they had been “forced out” of their predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan by city planning initiatives that had caused these once-thriving areas of the city to decline.⁷ These facts led many to charge that Lindsay and Golar were in fact anti-Semitic, having deliberately selected Forest Hills for the scatter site initiative because of its Jewish population. Past administrations had chased Jews all over the city, they alleged, and Lindsay would ensure that they had nowhere left to run. The residents of Forest Hills therefore identified themselves as refugees who had been chased out by the city and its destructive rebuilding schemes; they were now determined that they would not be driven out yet again by the presence of a low-income housing project.

These claims of being “forced out” illustrate the broader significance of the strategy of victimhood as well as the shortcomings of the concept of white backlash in this particular case. Rather than a reaction exclusively against the principles of liberalism or against black demands in the post-civil rights era, the protest in Forest Hills was also a backlash against a style of government that had dominated New York City politics since the New Deal, with its creation of locally-run and virtually sovereign public authorities charged with administering federal funds. Between the 1930s and the 1960s construction, transportation, and housing authorities, many under the control of “power-broker” Robert Moses, had displaced over two hundred thousand New Yorkers through urban renewal projects and the construction of expressways. These initiatives had physically destroyed

⁷ This issue of being “forced out” can also be found in Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 290-312 as well as in Jonathan Rieder’s *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1985), 21-26, 84.

dozens of neighbourhoods, reducing them to rubble or replacing tenements and modest apartments with middle-class housing and civic buildings. While African Americans and Puerto Ricans were those most frequently uprooted by urban renewal, or “Negro removal,” thousands of the city’s lower middle-class Jews were also affected by this redevelopment. Moses’ expressways tore through Jewish enclaves in the Bronx, while the city “dumped” thousand of poor blacks and Hispanics into Brooklyn’s Jewish neighbourhoods.⁸ Even though few of those minorities dispossessed by urban renewal found homes in the city’s public housing projects, these large-scale, high-density projects were the most visible symbols of the arrival of poverty and urban decay.⁹ As Forest Hills residents fondly recalled their old neighbourhoods, the blame for their decline was attributed to the state—the city, Moses, public authorities—as often as it was attributed to the poor and allegedly pathological minorities who moved in to these areas. Neighbourhood residents were now determined that the city be prevented from re-enacting this decline in Queens; they would not, they insisted, be “forced out” again.

In demanding “true” scatter site housing and community control, those who opposed the project in Forest Hills were reacting against a form of top-down city planning, which, in their view, ignored the wishes of New York’s citizens. The residents of Forest Hills therefore voiced their frustrations with the methods employed by Lindsay as much as, or even more so, as they did with the principles that lay behind the scatter site plan. Outer-borough residents who had fled Brownsville or East New York in the 1950s and 1960s were simply fed up with the autocratic style and the lack of accountability on the part of the city’s decision makers. As is evident in the language in which they voiced

⁸ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 6-11, 610, 623, 698.

⁹ Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 155, 114.

their opposition, middle class whites' anger was as much a backlash against the city's centralized and even totalitarian authorities as it was against African Americans or liberal ideology; the city and its historic power over neighbourhoods were as much the villains in this fight as were individual "limousine liberals" or allegedly pathological blacks.

The project opponents' claims of victimhood and undemocratic city planning would come into conflict with both the city's larger ambitions and the rhetoric it employed to press for these goals. Many liberals in the Lindsay Administration, the mayor in particular, subscribed to what I have termed "moral high modernism," or the use of social science and social engineering to bring about greater equality. The scatter site initiative represented intervention by a liberal, activist state to bring about a "moral imperative" necessary to aid underprivileged minorities.¹⁰ In addition, Lindsay, a member of the Kerner Commission, the federal body formed to study the riots of the mid-1960s, had urged the implementation of the scatter site plan in order to reduce the divisions between blacks and whites which had led to urban unrest in cities such as Newark, Detroit, and Los Angeles. These two factors, a moralistic adherence to social engineering and a fear of riots, led city officials to very publicly denounce the opponents of the project as small-minded bigots who were no better than Southern racists who wished to stall the drive for civil rights. These public accusations of racism were especially striking in the wake of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school decentralization crisis in which the largely Jewish teachers' union had repeatedly alleged that members of the African American Teachers' Association and blacks within the community were anti-Semitic. John Lindsay, one of the chief architects of the decentralization plan, had

¹⁰ Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim Is Integration," *New York Post*, 25 April 1972.

appeared reluctant to address these charges, a move which greatly angered many of the city's Jews.¹¹ Only three years later, however, Lindsay appeared perfectly willing to take up the issue of race (and racism) in Forest Hills. As scatter site housing represented to his administration both a moral issue and a means of reducing the threat of urban unrest, city officials such as Lindsay and Golar were able to use the language of racism to discredit the challenges of their opponents, seizing from them any moral high ground based on issues of democracy or discrimination. By coding its characterization of the project's opponents in the language of illegitimacy, City Hall could thus employ accusations of racial prejudice to remind the public of the city's alleged moral superiority, and indeed of the very need for scatter site housing.

The public castigations of the project opponents further represented the top-down and at times authoritarian approach of those who held power in New York City. Because decades of centralization had concentrated power in the hands of a few planners and "experts," these officials may have felt justified in employing these allegations of racism because they believed that they could do so without being effectively challenged. Although Lindsay had been one of the supporters of community control, and thus was ostensibly committed to listening to local citizens, even the school decentralization plan was executed top-down fashion, a social engineering scheme designed by outside experts and implemented by a central authority.

These allegations of prejudice were vehemently refuted by Forest Hills residents who, throughout the course of the battle over the fate of the project, repeatedly denied that their opposition was in any way racist. The "proof" of their own tolerance, they argued, could be found both in their acceptance of middle-class African American

¹¹ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 121, 143.

neighbours as well as in their biracial alliance with blacks in Queens who also objected to the project. These accusations of bigotry' on the part of the city would only serve to deepen the anger and resentment felt by residents of Forest Hills, many of whom felt that Lindsay used the allegations of racism to polarize the community, artificially pitting blacks against whites. Racism, they insisted, was a deliberately manufactured issue that ignored the small but significant number of black objectors to the project. Furthermore, the de-legitimization of the Forest Hills opposition appeared, in the eyes of local residents to minimize their own struggles to "make it" out of the ghetto. Opponents of the project therefore deeply resented what they saw as the moralistic condescension of the Lindsay administration; they believed that city officials, in yet another example of the city's traditionally autocratic methods, were willing to destroy the neighbourhood of those they had not even bothered to consult, only to label them racist when they attempted to defend their community.

By early 1972 community opposition to the project was so staunch that the city was forced to back down from its original ambitions for scatter site housing. At this time Lindsay was growing increasingly concerned that neighbourhood hostility to the project was so unyielding that it would lead to a mass exodus of Forest Hills residents, thereby undermining the scatter site plan's very reason for existence, economic and racial integration. In order to ensure that scatter site housing would actually foster integration rather than furthering white flight and segregation, Lindsay needed to appease the residents of Forest Hills. The Mayor therefore hired then local attorney Mario Cuomo to broker a workable compromise between the Housing Authority and local citizens. After studying the situation for two months and meeting with dozens of local citizens, Cuomo

recommended that the buildings be reduced to half of their proposed size, in order to both appease the community and offer a greater chance for meaningful integration.¹²

While he had originally vowed that the project plans would not be altered in any way, Lindsay accepted Cuomo's compromise proposal in August of 1972. The following month the local Community Board endorsed Cuomo's suggestion for the 12-story buildings, adding its own recommendation that the project be converted to low-income co-operative housing which would house tenants with both higher incomes and greater potential for upward mobility than most residents of urban public housing projects. Both the city and federal government approved the co-operative initiative shortly thereafter, making Forest Hills home to the first federally funded housing development of its kind. When the co-operative opened its doors in 1975 the majority of its tenants were working poor or elderly Queens residents rather than the "desperate" African American poor trapped in the ghettos of Brownsville or Bedford-Stuyvesant.¹³ Lindsay's attempts to undermine the opposition had, ironically, undermined his aims for the Forest Hills project; the co-operative did not house in any significant numbers those for whom it was originally intended. Moreover, the city would admit two decades later to racial steering in many of its housing developments, including Forest Hills, where it had attempted to maintain racial quotas of seventy per cent white.¹⁴ In denouncing his opponents as racist, therefore, Lindsay had unwittingly undergirded white hegemony in this corner of Queens.

¹² "Report to Honorable John V. Lindsay Concerning the Proposed Low-Income Housing Project at 108th Street, Forest Hills, Queens," in Mario Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low-Income Housing*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 154-176.

¹³ Joseph P. Fried, "Queens Project To Be 70% White," *New York Times*, 10 June 1975.

¹⁴ David M. Herszenhorn, "At the Forest Hills Co-op, a Reminder of Past Fury," *New York Times*, 22 October 1995.

More significantly, the struggle over Forest Hills illustrated that the methods Robert Moses had employed to remake New York were no longer tenable. While Lindsay had attempted to use the Moses-era style of top-down, centralized planning to reshape the racial geography that Moses himself had created, he was largely unsuccessful. Rather than imposing the housing plan on a neighbourhood, Lindsay was forced to seek a compromise that would accommodate the concerns of local residents. The scatter site controversy therefore reveals a shifting of power in urban politics: the real power to influence urban policy was no longer vested in public authorities or well-placed officials, but now lay in local neighbourhoods as well. While Corona's initial defeat of the scatter site proposal had foreshadowed this transition, Forest Hills cemented it as a reality. The struggle in Queens marked the death of the scatter site initiative in New York City, and thereby signaled the end of an era in public policy; urban politics would now require greater accountability to local constituents, in particular the white middle class. Quite simply, scatter site housing marked the end of the New York approach. The Forest Hills controversy therefore represents a watershed moment in New York City politics, and indeed in the reshaping of popular attitudes toward the state.

This shift in the locus of power can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, liberal disenchantment with Moses' legacy had led to his removal from his various posts; the "power broker" could no longer reign over the city virtually unchecked.¹⁵ More important, however, were transformations that occurred within the context of social policy and the perceptions of the state held by New York citizens. From the launching of

¹⁵ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 1131-1144; Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 261-294.

the War on Poverty in 1965 with its focus on the black family,¹⁶ many urban initiatives and anti-poverty policies, including public housing, became inextricably linked with issues of race. Efforts to ameliorate the conditions of the poor thus often translated into efforts to break down the walls of segregation. As the Forest Hills case clearly illustrates, policies that called for economic as well as racial integration were dependent on the cooperation of middle-income whites to make this integration possible. White neighbourhoods and their residents thus became the lynchpins of desegregation plans, and thereby gained a new position of strength in the implementation of the city's social policies.

In addition, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment had unleashed the forces of community which would prove difficult to contain. When Lindsay and the Board of Education awarded community control of education to three underprivileged neighbourhoods, they opened themselves up to cries of hypocrisy from other neighbourhoods. As Forest Hills Residents Association president Jerry Birbach would demand, why did community control apply only to poor black neighbourhoods?¹⁷ While this question could be credited to no more than white resentment and the frequently heard cry of "reverse discrimination," it nonetheless held a special salience for those who had lived in the shadow of Moses and his redevelopment of the city. Perhaps community control could have saved Forest Hills residents' old neighbourhoods; at the very least, they believed, it could save Forest Hills. The city's advocacy of community control in

¹⁶ The focus on African American poverty and family structure can be found in President Johnson's speech at Howard University in June of 1965, drafted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Richard N. Goodwin. Remarks of the President at Howard University, 4 June 1965, in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), 125-132.

¹⁷ Mancini and Brandes Gratz, "The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim is Integration."

1968 would thus prove ultimately incompatible with what residents perceived as a patently undemocratic planning process that ignored the wishes of entire neighbourhoods.

The rise in neighbourhood power was also the result of the growing ethnic resurgence in New York City, and indeed across the country, in the years following the civil rights movement. As Gary Gerstle has noted, "by the late 1960s and early 1970s the cultural style of black nationalism had spread well beyond the boundaries of black America." Various nonwhites as well as white ethnic groups began to embrace their own nationalist causes and attempt to reconnect with their heritage and traditions. The "new pluralism" of the era included a heightened sense of Jewish nationalism, one marked by a new assertiveness in the wake of Israel's victory in the 1967 War.¹⁸ The ethnic homogeneity of Forest Hills thus further contributed to the rise of neighbourhood power; its residents were now determined to stand up to city as *Jews*, and vowed that they would not be chased out again.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this transition in power can be attributed to the fact that urban constituents increasingly felt that the state and its power no longer served them, and were in fact a threat to their best interests. While there is an extensive body of literature that describes whites' belief that they were "under attack" from governmental programs designed to aid poor minorities,¹⁹ I wish to expand on this understanding. I do not wish to confine my definition of the "state" to specific policies

¹⁸ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 329, 331; Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 110-112.

¹⁹ See for example, Rieder, *Canarsie*; Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991); Stanley Greenberg, *Middle-Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991).

developed in the years following the civil rights movement, but instead include the broader conception of state-craft and the power governmental bodies were able to wield over their citizens. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, citizens no longer believed the “hoax” perpetuated by Moses that public authorities were primarily concerned with public welfare.²⁰ Residents now saw what they perceived to be the dangers of improvement schemes by liberal elites; the very state which they believed would protect them was now displacing citizens and destroying neighbourhoods. The scatter site housing controversy therefore further illuminates the breakdown of the New Deal coalition, especially in traditionally liberal New York City. A number of authors, including Gerstle and Steve Fraser, have discussed “the fall of the New Deal order,” the decline of what they describe as “an ideological character, a moral perspective, and a set of political relationships among policy elites, interest groups, and electoral constituencies” that shaped American politics from the 1930s until the 1970s.²¹ While scholars have attributed the decline of this order to racial and economic crises, the growing radicalism of middle-class youth, and the subsequent rise of the “Silent Majority,” the governmental systems established under the New Deal also played a role in this reshaping of political affiliations.²² The lack of accountability of public authorities which were “above politics”²³ was a product of the New Deal, and this lack of accountability would turn many voters away from this brand of governance. The Forest Hills controversy therefore played an active role in reshaping the political relationship among policy-makers, interest groups and constituents, shifting power away from the

²⁰ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 17.

²¹ Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), xvi.

²² Ibid, xix-xx; Rieder, “The Rise of the ‘Silent Majority,’” in Ibid, 243-268.

²³ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 16.

elites and toward the neighbourhood, replacing covert backroom dealings with the politics of open conflict.

CHAPTER ONE: Toward a New Housing Policy: Poverty Theory, Scatter Site Housing, and the “New York Approach”

On the morning of 5 December 1966 a group of about 30 women, all residents of Queens, assembled at their Borough Hall to set up a small picket line. Their purpose was to protest the New York City Planning Commission's recent approval of a low-income housing project slated for a vacant lot at the corner of 108th Street and the Long Island Expressway in Forest Hills, a community of garden apartments, high rises and semi-detached homes whose residents were predominantly middle class and Jewish. Voicing their concern over the impact an 828-apartment project for the poor would have on their decidedly middle-income neighbourhood, the protestors carried signs which bore slogans such as “Parks and Schools Before Population Explosion” and “Low Cost Housing at High Expense.” These women hoped their message would influence members of the city's Board of Estimate to vote against the project at its next meeting. Their efforts appeared to fall on deaf ears, however, as the Board approved the Forest Hills project less than a week later, and with seemingly little input from neighbourhood residents.¹

The protests against public housing in Forest Hills would not end with this small group of women, however. Five years later residents would steel themselves for an intense struggle with city officials against the much-maligned project. By 1971, the

¹ “Housewives Protest Plans for Housing in Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 6 December 1966.

crowd of thirty would be replaced with gatherings of hundreds and even thousands of men, women and children of all ages who vowed they would not rest until the housing initiative was rescinded. The signs demanding parks and schools would be replaced by those accusing Mayor John V. Lindsay of anti-Semitism while denouncing his Housing Authority chairman, Simeon Golar, as a bigot against middle-class whites. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the city would no longer be able to ignore neighbourhood opposition as it had in 1966, because its public housing policy came under constant, vocal, and sometimes violent attack from organized community protestors. After two years of heated struggle between the community and Lindsay and the Housing Authority, local officials finally brokered a compromise with the residents of Forest Hills.

Given the ferocity of the protest the housing project generated, it would seem pertinent to ask what motivated the New York City Housing Authority and the Lindsay Administration to place three low-income high rises in a largely white, middle-income neighbourhood such as Forest Hills. Legal requirements to desegregate public housing aside,² why was the project rushed through the channels of local government with seemingly no effort to win the approval of community residents? The decision to press on with the project in 1971 seems particularly puzzling given the hostility of many middle-class New Yorkers to Mayor Lindsay and his policies that had emerged by this time. The overwhelmingly negative response to Lindsay's creation of a civilian review board of the New York City Police Department and his decentralization of the public school system in a poor, black Brooklyn neighbourhood, for example, were indicative of the growing

² Because the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision of 1954 precluded the use of federal funds to directly or indirectly reinforce segregation, if funds for public housing were allocated only to racially concentrated areas and were not used to move non-white, low-income people out of the ghettos, all federal housing funds to New York City could technically be cut off. Mario Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low-Income Housing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 180-181.

resentment towards the liberal, patrician mayor.³ Residents of the city's outer boroughs had denounced both initiatives as elite officials' attempts to buy racial peace at their expense. In addition, when a 1968 blizzard left Queens was buried in snow for days after the streets of Manhattan were cleared, neighbourhood residents interpreted this fact further proof of the mayor's lack of sympathy for the middle class.⁴ Given this climate of hostility, therefore, we may also ask why, even with Lindsay's growing alienation of the very people who lived in Forest Hills—middle class white ethnics—did the administration insist on forging ahead with a project that seemed destined to yield only controversy and racial tensions?

The answer lies in both the social engineering in the name of greater equality embraced by postwar racial liberals such as John Lindsay and in the style of governance through which politics in New York City had operated since the 1930s. Firstly, the scatter site housing plan represented liberals' belief that an activist state should utilize rational planning and a social sciences model to press for an agenda of social justice. In formulating the scatter site housing policy, the Lindsay administration drew upon both contemporary behavioural understandings of poverty and the growing calls for "national action" to ameliorate the inner city conditions that plagued the African American poor. In addition, the goal of breaking up the ghetto through government intervention was also motivated by the very real threat of urban riots which had already gripped a number of

³ See for example Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 155-188; Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁴ Journalist Nat Hentoff notes that Lindsay's esteem among New Yorkers "may have reached its lowest point" during the aftermath of the 1968 blizzard. Nat Hentoff, *A Political Life: The Education of John V. Lindsay* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 303.

cities across the country. As the nation grew increasingly segregated, Lindsay predicted, this threat of social disorder would only increase.

Secondly, the manner in which Lindsay proceeded in Forest Hills, pushing through the plan with little consideration for local protests, reflected what Joel Schwartz has termed the "New York approach," in which the city imposed its redevelopment schemes on a population it rarely bothered to consult.⁵ Within this approach, which had shaped public policy since the rise of virtually sovereign local public authorities under the New Deal, there was little accountability to citizens and little room for dissenting voices. This style of top-down city planning had been embodied for thirty years by "power broker" Robert Moses, who held the title of "Construction Coordinator" while also heading numerous public authorities and exerting an unofficial influence over the New York City Housing Authority. Moses' urban renewal, public housing, and transportation redevelopments had drastically reshaped both the physical and racial geography of the city. While Moses' highways and civic projects had uprooted tens of thousands of New Yorkers, his housing policies displaced another 100 thousand while also increasing the social and spatial segregation of the city's African American and Puerto Rican population. Thus while Lindsay's liberalism and his desire to keep New York "cool" during the hot summers of urban riots motivated his attempts to alter the racial geography created by Moses, the Mayor nonetheless relied on many of the same methods as did the Construction Coordinator, thereby implicating himself in the New York approach.

⁵ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals and the Fight Against Poverty* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 2.

Beginning in the late 1950s, public officials at both the federal and local levels increasingly turned their attention to the ever growing problems of poverty and inequality in the United States. While America's cities had once been havens of upward mobility for poor migrants, urban centres had now become "dead ends" of juvenile delinquency, unemployment and growing welfare dependency, all of which were worsened by the burden of racial prejudice that served to marginalize so many African Americans within declining inner cities.⁶ As policymakers concerned with the plight of the poor employed new sociological and psychological theories in order to address the worsening "urban crisis" that gripped American cities by the late 1950s, a crusade in the name of social justice was wedded to an almost unblinking faith in the possibilities of social science and rational government planning by a select group of "experts." A reformist ethic and a commitment to the American principles of equality and justice therefore provided the motivation for a large scale effort to reverse the effects of urban despair, while faith in social science expertise would ostensibly provide the means of achieving this reform. The result was what may be termed an ideology of "moral high modernism," a worldview to which Lindsay most definitely subscribed.

Political scientist James C. Scott has defined "high modernist ideology" as a "strong, one might even say muscle-bound" faith in both scientific and technical progress and the potential it holds for the satisfaction of human needs. Beginning in the nineteenth century, unwavering confidence in the understanding of natural laws was translated into a "particularly sweeping vision" in which scientific principles could be adapted to human activity in order to create a "rational design of social order." The centralized state

⁶ Alice O'Connor, "Community Action, Urban Reform, and the Fight Against Poverty: The Ford Foundation's Gray Areas Program," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 5 (July 1996), 586, 606.

bureaucracy could simplify and rationalize whole societies in order to manage, transform and ultimately perfect them. Scott therefore identifies “high modernists” as those who wished “to use state power to bring about huge, utopian changes in people’s work habits, living patterns, moral conduct and worldview.” Society would no longer develop by “custom and historical accident,” but would rather be *planned* “according to conscious, rational, scientific criteria,” all of which would enable officials to design and maintain a more perfect social order.⁷

While Scott maintains that high modernism reached its apogee in the First World War,⁸ many of its defining characteristics survived well into the 1950s and 1960s. With its reliance on social scientists’ theories of “blocked opportunity” and the psychological necessity of “maximum feasible participation” on the part of the poor themselves, Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, for example, bore the hallmarks of social engineering through social scientific principles. This centralized, state-planned initiative was characterized by its reliance on social scientists as well as its desire for a more carefully managed social order. In addition, the very notion of a national, state-sponsored war against poverty itself points to the desire for greater racial and social justice that characterized the planning initiatives of postwar high modernism. Faith in rational and bureaucratic intervention merged with an adherence to the ideals of equality on the part of politicians and policymakers who participated in both the civil rights movement and America’s “rediscovery” of poverty in the early 1960s. By mid-decade increasing awareness of both the troubling inequality and the dangers to racial peace posed by black poverty sparked even greater efforts by liberal politicians to remove the barriers to

⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 4-5, 90-93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

equality. With the conviction that “freedom is not enough,”⁹ public officials and policymakers increasingly sought the advice of experts in implementing broad social initiatives designed to alleviate the effects of poverty and discrimination. The high modernist belief in the merits of careful government management of society therefore went hand in hand with a widely recognized moral impetus for just such social engineering.

This interventionist orthodoxy of postwar racial liberalism had its origins in the 1950s, a decade in which scholars and public officials alike began to adopt the new “cultural” definitions of poverty that were at the vanguard of social science. A new understanding of African American poverty was drawn largely from the Gunnar Myrdal's hugely influential *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, which argued for government intervention to eliminate the crippling effects of discrimination. First published in 1944, Myrdal's work argued that the heart of this “American dilemma” could be found in the contradiction between the nation's democratic ideals and its racial realities. Myrdal therefore presented the “pathology” of lower class blacks as, in part, an outcome of the pathology of white racism, the failure of whites to live up to the “American Creed” of equality, inalienable rights, justice and freedom.¹⁰ More significantly, however, by asserting that these blacks were in fact

⁹ See for example Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks of the President at Howard University, June 4, 1965,” in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967), 126.

¹⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 4; Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xi, 240-241; Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth Century U. S. History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 75, 96-97. Gary Gerstle also describes the tenets of this American Creed, labeling these beliefs “civic nationalism.” Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-4.

pathological, he also framed black poverty as an issue of culture rather than economics. Myrdal stated that African Americans, due in part to the legacy of slavery, held lower standards of industry, resourcefulness and self-reliance while “their family life is disorganized and their sexual morals are lax.”¹¹ Myrdal’s central hypothesis posited that African American poverty and pathology constituted a “vicious circle” in which white prejudice and low “Negro standards” mutually reinforced one another, triggering a “cumulative cycle” in which poverty bred further poverty.¹² Intervention in one of these determining factors, therefore, would effectively break the vicious circle. African Americans, Myrdal concluded, could escape the self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, and thus allow the nation to fulfill the American Creed, by rejecting the “Negro” culture of pathology and becoming culturally “white.”¹³

As historian Alice O’Connor explains, Myrdal’s “vicious circle” would become the “reigning metaphor in liberal social analysis for the next three decades.” Myrdal’s conclusions were so appealing principally because they demonstrated to American officials that racism and poverty could in fact be eliminated via intervention in the self-perpetuating culture of poverty. As public officials grew increasingly concerned with the plight of the poor, Myrdal’s cultural hypothesis offered to them assurances that the alleviation of the misery of millions of Americans was within their grasp and, better still, required no significant challenge to the economic status quo. Myrdal was one of the central architects of the formulation of poverty as a problem of social psychology which could be resolved through social engineering and assimilation, and thereby paved the way

¹¹ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 701.

¹² *Ibid.*, 75, 208.

¹³ O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 96. Myrdal stated that “*it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.*” Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 929. Italics in original.

“for the rationalization of poverty knowledge as in all senses a problem of cultural pathology.”¹⁴

In the early 1960s, poverty analysts and policy makers increasingly adopted Myrdal's new racial liberalism, regarding poverty as behavioural and psychological rather than exclusively economic. Poverty “experts” such as Kenneth Clark, Michael Harrington, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan offered the nation an image of poor urban blacks and Appalachian whites who were characterized by their “twisted spirit” and their “unstable” family structures. African American sociologist Clark argued that poor blacks possessed their own particular psychology, one characterized by “destructive” sexuality, high rates of illegitimacy and a lack of male role models, all of which could be traced to the devastating effects of slavery on the black family. The inner city, Clark concluded, represented “institutionalized pathology” which was self-perpetuating and was best thought of as a “contagious sickness” which bred further instability.¹⁵ Harrington, whose *The Other America* ushered in a period of unprecedented social programs aimed at aiding the poor, also argued that the “feelings, the emotions, the attitudes of the poor” differed from those of mainstream Americans. The “new,” crushing poverty of postwar America, Harrington argued, had created a culture of despair, a worldview of fatalism and pessimism that destroyed the possibility of upward mobility.¹⁶ In *The Negro Family: A*

¹⁴ O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 96-98. The term “culture of poverty” itself was pioneered by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in his studies of Mexican and Puerto Rican families in the late 1950s. These projects were funded by the American government to foster “modernization” and development in Latin America, and increasingly relied on external expertise to analyze government mandated psychological tests. Rejecting what he felt was a romanticized anthropological vision of traditional “folk” cultures, Lewis argued that the culture of poverty constituted a subculture among those who felt alienated from modern industrial society and was perpetuated by psychological means. Ibid, 114-120.

¹⁵ Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 70-75, 81.

¹⁶ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1962), 127, 10, 77, 134.

Case for National Action, his 1965 report to the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the US Department of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan invoked many of Myrdal's conclusions, arguing that the "matrifocal" black family constituted a "tangle of pathology" which was rapidly "tightening." Moynihan stated that black poverty represented a subculture of family disorganization that could be traced back to the emasculating effects of slavery on African American men and its devastating effects on black households. The socialization of African American children outside of accepted cultural norms, Moynihan concluded, was to blame for the cyclical nature of low black achievement in education and black joblessness and welfare dependency.¹⁷ Furthermore, Moynihan's call for "National Action" on the part of the Johnson Administration to "break into this cycle" of black poverty reiterated Myrdal's appeal for active government intervention to resolve the American Dilemma.¹⁸ The increasingly accepted understanding of poverty as an acquired set of "subnormal" behaviours was thus paired with the call for a concerted effort to eliminate these allegedly pathological values; once the experts conceived of poverty as cultural they were also able to envision its remedy through the eradication of this culture.¹⁹

One of the most clear manifestations of racial liberals' attempts to create greater equality through social engineering could be found in the reassessment that occurred in

¹⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965) in Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, 41-124.

¹⁸ Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, 93.

¹⁹ One of the most striking examples of this faith in the potential of social engineering to eliminate poverty was found in Lyndon Johnson's "To Fulfill These Rights" speech, delivered at Howard University in 1965, and co-written by Moynihan himself. In this address, Johnson condemned the injustice of racism and invoked the democratic principles of liberty while reiterating many of the conclusions of the Moynihan Report. Johnson also dedicated the efforts of his Administration to providing African Americans with "the same chance as every other American to learn and grow, to work and share in society, to develop their abilities." Yancey and Rainwater, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, 126.

the mid-1960s of the nation's federally-funded low-income public housing programs. Public housing had been launched at the federal level under the New Deal with the aim of aiding the "submerged" middle-class, "the innocent victims of economic reverses" whom the forces of nationwide depression had caused to drop from their "proper place" in society. Rent requirements for occupancy in public housing had ensured that the program would not be viewed as charity, but would instead attract the upwardly mobile, working, deserving poor, thus ruling out the possibility of accepting dependent families.²⁰ As the "submerged" middle-class re-emerged from its temporary downturn, in the 1950s, however, greater numbers of African-American families, many of whom received some sort of public assistance, took up occupancy in public housing. By the 1960s, the so-called "warehouses of the poor" became "desperately unloved" and were publicly regarded as "unwitting nurseries of an embryonic underclass," permanent residents of public housing, many of whom were unable to find housing anywhere else.²¹ Very quickly the phrase "public housing project" became a synonym for a pathological ghetto

²⁰ Lawrence M. Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing: A Century of Frustration* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), 21, 101, 106, 109. Because of these rent requirements, residence in the projects "entailed no loss of social status." Martin Meyerson and Edward C. Banfield, *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing in Chicago* (New York: Free Press, 1955), 94.

²¹ Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing*, 21. It is important to note that many blacks residing in public housing were, like their temporarily impoverished white counterparts, also there through no fault of their own. The channeling of so many African Americans towards low-income projects was, in fact, due largely to a series of government initiatives. While urban black America was already facing a housing shortage by the 1940s, poor black neighbourhoods frequently fell victim to urban renewal just as the African American population was growing due to migration. Migration itself coincided with suburbanization and the beginnings of deindustrialization in the cities, both of which were spurred in part by government programs such as highway construction that disproportionately displaced poor blacks whose homes lay in the paths of the new roadways. These policies thus completed the economic and racial turnover of public housing by displacing large numbers of African Americans. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 47, 260-262; Wilhelmina A. Leigh and Mildred O. Mitchell, "Public Housing and the Black Community," *Review of Black Political Economy* 17 (1988), 114.

which increasingly functioned to isolate, both spatially and socially, a growing population of poor, urban African Americans.²²

The growing consensus surrounding the “pathology” and “vicious circle” of poverty was accompanied by disillusionment and even hostility toward these “dead end” projects. Proponents of behavioural explanations of poverty pointed to the culture of poverty itself as the reason for the decline of many urban projects. Harrington, for one, argued that public housing simply imported the culture of poverty into new buildings. New housing itself, he stated, could not solve the “slum psychology” of the poor.²³ Clark also argued that to simply move the poor into public housing “without altering the pattern of their lives” would “not remove them from the tangle of community and personal pathology” that trapped the perpetually unemployed in a cycle of hardship and despair.²⁴ These views were echoed in a 1969 sociological study by William Moore, Jr. which captured an almost omnipresent characterization of government housing projects: *The Vertical Ghetto*. Moore concluded that, the “tangled problems rooted in generations of destitution” would be found in new projects just as they had been found in old slums. In a world where “crime, unemployment and delinquency are routine” and “broken windows, broken bottles and broken spirits are commonplace,” it was difficult, if not impossible, to escape the “self-perpetuating and desperate existence of the new-style ghetto.”²⁵

According to the experts who studied the poor and saw carefully planned state initiatives as their best hope, the federal government clearly needed to do more than

²² See for example John F. Bauman, Norman P. Hummon and Edward K. Muller, “Public Housing, Isolation and the Urban Underclass: Philadelphia’s Richard Allen Homes,” *Journal of Urban History* 17, no. 3 (May, 1991), 278, 281-282, 285-286.

²³ Harrington, *The Other America*, 149, 152-153.

²⁴ Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 106.

²⁵ William Moore, Jr., *The Vertical Ghetto: Everyday Life in an Urban Project* (New York: Random House, 1969), 32, 35, 39.

provide adequate low-cost housing in the inner cities. Recalling Lyndon Johnson's 1965 Howard University address in which the President pledged his dedication to providing the poor with "decent homes *in decent surroundings*,"²⁶ social and behavioural scientists called upon government officials to launch a concerted effort to modify the pathological behaviour that existed within these ghettos. The self-perpetuating psychology of the poor, they argued, must be supplanted by a set of mainstream values which fostered family stability and increased aspirations. Poor urban blacks could thus be divested of their "slum psychology" via integration with those who appeared to embody these positive values: middle-class whites. The result was a growing call for the "scattering" of low-income public housing, the construction of smaller scale projects in middle and working-class neighbourhoods. Low density housing would prevent federal projects from becoming isolated islands of pathology, while assimilation into the surrounding community would allegedly break the "vicious cycle," precluding the culture of poverty from being passed on to a subsequent generation of public housing occupants.²⁷

This new housing initiative represented an unmistakable articulation of the "moralistic high modernism" of the 1960s: the federal government, relying on the expertise of social scientists, would marshal its bureaucratic powers to intervene in the lives of its citizens with the aim of ameliorating their economic status as well as their mental health. While this brand of high modernist ideology was apparent at the federal level, it also found a home in local politics. The necessity of dispersing federal low-

²⁶ Yancey and Rainwater, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, 131. Emphasis added.

²⁷ This approach was endorsed early on by Harrington, who argued for an end to the "integration of the poor with the poor" in public housing, and called for the poor to be integrated with the rest of society. Low- and middle-income units were to be interspersed while projects themselves would be integrated into "existing and vital neighbourhoods." Harrington, *The Other America*, 154-156, 168.

income housing projects, for example, was also endorsed by the housing commission appointed by another proponent of this state activist liberalism, New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay.

In the first year of his mayoralty, Lindsay pledged to build tens of thousands of units of low-income housing to house the city's rapidly expanding population of underprivileged African Americans and Puerto Ricans. With this goal in mind, in 1965 the mayor appointed the Housing and Urban Renewal Task Force to investigate the realities of low-income housing in New York. The following year the Task Force released a report calling on the city to implement greater racial and economic diversity in housing, arguing that when projects were faced with growing segregation, "it becomes the duty of a public agency to prevent it by positive policy, even where the public agency concerned must become conscious of color."²⁸ The report also urged officials to design public housing in order to integrate its residents into existing neighbourhoods rather than creating "self-contained projects," massive buildings which only served to isolate their occupants. Lindsay and his housing officials took this strong message of integration through housing and proposed what became known as the "scatter site" plan: New York's middle-income communities would play host to low-income housing projects, allowing those in need to escape the poverty and pathology of the ghetto.²⁹ As city housing official Eugenia Flatow explained, Lindsay's scatter site plan would "give people a chance to escape not just from slum buildings, but from slum environments in the hope of giving their families a different kind of environment and also raising their level of

²⁸ "Report of Housing and Urban Renewal Task Force," 10 January 1966, as cited in Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 505.

²⁹ Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 505.

expectations.”³⁰ The moral high modernism of racial liberalism was evident in the administration’s commitment to achieving social justice through social engineering; Lindsay often framed his efforts to implement scatter site housing as a “moral imperative,” in the words of City Planning Commissioner Don Elliot, while many inside City Hall interpreted the new housing initiative as “another milestone in the traditional, if stalled, drive toward equal rights through integration.” As one unnamed New York City Housing Official stated, “Forest Hills is the Selma, Alabama, of scatter site.”³¹

In the mid-1960s, of course, the commitment to the amelioration of black poverty took on a new sense of urgency in the wake of the Watts riots of 1965. While many policy-makers adopted this moralistic high modernism out of a sense of justice and a desire to live up to the tenets of the American Creed, they were also motivated by a desire to avoid further inner-city violence. The scatter site housing plan therefore also emerged out of the fear that Watts could be repeated across the country and, more specifically, in New York City. Mayor Lindsay’s commitment to the prevention of further urban disorder can be seen in his participation in the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (more commonly known as the Kerner Commission), another panel of experts who came out heavily in favour of breaking up the ghetto through the dispersal of public housing.

In July of 1967 President Johnson convened the Kerner Commission to examine the causes of three successive summers of urban riots and looting in which a stunned nation watched as city after city burned. The Commission was charged with the task of seeking out the causes of these riots as well as any measures the federal government could adopt to prevent such violence in the future. While the Commission’s report had

³⁰ *New York Times*, 4 July 1966, as cited in Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 505.

³¹ Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, “The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim Is Integration,” *New York Post*, 25 April 1972.

been intended as an investigation which would certainly be sympathetic to the black community, Lindsay assumed "virtual leadership" of the panel and transformed the document into a searing critique of the American race relations.³² In January of 1968 he sent a memo to other Commission members stating that the urban riots constituted "the most serious domestic crisis we have faced in the past century." Because of this gravity, there could be "no delay" in addressing its causes: "We need action . . . And we need no lesser level of response—a wartime level of resources and commitment with a full domestic strategy."³³ If the country wished to chart a new course and avoid further unrest in the future, Lindsay asserted, the time for national action was now.³⁴

Among the Commission's findings was the dire warning that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal." Discrimination now threatened "the future of every American."³⁵ In order to reverse this trend and alleviate the racialized urban poverty of which the Watts riot of 1965 was the most visible symbol, the Commission urged the federal government to engage in social engineering, intervening in the culture of poverty and breaking up segregated slums.³⁶ One of the strategies of "national action" which the government could adopt, the panel concluded, was the building of low-income housing in middle-income neighbourhoods. If

³² Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 204.

³³ Michael Lipsky and David Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1977), 132-33 as cited in Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 205.

³⁴ As the introduction the Report stated, "To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of democratic values." National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 1.

³⁵ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1.

³⁶ The commitment to social engineering to alleviate the cultural conditions of poverty could be found in Lyndon Johnson's July 27 address to the nation, which appeared as the epigraph to the Report. In this address, the President called for "an attack" on "the conditions that breed despair and violence." This sentiment was also echoed in one of the Commission's overarching recommendations that the federal government "undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and frustration that now dominates the ghetto and weakens our society." *Ibid*, 2.

this measure was not taken, the Commission forewarned, public housing would “continue to concentrate the most impoverished and dependent segments of the population in the central-city ghettos,” and would therefore “compound the conditions of failure and hopelessness which lead to crime, civil disorder and social disorganization.”³⁷

Both this sense of urgency regarding racial tensions and the notion of scatter site housing as a “moral imperative” would influence the manner in which the city proceeded to enact this new policy in Forest Hills. Officials in City Hall and the Housing Authority were determined to press ahead with the scatter site plan quickly, with the aim of implementing it sooner rather than later and with minimal obstruction from the local community. This desire for expediency would therefore leave little room for voices of opposition from those living in Forest Hills. The Lindsay administration’s approval of the scatter site plan, with its reliance on “experts,” its top-down implementation, and its imposition of the plan on a surprised and angry community, placed its methods squarely within the “New York approach.”

Joel Schwartz, in his account of the redevelopment of New York under the alliance of Robert Moses and his liberal allies, has identified this New York approach as one in which an activist state claiming to work in the best interests of public welfare saw no need to accommodate the “little people,” usually poor immigrants, in its plans.³⁸ Schwartz traces this political tradition to the Progressive Era, when concerns about “realizing the highest and best use of the inner city’s expensive square footage” led to the displacement of poor tenement dwellers to make room for “middle-class apartments on

³⁷ Ibid, 474-475; David K. Shipler, “Housing for the Poor: A Typical Reaction,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1971.

³⁸ Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 2.

broad boulevards.”³⁹ By the 1920s the city functioned as an “activist state, fortified with advisory planning boards, commissions on congestion, tenements, and zoning,” and therefore “claimed to speak for the best interests of the poor in technical areas, where they were not qualified to speak for themselves.”⁴⁰ Schwartz argues that Robert Moses, with his focus on civic improvements that would remove urban “blight” and his lack of concern for those he displaced, fit into the grooves of this pre-existing municipal policy.⁴¹

In addition to embodying the reform traditions established by Progressive Era elites, the New York approach perfected by Moses was also part of a broader national style of New Deal governance in which small bodies of appointed experts who were somehow “above politics” dramatically reshaped America’s urban centres through the aid of federal dollars and their freedom from public opinion. From his rise to power in the 1930s until his eventual ousting under Governor Rockefeller in the 1960s, Moses bore the title of “Construction Coordinator” and presided over a number of the city’s public authorities, implementing vast and unprecedented transformations to New York’s transportation system, housing patterns, and public spaces. With his role in these public authorities, Moses was very much a product of the New Deal. Under Roosevelt’s public works and housing programs, local authorities were charged with the administration of federal funds. For example, the United States Housing Authority, created in 1937 under the Wagner-Steagall Act, provided loans to local housing authorities totaling \$800 million.⁴² While Moses was never a member of the New York City Housing Authority

³⁹ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 297.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴¹ Schwartz also argues that Moses did not act alone in his unprecedented displacement of the poor and lower-middle class, but was aided by New York liberals and their faith in redevelopment and planning expertise. *Ibid*, xvi-xix, 112, 169.

⁴² Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses, Urban and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 610.

board, he was able to dominate its membership, exerting considerable influence over the authority for over a decade.⁴³ Moses had thus “focused on the possibilities” of the public authority while it was “still in its infancy as an urban force,” raising this institution “to a maturity in which it became the force through which he shaped New York and its suburbs in the image he personally conceived.”⁴⁴ Moses was able to exploit the dominance and lack of accountability of these bodies which he believed to be “outside and above politics”: public authorities “possessed not only the power of a large private corporation but also some of the powers of a sovereign state,” including the power of eminent domain and the ability to govern by its own laws.⁴⁵ As Robert Caro notes, the key rationales for the establishment of authorities were their perceived “freedom from the red tape involved in old-line governmental agencies and their ability to function freely and efficiently because they were established outside governmental bureaucracies.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, these powers were vested in the board of the authority, even if there was only one sole member, as was the case with the Henry Hudson Parkway Authority, which counted Robert Moses as its only member.⁴⁷ The rise of the public authority under the New Deal therefore firmly cemented the New York approach of the early twentieth century and allowed policy-makers to implement it on a much grander scale.

Given the power wielded by Moses for so many years, we may wonder why this approach was tolerated until the 1960s. Why did so many borough residents submit to the New York approach? Firstly, the New Deal itself convinced many that the state would protect its citizens and keep their best interests in mind. Many of the elderly residents of

⁴³ Ibid, 706, 758, 762, 805-806.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 623, 16, 632.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 633.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 623.

Forest Hills, for example, had been beneficiaries of New Deal initiatives such as Medicare and Social Security. In addition, public housing under the New Deal was originally conceived as temporary homes for the “submerged” middle class. Government built projects had thus benefited the upwardly mobile and frequently served as a stepping stone to homeownership and middle-class status.⁴⁸ A number of Forest Hills residents, including Forest Hills Residents Association president Jerry Birbach, had grown up in working poor families in Williamsburg and the Lower East Side, and had lived in public housing projects themselves.⁴⁹ In addition to benefiting from these early housing policies, middle- and working-class New Yorkers also reaped the advantages of Moses’ parks and parkways. In the 1920s New York had no state parks, and city residents had to fight traffic along narrow and dusty roads to escape to the green hills and beaches of Long Island, only to find these rural areas monopolized by a handful of wealthy families.⁵⁰ Under Robert Moses, however, New York State would acquire over two million acres of state parks, while parkways led from Queens out to the newly built Jones Beach and beyond, creating a “modern pastoral” atmosphere for urban residents.⁵¹ Given both these immediate benefits of Moses’ policies and the widespread belief among the middle and working classes that the New Deal state was “their” government, many New Yorkers believed the myth perpetuated by Moses that public authorities made their decisions solely on the basis of public welfare. The local press further propagated this image with its adulation of Moses; newspapers heaped praise upon his public works initiatives,

⁴⁸ Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing*, 15, 109-110.

⁴⁹ Clark Whelton, “The Hole In Forest Hills,” *Village Voice*, 24 August 1972.

⁵⁰ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11, 156; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 298.

identifying him with the “glowing cause of parks” as well as with battles against a red tape bureaucracy, crooked politicians, and the very wealthy.⁵²

Under the plans envisioned by the Construction Coordinator, however, tens of thousands of the city’s poor African Americans and Puerto Ricans as well as its lower-middle-class white ethnics were displaced, uprooted from their neighbourhoods and often left to their own devices in their attempts to find alternate housing. Those fortunate enough to gain entry into one of the city’s public housing projects found themselves living in drab, utilitarian buildings that stretched for miles along the eastern edge of the island of Manhattan and were clustered together in pockets of Brooklyn and the Bronx.⁵³ Moses’ expressways and parkways removed tens of thousands of people from their path, bulldozing neighbourhoods and flooding the boroughs with automobiles and their inevitable by-products, noise and exhaust fumes. Moses’ redevelopment also served to foster greater segregation across the city, reclaiming large tracts of tenements for middle-class housing, concentrating public housing projects in “marginal” areas already undergoing racial transition, and forcing blacks and Puerto Ricans into the few neighbourhoods still “open” to them.⁵⁴

Lindsay’s scatter site plan was very much intended to reverse the effects of Moses’ housing initiatives, creating greater integration and reducing the concentration of public housing in poor, black and Puerto Rican neighbourhoods. During his first years in City Hall, Lindsay in fact made no secret of his dislike for Moses and his desire to

⁵² Caro, *The Power Broker*, 16-17, 424, 193.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 6-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 5-8, 11-12, 19-20; Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, xvi, 113-115, 122-125, 288, 294; Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 108, 116.

remove him from his positions of authority.⁵⁵ In his attempts to reshape the racial geography created by Moses, however, Lindsay in fact employed many of the same methods as his opponent. Like Moses, the Mayor attempted to operate “outside politics,” relying on expert opinion and attempting to circumvent public consultation as much as possible. And while Lindsay was determined to aid poor minorities, the “little people” ignored by Moses, he seemed reluctant to address the concerns of those who now saw themselves as the new “little people” or “forgotten men,” outer-borough white ethnics. Due to his sense of urgency and his faith in the possibilities of social engineering, Lindsay, much like Moses, attempted to implement his vision for the city in a top-down fashion that placed power in the hands of a few and offered little accountability to those affected by redevelopment.

The demise of this approach would be seen most clearly in Forest Hills, but would also be foreshadowed in nearby Corona, Queens. The scatter site housing project which was to be built in Forest Hills had been originally planned for this working-class, Italian district of modest homes, many of which were built by their owners. Residents of Corona, however, were able to defeat the city’s housing plan, forcing officials to look elsewhere to carry out Lindsay’s scatter site program. As Mario Cuomo notes, the disputes with the city in Forest Hills and Corona were “inextricably intertwined.”⁵⁶ A brief description of the Corona dispute therefore illuminates the responses of both the city and neighbourhood residents to the Forest Hills housing controversy.

In June of 1966 the City Planning Commission (CPC) unanimously approved the Corona project in a seemingly uneventful session. When the proposal was placed before

⁵⁵ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 1117-1131.

⁵⁶ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 4.

the public, however, the local opposition was loud and vigorous. The people of Corona and nearby Lefrak City, an enormous apartment complex located about a mile north of Corona, argued that the area's growing population warranted the construction of a new high school rather than a low-income housing project which would only further crowd the neighbourhood. In an eleventh hour move, the Board of Estimate concurred, withdrawing the project and approving a high school to be built in its place.⁵⁷

The struggle in Corona did not end here, however. In order to accommodate an athletic field for the new school, the city expanded the original 4.5 acre site selected for the housing project, increasing the area slated for construction to 12.5 acres. Sixty-nine homes and five local businesses were located within the newly enlarged site, and all of them were to be demolished. The city, it appeared to the neighbourhood's residents, was willing to destroy "the heart of Corona" with the stroke of a pen.⁵⁸ After some initial panic and confusion of the part of local homeowners, the condemnations sparked a new wave of community protest, and the people of Corona hired Holliswood attorney Mario Cuomo to argue their case before city officials. While the city initially appeared unwilling to listen to the neighbourhood opposition, public pressure grew as Corona became a *cause célèbre*, attracting the attention of popular New York City columnist Jimmy Breslin. Breslin began what Cuomo later termed "a one-man media campaign," inspiring the liberal press in cities as far away as Los Angeles declare their support for Corona's homeowners.⁵⁹ This lobbying by high profile journalists opened the doors of City Hall to Cuomo, who was able to negotiate a compromise whereby the city would

⁵⁷ Ibid, 11; Walter Goodman, "The Battle of Forest Hills: Who's Ahead?" *New York Times Magazine*, 20 February 1972, 9; Ross Gelbspan, "Corona: Cause for a Day," *Village Voice*, 8 July 1971.

⁵⁸ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 16; Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 505.

move the high school's playfield to a nearby park, saving all but fourteen of the homes, which could then be relocated to an area of the original project site only one block from where they now stood. Lindsay announced the "Corona compromise" in December of 1970 and, after state legislators held it up and subsequently revised it to affect only four homes, the bill was passed in June of 1972.⁶⁰

The protests on the part of Corona residents and the need for the city to accept a compromise brokered by Mario Cuomo would foreshadow the opposition to social engineering initiatives that John Lindsay would encounter in Forest Hills. Just as important, however, was the symbolic victory of an outer-borough Italian community that the compromise represented. The Corona struggle illustrated that New York City's white ethnic neighbourhoods could take on the city and win; Corona demonstrated the growing demand for accountability to communities and thus hinted at a shift in power from the New York approach to greater control on the part of neighbourhoods. As Cuomo noted in 1974, when Lindsay's popularity began to wane, "the Corona compromise served as a source of hope to all anti-establishment forces," providing further ammunition to groups who wished to voice their discontent with the Lindsay administration's policies.⁶¹ One of these very groups would be located in the middle-class, Jewish community of neighbouring Forest Hills.

With low-income public housing in Corona officially dead in 1966, the city's "deep commitment" to scatter site housing compelled the New York City Housing Authority to locate another nearby site which would allow it to replace the Corona

⁶⁰ Gelbspan, "Corona: Cause for a Day"; Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 506-508.

⁶¹ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 22.

project.⁶² By that autumn the Authority had decided on 8.5 acres of vacant land on 108th Street in Forest Hills, and in December of 1966 the city “somehow managed” to persuade the Board of Estimate to approve the project site.⁶³ Unlike their counterparts in Corona, residents of Forest Hills did not respond to the prospect of public housing with overwhelming public outcry; protests were relatively small and virtually ineffective. It is important to note, however, that the small scale of the initial resistance to the Forest Hills project was due to the closed-door methods of the city rather than apathy or even support for the project on the part of the local community. The fact that early opposition in Forest Hills was not more vocal and forceful was “attributable to the suddenness of the switch” in sites from Corona to Forest Hills as well as “the lack of adequate vehicles for communication with the community” which were employed by the city.⁶⁴ As journalist Walter Goodman noted, up until the CPC held a public hearing on the matter on the last day of November, residents of Forest Hills had been “by and large, unaware of the arrangements which their Borough President was making on their behalf.”⁶⁵ The city thus appeared to be keeping neighbourhood residents in the dark on its plans for their neighbourhood. Echoing the style of decision-making adopted by Moses, the Lindsay administration offered the Forest Hills community little input into the scatter site policy,

⁶² This “deep commitment” was also shaped by legal requirements to desegregate federally-funded public housing. *Ibid.*, 180-181.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12. As Jewell Bellush notes, public hearings before the Board of Estimate were often “of relatively little importance” because of the extensive political consultation with borough presidents that took place in the initial stages of the decision-making process. Bellush, “Housing,” in Bellush and Stephen M. Davids, eds., *Race and Politics in New York City: Five Studies in Policy-Making* (New York, Washington, and London: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 107.

⁶⁵ Goodman, “The Battle of Forest Hills.”

keeping it a virtually clandestine affair that existed outside of "politics" as long as they could.⁶⁶

In addition to this lack of communication with neighbourhood residents, in what many would later see as an attempt to stifle any further opposition that could endanger the scatter site plan, the project was rushed through the necessary process of approval in less than one week with the aid of some "behind the scenes political work."⁶⁷ Despite the initial opposition to the project voiced at the CPC hearing, for example, the Commission approved the site two days later. The proposal then received the unanimous support of the Board of Estimate before the week was up. As Commissioner Don Elliot later admitted, the city was never "able to get the consent of the communities" in which scatter site projects were to be built, clearly illustrating the fact that officials did little to incorporate neighbourhood opinion into their housing plans.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the members of the local community planning board, a body which had no legal authority on the matter but was required to make its recommendations to the Board of Estimate, unanimously rejected the proposal only to have the Board quickly pass the initiative. Members of the community board would also complain that they had been provided with "practically no opportunity" to hold public hearing to discuss the matter with local residents. As Mario Cuomo observes, "had the community been given full warning and a worthwhile opportunity to participate, the project might never have left the drawing board."⁶⁹ In a move that would come back to haunt city officials, the Lindsay administration appeared to steamroll

⁶⁶ Among the Lindsay administration's goals was to make the Mayor's role central and to eliminate "politicking" on the part of borough presidents who often opposed public housing in their districts. Don Elliot, for example, sought to eliminate the veto power of the borough presidents, eliminating consultation and bargaining in the initial planning processes. Bellush, "Housing," 112, 113-114.

⁶⁷ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 12.

⁶⁸ Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 510.

⁶⁹ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 12-13.

through the local planning process. Lindsay was thus willing to embrace the New York approach in order to press ahead with the “moral imperative” that he believed would provide improved housing, foster integration, and reduce the threat of urban unrest.

The Forest Hills project for the most part lay dormant until 1970, seemingly disappearing from public view. During the intervening years the city discovered that the poor, swampy quality of the land would necessitate costly pile-driving, and the project was sent back to housing officials for redesigns and a budget overhaul. With this lack of progress, most residents of Forest Hills assumed that the city had lost interest in the project. Rumours began to circulate that this public housing development would never be built, or that the Housing Authority was reconsidering the original site in Corona. The situation began to heat up, however, in December of 1970 when the final plans for the Corona high school were announced. Attention was diverted back to Forest Hills as residents realized that no low-income housing would be built in Corona and the project would, in fact, be located in their neighbourhood.⁷⁰ Residents began to mobilize almost immediately to fight what they saw as a threat to their community and for the next two years the city would find itself locked in an ever-escalating and sometimes violent battle with the residents of Forest Hills over the fate of its scatter site program.

The expedited and seemingly covert approval of the scatter site project in Forest Hills, Queens revealed the potentially undemocratic tendencies of a policy designed to fulfill the principles of democracy and equality, or the American Creed. Moreover, as Mario Cuomo noted, a plan that required white participation but did not seek out local white approval seemed to be characterized by a lack of “common sense”:

⁷⁰ Ibid, 11-12, 15, 22.

Common sense would have said that . . . before asking a community for its active good will and cooperation with the project one ought to explain to that community the sacrifices involved; that a public hearing should be a hearing at which the public is present and at which it is heard before decisions are made.⁷¹

The manner in which the project was approved would therefore sow the seeds of its ultimate transformation into co-operative housing for Queens' white working poor and elderly. In voicing their objections to the project, Forest Hills residents would repeatedly focus on the lack of consultation afforded to the community, arguing that they were the victims of decades of undemocratic city planning. The Forest Hills controversy would thus ultimately illustrate the incompatibility of the New York approach with the growing forces of community. As we shall see in the following chapters, as the opposition to the project began to gain momentum in the final months of 1971, all of these facts would begin to work against Lindsay, ultimately unraveling the New York approach.

⁷¹ Ibid, 145.

CHAPTER TWO:

A “Backlash” Against the City: Victim Status and the Demand for Greater Local Accountability

On 3 February 1972, a group of about 30 women and children from Forest Hills, Queens staged a sit-in at the Manhattan office of New York City Housing Authority Chairman Simeon Golar in protest of the city's plans to build a low-income housing project in their community. Among those present was Mrs. Jerry Birbach, wife of the president of the Forest Hills Residents Association, one of the most prominent local organizations in the fight against scatter site housing. On this occasion Mrs. Birbach stood in the lobby of the building that housed Golar's office and attempted to block the elevators. “Lindsay and Golar don't listen to the people, especially in Forest Hills,” she told one reporter. “We put Lindsay in office. The least he can do is listen to us.” Helen Schiffman, another of the protestors, also echoed this sentiment, stating that Lindsay “doesn't seem interested in how we feel.” The city's Mayor, she asserted, “talks about the forgotten man, but truthfully we're the forgotten man [sic].”¹

This argument that the residents of the Forest Hills had been “forgotten” or ignored by city officials who paid no heed to their concerns would be heard many times over the course of the battle against scatter site housing. Opponents of the project would

¹ Howard Reiser and Vito Turso, “Project Foes Sit In, Say They'll Keep it Up,” *Long Island Press*, 4 February 1972.

argue repeatedly that the Lindsay administration, in its rush to implement the scatter site plan, showed little appreciation for the viability of Forest Hills and the interests of its residents. The neighbourhood's middle-class residents claimed that they were being used by an "uncaring, anonymous, patronizing liberal establishment as pawns in a social experiment" while their own needs went unattended.²

At first glance, this scenario would appear to be a familiar one among the city's middle-income whites in the early 1970s; the accusation that "limousine liberals" cared only about the very wealthy or the very poor while ignoring their middle-class constituents had been heard in criticisms of welfare policy, the police review board, and school integration through busing, as well as in the fallout after the 1968 snowstorm that left Queens paralyzed for days while the streets of Manhattan were cleared. Upon closer examination, however, the battle over public housing in Forest Hills proves to be more than what has been labeled "white backlash," the wholesale repudiation of poor African Americans and their liberal allies. Rather than representing only a manifestation of anti-liberal or anti-black sentiments, the struggle against public housing saw those who opposed the project appropriate both the rhetoric of racial liberalism and the African American demands for "community control" which had been articulated in the struggle for school decentralization at Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968. Firstly, opponents of the project in Forest Hills did not attempt to discredit black demands for community control, but instead actively appropriated this language, insisting that Forest Hills be afforded community control of local housing matters. The city's lack of consultation with the community formed the basis of Forest Hills residents' claims to their status as "forgotten"

² Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: Forest Hills and Other Battles, Article 5: The Future," *New York Post*, 28 April 1972.

men and women. In addition, those who fought the project adopted racial liberals' psychological and behavioural definitions of poverty, both of which had been originally used to justify the project, adapting liberal arguments about the psychology of the poor to their own ends. In this manner, the project's opponents sought to emphasize their commitment to true equality and their sympathies for the poor and in fact appear more "liberal" than John Lindsay himself.

Rather than rejecting black and liberal discourse, therefore, the opponents of scatter site housing attempted to incorporate these ideas into a narrative of victimhood, portraying themselves as the victims of decades of undemocratic city planning. The lack of consultation afforded to the Forest Hills community, they argued, simply represented the latest example of city officials imposing their redevelopment plans on a neighbourhood while showing little concern for the fate of its residents. Many living in Forest Hills argued that they were refugees of their old neighbourhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx that had faced crime and decay, and now the city was threatening to chase them out of this corner of Queens. While residents did attribute the decline of these neighbourhoods to poor and allegedly pathological African Americans and Puerto Ricans, they also blamed the city, pointing to the role of municipal policy in displacing white ethnics from lower-middle-class areas. The "backlash" exhibited by the residents of Forest Hills was therefore just as much a response to the power of the state under the New York approach as it was a rejection of poor blacks or "limousine liberals."

Further exhibiting their disenchantment with the city's redevelopment strategies and attempting to claim their status as victims, project opponents also argued that the city's housing policy was actually anti-Semitic, almost exclusively targeting Jewish

neighbourhoods for scatter site projects. Moreover, they asserted, New York's redevelopment policies had a long history of destroying Jewish neighbourhoods and "chasing out" their residents. Not only had they been forced out of their old neighbourhoods, they stated, they had been displaced by officials with an anti-Semitic bias. It must be noted, however, that this victim status carved out by residents of Forest Hills was not a passive one. Forest Hills Jews argued that they needed to stand and fight this anti-Semitism, vowing that they would not be forced out yet again. In an age of growing black nationalism, Forest Hills residents drew on a new and more assertive Jewish nationalism, a fact which further illustrates their borrowing from the black protest movement. The specific arguments raised by the residents of Forest Hills therefore illustrate that reactionary white anti-liberalism does not sufficiently account for the opposition to scatter site housing in Forest Hills. Instead, the scatter site controversy reveals that the motivations behind the white protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s are in fact more complex than many scholars have suggested.

Over the past two decades, a number of historians and sociologists investigating the response of the working- and middle-class whites to black nationalism, the War on Poverty, and the counter-culture movement of the 1960s have characterized protests such as that found in Forest Hills as a "backlash" on the part of white ethnics.³ Sociologist Jonathan Rieder, for example, has argued that residents of Canarsie, Brooklyn were increasingly angered by liberals' alleged singling out of minorities for aid, what

³ It must be noted that the term "backlash" appeared as early as 1964. In August of 1964 the *New York Times* conducted a poll "to find out whether the white backlash . . . actually did exist in New York City and to what extent." Respondents were asked a number of political questions related to their views on race. Among the findings of this survey was that most New Yorkers (54 per cent) felt that the civil rights movement was "going too fast." "Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive," *New York Times*, 21 September 1964.

amounted in their eyes to “bumping” blacks ahead of white ethnics in the line to join middle-class society. Canarsie’s whites felt that government benefits were flowing in one direction, from the middle-class to the poor, and worse yet, were often extorted through “illicit” methods such as crime and rioting, which now threatened white neighbourhoods.⁴ Thomas and Mary Edsall have also concluded that whites’ building resentment of African Americans was fused to their fear that liberal politicians would raise taxes from the white middle class to benefit the black and Hispanic poor, often spending these funds “wastefully,”⁵ and they therefore equated the granting of greater African American rights with the relinquishing of their own rights and privileges.⁶ As historian Sylvie Murray has observed, within this literature the white middle-class “has become synonymous with reactionary populist politics.”⁷

One would not have to search for long to find manifestations of this reactionary populism, complete with anti-liberalism and a certain mistrust of socio-economically challenged minorities, in Forest Hills in the early 1970s. Many neighbourhood residents believed that the scatter site housing project would mean the demise of Forest Hills as a viable community for hard-working middle-income earners who took pride in their homes and neighbourhoods, arguing that scatter site housing would only import poverty and crime into stable neighbourhoods, precipitating their eventual decline and causing property values to plummet. The local population appeared thoroughly convinced that

⁴ Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1, 61, 109-112; see also Stanley Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 26, 34, 37-40

⁵ Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York and London: Norton, 1985), 5-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁷ Sylvie Murray, *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 154.

public housing “would bring as its inevitable concomitant increasing crime, vandalism, exodus and deterioration.”⁸ At a rally at the project’s construction site in November of 1971, for example, protesters expressed their concern that public housing meant “the end of Queens,” as the area would be transformed into a slum in which “crime would soar.”⁹ As one letter to the Editor of the *New York Times* expressed it, if any project was built, “Forest Hills will cease to be a viable middle class community.”¹⁰ A statement by the Queens Jewish Community Council (QJCC) that “[n]o problem will be solved by moving a ghetto to Forest Hills” further reflected the general consensus that the project would do nothing to ease the crime and poverty plaguing the inner cities but would actually lead to their increase by spreading urban social ills outward into middle-class Queens.¹¹

Those protesting the project therefore frequently framed their struggle as a fight to save the middle-class in New York City, and indeed to save “Middle-Class America” itself. The Forest Hills Residents Association (FHRA), led by local businessman and homeowner Jerry Birbach, was at the forefront of encouraging its supporters to think of themselves as members of a threatened and beleaguered middle class attempting to preserve their neighbourhood as well as their class status. Birbach invited these residents to view themselves as a group increasingly under attack from city officials who seemed almost determined to destroy their neighbourhoods. A series of FHRA public notices placed in the classified section of the *New York Times*, for instance, stated that the

⁸ Mario Cuomo, “Report to Honorable John V. Lindsay Concerning the Proposed Low-Income Housing Project at 108th Street, Forest Hills Queens,” in Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low-Income Housing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 184.

⁹ Murray Schumach, “Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1971.

¹⁰ Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 30 August 1972.

¹¹ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 113.

Association was “fighting to preserve middle-class communities everywhere.”¹² Another FHRA advertisement, this one addressed to Queens Borough President Donald Manes, declared that “It is up to you [Manes] to lead the way for the other Board of Estimate members or you will be as guilty as the Mayor of destroying middle income communities.”¹³

The FHRA’s message to other communities was simple: if John Lindsay was allowed to implement this plan in Forest Hills, any middle-income neighbourhood in the outer boroughs could be the next to face crime and decay. For example, a leaflet distributed by Jerry Birbach in preparation for a Board of Estimate hearing on 26 October 1972 urged Queens residents to “Give a damn. Get involved. Save Forest Hills and middle-income communities everywhere.”¹⁴ In addition, one of the largest ovations at an eleventh-hour rally against the project came after one community leader stated that the community’s protests represented “an indictment” of the city administration “for murder, for killing the middle class.”¹⁵ Perhaps no clearer articulation of this class-based siege mentality could be found than in the words printed on the placard of one protestor at a 1971 rally: “SAVE FOREST HILLS, SAVE MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICA.”¹⁶

In addition to expressing this defensive middle-class identity, Forest Hills residents also voiced another hallmark of white backlash, their growing indignation toward poor African Americans and their perceived “special status.” Opponents of the project on several occasions clearly exhibited their resentment of underprivileged African

¹² Classified Advertisements, *New York Times*, 22 August 1972 and 23 August 1972.

¹³ Advertisement, *New York Times*, 24 October 1972.

¹⁴ “Sodowsky Treed by Housing Foes on Wrong Trail,” *Daily News*, 13 October 1972.

¹⁵ Steve Pasternak, “Battle of Forest Hills Rages On,” *Long Island Press*, 22 April 1974.

¹⁶ Paul Cowan, “‘Them’ in Forest Hills,” *Village Voice*, 23 December 1971. Journalists Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz both characterized the Forest Hills controversy as “a resistance movement that can only be characterized as middle-class revolt.” “Scattersite Housing: Forest Hills and Other Battles, Article V: The Future.”

Americans by arguing that blacks in public housing were feckless and dependent. The African Americans who would come to Forest Hills under the scatter site program purportedly wanted “something for nothing” and lacked the upward mobility necessary to pull themselves out of poverty. As Daniel Walkowitz has argued, in the late 1960s African Americans’ alleged “failure” to achieve the “promise” of material success and social uplift supposedly available to all became increasingly entwined with Jews’ rise from poverty.¹⁷ As New York’s Jews increasingly felt that blacks were “privileged” by the Great Society and the War on Poverty, Walkowitz argues, they invoked Jewish upward mobility as a “counternarrative” to black poverty in order to justify cutbacks in welfare and social spending in minorities. If Jews could “make it” on their own, they argued, so too should African Americans.¹⁸

The invocation of this success counternarrative could be found in the observation of *New York Post* columnists Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz that many whites in Forest Hills that believed that “some ‘segments of our society’ (read the black poor) are getting something for nothing, whereas working class whites have had to struggle every square they’ve advanced on the checkerboard of the American status game.”¹⁹ The wife of a Queens jewelry store manager, speaking to a *Village Voice* reporter, echoed this conviction by stating: “If Negroes who can afford it want to live in this building, that’s fine with me. . . . But it’s the idea of those people getting something

¹⁷ Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 4-6, 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-24, 259-260, 263. The “myth” of the “Jewish Horatio Alger” who pulled himself up by nothing more than his own bootstraps is also discussed by Karen Brodtkin. Like Walkowitz, Brodtkin argues that Jews invoked their own climb out of the ghetto to infer that African Americans should also be expected to achieve such progress without “special” aid from the state. Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 26-27, 50, 151-155.

¹⁹ Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, “ScatterSite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article I: A Clash of Values,” *New York Post*, 24 April 1972.

for nothing that really burns me up.”²⁰ Perhaps one woman protesting at the City Planning Commission best embodied the backlash and its racialized resentment of the poor when she asserted that the people of Queens “improved our lot by struggle. The Negroes want everything for free. How much can we take? How much can we pay?”²¹

Implicit in these condemnations of poor African Americans receiving “something for nothing” was the growing feeling among many working- and middle-class whites that these “handouts” were increasingly provided on a racial basis and would be funded from the pockets of whites. This opposition to the Forest Hills project on the basis of resentment toward welfare recipients would seem to characterize the struggle as an example of anti-liberal backlash: middle-income whites saw liberal politicians “unfairly” advancing poor minorities both socially and economically while allegedly doing little to ensure that hard-working whites were able to maintain their class status.

This notion of defensive middle-class anti-liberalism becomes more complicated and problematic, however, when we consider the specific language in which the project’s opponents chose to articulate their position; Forest Hills residents appropriated the discourse of both racial liberalism and black protest in order to argue against scatter site housing. Rather than simply dismissing liberal doctrine or African American demands for greater equality, Forest Hills residents who fought the implementation of scatter site housing actively appropriated these ideas. While middle-income whites reshaped both liberal and civil rights rhetoric to conservative ends, thus betraying a certain anti-liberalism and fear of poor blacks, the fact that these whites so frequently invoked the rhetoric they purportedly rejected is striking nonetheless. White ethnics in Forest Hills

²⁰ Paul Cowan, “‘Them’ in Forest Hills.”

²¹ Steven V. Roberts, “Housing Project in Queens Scored,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1966.

did not present themselves to the public and city officials as “Archie Bunkers”²² fed up with the demands of liberals and poor blacks; instead they molded liberal racism to portray themselves as the true defenders of the poor while calling on community control to fight totalitarian city planning methods that showed little concern for the rights of the “little people,” in particular middle-class Jews.

In voicing their objections to the proposed low-income housing project, white ethnics in Forest Hills frequently invoked the theory of the “culture of poverty” which racial liberals such as John Lindsay had initially used to justify the scatter site initiative. Given their conviction that the project would transform the community into a haven for crime, drugs, and vandalism, it was hardly surprising that some white ethnics used liberals’ characterizations of the “pathological” poor to argue that an influx of low-income residents would in fact pose a danger to their community. For example, Alan Goldstein of Forest Hills argued against the folly of “placing thousands of poor people into the midst of a stable middle-income area.” Middle-class people, he warned, “will not sit by and watch their neighborhood become engulfed by the problems of the ghetto.”²³ More significantly, however, the foes of the project also appropriated liberals’ behavioural definitions of poverty and the oft-cited liberal image of the “vertical ghetto” to argue that the project would actually be *harmful* to the poor. Integrationist liberals had used the language of psychological damage—the hopelessness, despair and “twisted spirit” of the poor—to argue for the necessity of economic integration through public housing. Forest Hills residents were now able to adopt this discourse and shape its meanings to their own ends, arguing that the isolation of low-income families in three

²² See for example Gail Sheehy, “Watching Watergate in Archie Bunker Country,” *New York Magazine*, 18 June 1973, 35-41.

²³ Letter to the Editor, *New York Post*, 8 August 1972.

high rise towers would actually inflict psychological damage on underprivileged minorities, stigmatizing them and thus perpetuating their cultural and economic deprivation.

At a press conference in July of 1972, Jerry Birbach denounced the scatter site program for stigmatizing the poor, arguing that low-income families would “never” be integrated into the community “if they [city officials] put them in a project. The project would only isolate them from the community.” Citing the low success rate of high-rise apartments in alleviating poverty, Birbach instead called for single apartments in already-existing buildings to be made available to the poor.²⁴ Birbach would also add that the problems of the poor “are not going to be solved by putting them in housing projects where they are isolated from the surrounding community.” Politicians such as Lindsay, he argued, could “help just as many people” through the subsidizing of rent payments in existing apartments, a move which would allow the poor “to have more dignity than living in a project.”²⁵ A FHRA advertisement in the *New York Times* similarly characterized the scatter site initiative as Lindsay and Golar’s “plan to build ‘warehouses for the poor’ in Forest Hills-Rego Park.” This advertisement featured an illustration of graffiti-covered, garbage-strewn neighbourhood, next to which read the caption: “Project stigmatizes the poor—Isolation, not integration.” The “Birbach Plan,” by contrast, called for the “placement of lower-income families in existing buildings throughout the community for TRUE integration,” in order that “the poor would have a true middle-income environment.”²⁶ In arguing that that integration of the poor with other such

²⁴ Hal Shapiro, “Birbach, NAACP Oppose Cuomo Compromise,” *Long Island Press*, 27 July 1972.

²⁵ Clark Whelton, “The Hole in Forest Hills,” *Village Voice*, 24 August 1972.

²⁶ Advertisement, *New York Times*, 24 October 1972.

families in the same building would only further the "twisted spirit" and lack of dignity of poor blacks, Birbach seemed to endorse the arguments of Michael Harrington and Kenneth B. Clark, two of the original proponents of economic integration through housing.²⁷

Alvin Lashinsky, director of the QJCC and a prominent critic of the project, echoed Birbach's predictions that scatter site housing, rather than ameliorating the condition of the poor, would do them further injury. Lashinsky, writing in the Jewish journal *Sh'ma*, asserted that those poor families brought into middle-income neighbourhoods through the scatter site program would only "remain hungry, poorly educated, unemployed, and become hostile, not to the politicians who brought them in, but to the surrounding community." In short, Lashinsky argued, "It is unfair for politicians to falsely raise peoples' hopes, and then just dump them into a community and leave."²⁸ In a similar invocation of psychological damage, Assemblyman Herbert Miller, a Forest Hills Democrat who had opposed the project since its initial proposal in 1966, took the floor at a public meeting to warn the scatter site plan's backers "You do the poor black irrevocable injury by isolating him in a housing compound designed solely for the poor and allow him to stay as long as he remains in a state of indigency [sic]."²⁹ Both of these men thus equated the current scatter site plan for three twenty-four story towers with injury to the already fragile psyche of the poor.

²⁷ See Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (London and New York: MacMillan, 1965), 152-153, 167 and Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 106.

²⁸ Lashinsky also added that it was unfair to expect "any middle class area to provide the services that Government finds itself unwilling to provide." Alvin Lashinsky, "From the Queens Jewish Community Council," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, 14 January 1972, 25.

²⁹ Vito Turso, "Forest Hills Residents Urge No Compromise, No Project," *Long Island Press*, 13 September 1972; "Forest Hills Compromise Denounced," *New York Post*, 13 September 1972.

The same appropriation of the liberal discourse of poverty could also be found in the writing of local journalists sympathetic to the cause of Forest Hills residents such as Birbach. Columnist John P. Roche, writing for the *Long Island Press*, argued that “the construction of three of those appalling penitentiaries almost guarantees that the perhaps 3,000 occupants will not escape from the culture of poverty—they will bring it with them to Forest Hills.” Roche therefore concluded that scatter site housing would simply not allow the poor to join the community: “if you install a gilded slum . . . people will simply take their values with them—or rather, their lack of community sense, their valueless despair.”³⁰ Columnist Pete Hamill, a noted champion of the lower-middle class, also noted that “Anyone who has ever been to Chicago knows that 24-story low-income housing projects are really only vertical ghettos.” If the Forest Hills project were to become “a series of 24-story ghettos, then those blacks and Puerto Ricans are going to be betrayed too.” Hamill therefore argued that to shift poor minorities “from one ghetto to another is to defraud and cheat them once again.”³¹

Some of the staunchest opponents of the liberal initiative of scatter site housing did not attempt to discredit the poverty theory that had inspired this program, but rather accepted it as fact. While they may have adapted these theories for a seemingly conservative purpose, Birbach and his allies did not challenge the legitimacy of the liberals’ cultural theories of deprivation, nor did they question the behavioural science that lay behind the denunciations of the vertical ghetto. Instead, they appeared to readily endorse these ideas, assuming along with liberals that large-scale public housing was psychologically harmful to the poor, marking them with the stigma of poverty, and

³⁰ John P. Roche, “An Error Was Made at Forest Hills,” *Long Island Press*, 30 November 1971.

³¹ Pete Hamill, “An Old, Sad Song,” *New York Post*, 23 November 1971.

presenting a “true” vision of scatter site housing which would ensure achievable economic integration and the opportunity for social uplift. In this manner, the project foes sought to portray themselves as *more* liberal than liberals such as John Lindsay or Simeon Golar. By opposing the scatter site project, they argued, they were the ones who truly sought to protect the interests of the black poor.

In their attempt to stymie the city’s plans to build public housing in their neighbourhood Forest Hills’ white ethnics did not stop at endorsing racial liberal ideology, but also adopted the language and tactics of the group to whom the Lindsay administration allegedly “pandered,” African Americans. In addition to invoking the liberal discourse of poverty, opponents of the Forest Hills project repeatedly demanded “community control” for their neighbourhood. This expression had served as the rallying cry of black activists and educators in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school decentralization crisis only three years earlier, a cause which had been ardently supported by liberals such as John Lindsay.

The continued de facto segregation of New York City schools in the early 1960s, had led many local African Americans to demand greater community participation in the education system. Supporters of grassroots administration argued that the “failures” of segregated ghetto schools, with their low achievement scores and high rates of teacher turnover, could be overcome with increased parental input into education policy. Local community boards would shape curriculum and staffing decisions, thereby addressing the needs of the community and its children and placing the education system in the hands of those who had the greatest stake in its improvement: local parents.³² Growing pressures

³² Barbara Carter, *Pickets, Parents and Power: The Story Behind the New York City Teachers' Strike* (New York: Citation Press, 1971), 6-9.

for community control, culminating in a 1966 school boycott, led Lindsay and the Board of Education to create three "experimental" decentralized school districts, one of which represented the poor African American and Puerto Rican neighbourhood of Ocean-Hill Brownsville in Brooklyn.³³ This school district was placed under the jurisdiction of a local board whose membership was predominantly African American and firmly committed to the principle of total community control. In May of 1968, the board dismissed 19 Jewish teachers, precipitating a wave of city-wide teachers' strikes that dragged on for months, ending only when the local board was placed under state trusteeship that November. During the intervening months, heated conflicts were regular occurrences at New York schools as tempers flared and racial tensions escalated. Police officers and riot squads patrolled local schools while the largely Jewish United Federation of Teachers (UFT) traded accusations of anti-Semitism with black parents' and activists' allegations of racism.³⁴

The scatter site opponents' appropriation of community control even in the wake of these growing tensions between blacks and Jews further complicates the notion of white ethnic backlash. Rather than repudiating or denigrating African American demands for greater local control, Forest Hills residents appeared to acknowledge the legitimacy of these demands by adopting them for themselves. The opponents of scatter site housing once again attempted to prove themselves to be more committed to liberal principles than the liberals in City Hall, accusing Lindsay of hypocrisy. FHRA president Jerry Birbach, for example, demanded to know why community control was deemed acceptable or even

³³ Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York*, 156, 170.

³⁴ Carter, *Pickets, Parents, and Power*, 4; Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 231-235; Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 316-317, 320, 324-332; Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 220-225.

essential in African American neighbourhoods in East New York or Ocean Hill-Brownsville but was denied to the largely white and Jewish population of his Queens neighbourhood.³⁵ Birbach would go on to reiterate this sentiment on several occasions, demanding of city officials "Does community control apply to Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem . . . and not to middle-income people in Forest Hills?"³⁶ In October of 1971 Birbach announced the creation of a new coalition of Queens community organizations which threatened "militant demonstrations" against the city if Lindsay did not grant "community control of neighbourhoods." The coalition, which represented both black and white residents, pledged to hold a series of non-violent demonstrations designed to draw attention to the "plight" of neighbourhoods which were battling the city over the establishment of programs without community consent.³⁷ The implications in this strategy were clear: scatter site housing in Queens represented to Forest Hills residents the Lindsay Administration "forcing" its plan on a group of citizens it had not bothered to include in the planning process, thus denying them the principle of community control which it had previously supported.³⁸

³⁵ See for example Walter Goodman, "The Battle for Forest Hills: Who's Ahead?" *New York Times Magazine*, 20 February 1972, 61.

³⁶ African American activist Sonny Carson of the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) also came out against the project on the grounds that it represented a blow to community control. According to Carson, "Every community has the right to determine what kind of housing they need, to control their own destiny." Meanwhile *New York Times* editorial board member and future NYCHA official Roger Starr observed that the Lindsay administration appeared to be "following two divergent courses." According to Starr, "You can't have community control on the one hand and scatter site on the other. Because, chances are, you're going to have community opposition to scatter site." Mancini and Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim Is Integration," *New York Post*, 25 April 1972.

³⁷ Vito Turso, "Coalition Threatens Demonstrations for Community Control," *Long Island Press*, 4 October 1971 *Post* reporters Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, also observed that angry residents "fume that the project is being rammed down their throats without their approval." Mancini and Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article I: A Clash of Values."

³⁸ Jerald Podair has also identified this white appropriation of community control, both in Forest Hills and in Canarsie, Brooklyn in the fight against busing. Birbach's demands for community control in Forest Hills underscore Podair's assertion that blacks and whites in New York City had differing understandings of "equality" in the wake of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. While African Americans insisted on

Birbach's allegation that the site selection process was undemocratic and even hypocritical was widespread among community leaders and politicians in Queens. Local rabbi William Berkowitz, for example, charged that the project was "poorly planned" and was the product of a "grave error" by local officials. Berkowitz also claimed that any concept of community control "that acknowledges the rights of one group but not the other is not true community control and is a further act designed to provoke inter-minority strife."³⁹ Even when not referring directly to "community control," these project opponents declared their unhappiness with the city's lack of communication and consultation with neighbourhood residents, demanding that communities be allowed greater input in the decision-making process. QJCC executive vice president Dr. Stanley Dacher condemned the "chicanery and insufficient consultation with the community in the planning stages."⁴⁰ Joseph DeVoy president of the Central Queens Allied Civic Council and chairman of Community Board No. 6, which represented Forest Hills, stated that before city officials proposed scatter site housing in any neighbourhood, "they should come to the community with their ideas first." If the city had agreed to

the equality of *results*, whites took this word to mean the equality of *opportunity*. Under this latter definition, if community control was available to blacks, it should, in all fairness, be available to white as well. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 186-192.

³⁹ Hal Shapiro, "Rabbi Demands Halt to Forest Hills Job," *Long Island Press*, 10 February 1972.

⁴⁰ Howard Reiser, "Cuomo a Lindsay Pawn in Forest Hills Study?" *Long Island Press*, 9 August 1972. It must be noted that even Jewish reform groups which endorsed the project, refusing to "compromise one inch with the inalienable right of breaking up ghetto areas," called for greater community input into the selection and construction process. For example, the American Jewish Committee, one of the most vocal organizations to support the scatter-site initiative, published a "Ten Point Guide to Scatter Site Public Housing" which called on cities to plan scatter site projects "with middle-class communities in such a way as to alleviate their fears." New York Federation of Reform Synagogues Statement on Forest Hills Housing Project, Memorandum to Seymour Samet and Alex Greendale, 16 December 1971; Joseph Willen to Mr. Bertram H. Gold, Executive Vice President, AJC, 9 December 1971; Statement Presented Before the Senate Committee on Housing and Urban Development, Scattered-Site Public Housing, Terence H. Benbow, Chairman, Subcommittee on Urban Development, 20 December 1971; "Guidelines to Scatter Site Public Housing" (working paper of the American Jewish Committee), Memorandum to Members of the AJC Housing Committee from Raphael D. Silver, 7 December 1971, Scatter Site Housing—Forest Hills, Box 2, Intergroup Relations and Social Action Department/Housing Collection, AJC Archives.

consultation with Forest Hills prior to the approval of the project, DeVoy asserted, some form of agreement could have been reached to satisfy both groups.⁴¹ DeVoy, who lived in Forest Hills himself, also stated that even the concessions made by the city to the community, including the clause that forty percent of the units be reserved for the elderly, "were made by the city without consulting us. *The city has never consulted us.*"⁴²

In seeking to portray themselves as a group which was denied the "right" of community control yet defended the poor nonetheless, the opponents of public housing in Forest Hills cultivated a strategy of victimhood. The victim image could be found in the claims that the opponents of the project received minimal support from other New Yorkers. Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt of Forest Hills stated that, as much as he objected to the project, he objected "more to the lack of sympathy from important people living outside of Forest Hills." Grunblatt was disturbed by how few leaders outside the neighbourhood stood up for the community and what he believed to be a most valid concern: "the security of that Queens neighbourhood."⁴³ The cultivation of victimhood was also present in some Forest Hills residents' public comparison of themselves to other frustrated or oppressed groups. As Jerry Birbach stated to a *Times* reporter, "Now I understand how the prisoners at Attica felt. The frustration led to violence. Rockefeller had his Attica. Lindsay has his Forest Hills."⁴⁴

More than simply the victims of Lindsay's current policies, however, the project's opponents identified themselves as a group who had long suffered at the hands of the city planners who appeared to ignore their concerns. As Sylvie Murray notes, concerns about

⁴¹ Vito Turso, "Of Picketing and Peace," *Long Island Press*, 29 November 1971.

⁴² Clark Whelton, "But Not Where I Live," *Village Voice*, 9 December 1971. Italics in original.

⁴³ Owen Moritz, "The Jewish Backlash: The People Fight and Warn Pols to Switch," *Daily News*, 9 September 1972.

⁴⁴ James F. Clarity, "A Reluctant Militant in Queens," *New York Times*, 22 November 1971.

the local decision-making process had also shaped the response of Queens residents to earlier government-planned integration initiatives. The local government's lack of consultation with residents and its lack of responsiveness to the community, Murray maintains, was "a major part of their opposition to the integration plans of the 1960s." The integration of Queens JHS 192, for example, was greeted with skepticism because of the "lack of appropriate communication between the Board [of Education] and parents," while residents opposed scatter site housing in Kew Hills because of Lindsay's "government by guesswork" and his failure to gather the "grass-root opinion he professes to seek but really shuns." While race did come into play in these discussions, equally important was the feeling that, after ignoring the neighbourhood of Queens for over two decades, city reformers had decided not to involve local communities in the decision-making process.⁴⁵

This feeling that the city was imposing its plans on the local population held a special resonance for many residents of Forest Hills who had previously witnessed the decline of their neighbourhoods. During the decade preceding the announcement of the scatter site plan, a large number of families came to this Queens neighbourhood from areas of Brooklyn and the Bronx that were undergoing racial transition and showing marked signs of poverty and decline. More significant was the fact that many elderly and middle-aged Forest Hills residents frequently argued that, in the 1950s and 1960s, they had been "forced out" of these neighbourhoods by the effects of city planning initiatives. Many residents of Forest Hills therefore saw themselves as "refugees" who had come to Queens to escape the decay of areas such as East New York and the Grand Concourse.

⁴⁵ Sylvie Murray, *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 155-165.

As journalist Murray Schumach noted in 1971, the opposition to the project on the part of many elderly Forest Hills residents was “rooted in memory,” specifically the memory of “the neighborhoods they built in the Bronx and Brooklyn, where they made friends, raised grandchildren, gathered on stoops and in parks, baby-sat for one another, went to bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings.” Their anger at the city stemmed from the fact these neighbourhoods had been transformed into “hostile slums” from which they “had to flee,” and now they could be “forced out” of Forest Hills by Lindsay and Golar. As one elderly woman stated, “Now they build a project. What will happen? Where will we go?”⁴⁶ “Frank W.,” a resident of 108th Street, declared, “We’re refugees from East New York. Came to Forest Hills to get away from what’s happening to these neighbourhoods. What happens? It follows me.”⁴⁷ Jill Jonnes also locates this feeling of being chased by poverty among the residents of Charlotte Street in the Bronx. As crime and drugs came to the neighbourhood in the 1950s, families began to move away because they were frightened by “the symptoms of poverty and social disintegration that they had struggled so hard to escape from on the Lower East Side and in their own lives on Charlotte Street.”⁴⁸

While many residents of these neighbourhoods attributed their decline to the “pathological” black and Puerto Rican families who began to arrive in the late 1950s, they also blamed the city itself for destroying these stable lower-middle-class enclaves. Residents castigated the city for building these public housing projects in their neighbourhood and essentially “dumping” poor minorities into their communities while

⁴⁶ Murray Schumach, “The Anguish of Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1971.

⁴⁷ Mancini and Gratz, “Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article I: A Clash of Values.”

⁴⁸ Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 222, 225-230.

doing little to improve the municipal services these families demanded. One homeowner living half a mile away from the project site had also lived until 1958 in East New York, an area of "modest homes" where "streets were quiet and clean, and one rarely heard of a violent crime in the neighborhood." This Forest Hills resident believed that "everything changed" with the construction of low-income housing in the early 1950s. The projects, he stated, were "the death knell of East New York; they turned the area into a crime-ridden jungle almost overnight." The same decline, he warned, would happen in Forest Hills, and "anywhere else low-income housing is forced upon the community."⁴⁹ The city, this man inferred, had already brought about the decline of one community in which he lived; now a project being built without his approval would bring crowding and increased crime and poverty to Forest Hills.

The visibility of the city's public housing projects, and thus residents' subsequent anger at their construction, was heightened by the fact that Moses had built these projects in concentrated pockets throughout the city, clearing large areas of land for their erection. For example, the New York City Housing Authority began building projects in the Bronx at the end of the Second World War and soon had constructed the largest concentration of public housing anywhere in the country: ninety-six public housing projects were built in the lower Bronx, totaling 12,486 apartments.⁵⁰ Moses had also selected Brownsville as another concentration of public housing, demonstrating his strategy of building in what he believed to be "marginal" neighbourhoods.⁵¹ While many residents saw the area as a working-class neighbourhood rather than a "slum," Moses described Brownsville as "a neighbourhood which needs to be cleared and can apparently be rehabilitated in no other

⁴⁹ Letter to the Editor, *Long Island Press*, 12 November 1972.

⁵⁰ Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 118, 119.

⁵¹ Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 108.

way.”⁵² As a 1956 series in the *World-Telegram and Sun* noted, “slum clearance” was clearing not only slums, but also “healthy pleasant residential and business sections—and not building anything to replace them.”⁵³

Further illustrating the top-down approach to urban redevelopment, throughout the process, neither Moses nor the NYCHA “bothered to consult with residents in the affected areas” regarding the construction of these projects. The public authority in fact did away with the “pretense” of local advisory committees, having already standardized tenant selection procedures and reduced buildings to austere standards that left little room for community facilities.⁵⁴ Moses’ construction of public housing in Brownsville thus embodied the New York approach, illustrating to residents the power of the state to reshape their neighbourhoods independently of public opinion.

Both Wendell Pritchett and Craig Steven Wilder have also explored the role of the municipal government in the transformation of neighbourhoods such as Brownsville from white ethnic enclaves to bastions of black and Latino poverty. While they consciously concentrated public housing in “changing neighbourhoods,” many local officials believed that the areas’ racial transitions “lessened or eliminated the need for new community facilities.” Increased spending on schools and other municipal services was seen by city officials as a “waste” since “all the worthy poor were leaving anyway.”⁵⁵ The growth of a non-white population in a given area of the city was therefore frequently followed by an exodus of public services, including sanitation and police presence. As the black and Puerto Rican population of Brooklyn, for example, became increasingly concentrated in

⁵² Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 119.

⁵³ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 1006.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 122.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

the northern section of the borough, new housing and municipal services were relocated to South Brooklyn. The ghettoization of these neighbourhoods was completed by the flight of local businesses which were “seduced by the thriving government-subsidized suburbs.” Many of those who fled areas such as North Brooklyn, Wilder argues, were chasing down government services as much as they were running from people of colour.⁵⁶

As a result of these practices even those residents of neighbourhoods such as Brownsville who had “rejoiced” at the arrival of public housing in the 1940s soon came to blame the projects for the decline of their neighbourhood.⁵⁷ Public housing projects, Pritchett notes, became “lightning rods” for attention of crime and urban decay; by the 1950s the perception that public housing meant neighbourhood decay was strong in the minds of the public.⁵⁸ Given both this perceived link between city policy and urban blight and the growing clamour for community control, the protests of Forest Hills residents over the city’s lack of consultation hardly comes as a surprise.

Perhaps no initiative better embodied Moses’ approach and his effect on white ethnic neighbourhoods than the construction of urban expressways, in particular the Cross-Bronx Expressway, built in the 1950s. When Moses first proposed the seven mile expressway in 1944, the idea seemed impossible to most New Yorkers, and many believed that it would never be built. How could anyone build a highway through seven miles of homes and apartment buildings?⁵⁹ By the end of the decade they would be well

⁵⁶ Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant With Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 196, 210-212.

⁵⁷ Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 114, 115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁹ Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 119; Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 292.

aware that Moses could in fact cut a swath through these neighbourhoods. Marshall Berman has described the destruction the Cross-Bronx Expressway brought to his neighbourhood, when for “ten years . . . the center of the Bronx was pounded and blasted and smashed.” By the late 1950s the “depopulated, economically depleted, emotionally shattered” Bronx was “ripe for all the spirals of urban blight.”⁶⁰ In addition to enacting this physical destruction, Moses was able to displace residents with minimal notice and no assurances of finding other housing. For example, in December of 1952 residents of East Tremont received letters informing them that they lived in the right-of-way of the Expressway and had ninety days to vacate.⁶¹ The management company ostensibly established to aid East Tremont’s families in finding other accommodations was of little help. As one woman stated, “They didn’t want to help you, they just wanted you out. And they wanted you out fast.”⁶²

In 1946 a group of civic, religious and veterans groups came together to form the Cross-Bronx Citizens’ Protective Association to oppose the potential displacement tens of thousands of families, demanding “Housing before Highways” and voicing their objection to public officials “cramming highways down the throats of our veterans.” Moses ignored these protests, forging ahead “unruffled and determined.”⁶³ As Robert Caro has noted, “Democracy had not solved the problem of building large-scale urban public works, so Moses solved it by ignoring democracy.”⁶⁴ As another observer noted,

⁶⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 292, 293.

⁶¹ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 859.

⁶² Quoted in *Ibid*, 879.

⁶³ Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 121.

⁶⁴ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 848.

“Moses paid no bit of attention to the public nor to a consensus. He just rode roughshod over the political system.”⁶⁵

While the residents of East Tremont were upset about the loss of their homes, they were equally unhappy with the way in which they had been uprooted by the city with little warning and apparently little concern for their welfare. As one observer noted, the manner in which Moses proceeded “had major impact on how the community reacted to change thereafter. He had left them with the feeling of being isolated, left alone—that no one cared, no one listened to them. When they tried to protest, they were powerless.”⁶⁶

These same feelings of powerlessness and disbelief were expressed by Berman, who, surveying the damage to the Bronx, described Moses as “the man who made all this possible,” the figure whose public works “helped bring my childhood to an end.”⁶⁷ Moses, who “seemed to glory in the devastation,” was clearly the villain in Berman’s memories.⁶⁸ More the simply a megalomaniacal individual, however, Moses also represented the far-reaching power of the state and its ability force out residents with steam shovels and bulldozers. The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway thus represented citizens’ growing disenchantment with the New York approach and the lack of accountability of city agencies.

In raising their criticisms of the site selection and planning process in Forest Hills, project opponents not only appropriated the rhetoric of community control, but also more broadly framed their arguments against scatter site housing as a condemnation of decades of undemocratic city planning processes. The absence of community control in Forest

⁶⁵ Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*, 125.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 892.

⁶⁷ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 291.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 293.

Hills, they argued, not only smacked of Lindsay's hypocrisy, but also represented the city's continued refusal to consult with local residents. Once again, they believed, the city had refused to offer community members a say in a public works initiative that would potentially harm their neighbourhood. In this view, the right of members of a community to have their say in a social engineering scheme which could potentially harm their neighbourhood had been violated by an undemocratic local government.

The anger of Forest Hills residents with what they saw as the city's constant construction of public housing in their neighbourhoods without their approval indicates that their protests against the scatter site reflected their frustration with the manner in which the city proceeded as much as it did their antipathy toward African Americans or liberals. Residents of the community were quite simply fed up with the style of municipal government which had drastically reshaped their neighbourhoods over the past twenty years, arguing that they were the victims of past city planning initiatives as well of Lindsay's current use of these same undemocratic methods.

Forest Hills residents' construction of a narrative of victimization was also particularly apparent in their frequent allegations that they were the victims of longstanding institutional anti-Semitism.⁶⁹ Throughout the battle over public housing in Forest Hills, opponents of the project repeatedly accused Lindsay and Housing Authority Chairman Simeon Golar of blatant anti-Jewish sentiments. Protestors at the construction site, for example, carried picket signs which bore slogans such as "Lindsay a Modern-

⁶⁹ Podair has argued that the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis marked the complete Jewish embrace of whiteness, since New York City's Jews saw themselves less as an ethnic group and more wholly as "white." The school decentralization crisis, Podair states, marked "the Jewish passage from racial ambiguity to unmistakable white identity;" religion and ethnicity paled before the central black/white divide. This contention is not supported by the actions of Forest Hills' Jewish population, which in fact maintained a distinctly Jewish and ethnic identity and in fact asserted this identity in its fight against the project. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 144.

Day Hitler!" "Down With Adolf Lindsay and His Project," and "Impeach Adolf Lindsay."⁷⁰ According to those Jews who wished to block construction of the project, City Hall had targeted Forest Hills for the scatter site experiment specifically because it was Jewish neighbourhood, and therefore had a more "liberal" reputation. A QJCC bulletin, for example, denounced the selection of middle-class Jewish neighbourhoods as "sites for the City's social engineering experiments" as "both purposeful and cynical" stating that politicians "have calculated that Jewish communities are not expected to resist or react."⁷¹ It was no coincidence, a number of Jewish community groups argued, that of the dozen or so scatter site projects currently on the books in New York City, the majority were located in neighbourhoods with Jewish majorities. As Rabbi Maurice D. Simcke of the Howard Beach Jewish Center stated, "It strikes me as tragic that all middle class areas selected for low income projects are Jewish areas."⁷² Queens Jewish Community Council director Alvin Lashinsky also argued that his organization had become active in the housing dispute "because the City has made the question of scatter-site housing into a Jewish issue in this City," having only pursued the housing initiative in the middle-class Jewish areas of Forest Hills, Lindenwood and Flushing-Hillcrest.⁷³

FHRA president Jerry Birbach also complained that the city had demonstrated its lack of respect for the Jewish community by choosing the Jewish Sabbath to serve a court

⁷⁰ Goodman, "The Battle of Forest Hills: Who's Ahead?" 8.

⁷¹ Queens Jewish Community Council bulletin, October 1971, Scatter Site Housing—Forest Hills, Box 2, Intergroup Relations and Social Action Department/Housing Collection, AJC Archives. In addition to these local residents and community leaders, Jewish Sociologist Nathan Glazer, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, "stated bluntly" that the city had selected the Queens neighbourhood because it believed that "Jews would not fight against it, although Italians or Wasps or other national groups would rise up in anger." Glazer cited in "Fight of Queens Jews Gains Momentum," *The Jewish Post and Opinion*, 7 January 1972.

⁷² Howard Reiser, "City's Out to Destroy Jewish Communities, Rabbi Charges," *Long Island Press*, 14 October 1971.

⁷³ Lashinsky, "From the Queens Jewish Community Council," 25-26.

order barring Forest Hills residents from interfering with construction of the project. Birbach stated that this move represented "an affront to the community, to the Jewish community . . . They call us racists. They're racists."⁷⁴ The FHRA also contended that this anti-Semitic bias had existed since the project's inception, claiming the had city rushed approval of the project through in December of 1966 by holding the final hearing on the matter after sunset on the Sabbath, "thereby depriving many Jewish opponents of the project the right to speak."⁷⁵ Birbach would also directly accuse Simeon Golar of anti-Semitism in a face-to-face confrontation, demanding of the NYCHA chairman, "Where did you study, with Goebbels?"⁷⁶

In addition to leveling these charges at the current administration, those Jews who protested against the project portrayed themselves as the longstanding victims of the city's disastrous experiments in social engineering and urban redevelopment in Jewish communities. The neighbourhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn from which many Forest Hills residents had fled were in fact Jewish neighbourhoods; as the population fled to Queens, businesses owned by local Jews had collapsed while synagogues lost their congregations and had no choice but to close. Those who had been "forced out" of these neighbourhoods saw themselves not only as refugees of urban decay, but more specifically as *Jewish* refugees. Rabbi Simcke, for example, stated that the Jews living in Forest Hills "are refugees who have fled from other parts of the city where an influx of low income groups has caused increases in crime, violence and rapid deterioration." According to Simcke, the city's Jews had moved from Crown Heights, Brownsville, the

⁷⁴ "City Restrains Site Protestors," *New York Post*, 20 November 1971.

⁷⁵ Michael Iachetta, "Residents to Appeal Project Ruling," *Daily News*, 23 September 1971.

⁷⁶ Michael T. Kaufman, "'Bigot' and 'Liar' Mark TV Clash on Forest Hills," *New York Times*, 22 November 1971.

Grand Concourse, East Flatbush and East New York, "all of which were once thriving Jewish communities," abandoning their homes and institutions to "start from scratch in a safe area of the city." With the construction of the scatter site project, Simcke concluded, Forest Hills' Jews "are being told de facto that there is no place left for them in the city."⁷⁷

Alvin Lashinsky of the Queens Jewish Community Council also voiced his fear that the project would lead to the erosion of the "Jewish character" of the neighbourhood. Based on the recent decline of a number of Jewish neighbourhoods in New York, Lashinsky stated, the city's Jews had "good reason to believe that this central area of Queens will be transformed from a middle-class, contributing, tax-paying community to another blighted area dependent on federal, state and city money."⁷⁸ Lashinsky's organization also issued a bulletin on "The Hottest Issue in Queens County," stating that low-income housing projects had a well-known history of "area deterioration, crime, fear—and the ultimate flight of the middle class." One only had to look to Jewish neighbourhoods in the South Bronx, Crown Heights, Queensbridge and the Rockaway, the bulletin warned, to see evidence of this decline. How many more Jewish communities, the QJCC demanded, would be "obliterated" before the city's Jews became convinced that the "syndrome of flight" was very real and would happen again?⁷⁹

Perhaps the most striking example of this cultivation of a strategy of victimhood was the project opponents' use of allusions to the Holocaust in voicing their objections to scatter site housing. One resident, for example, likened the neighbourhood to "Paris

⁷⁷ Reiser, "City's Out to Destroy Jewish Communities, Rabbi Charges."

⁷⁸ Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article I; A Clash of Values."

⁷⁹ Queens Jewish Community Council bulletin, October 1971.

under the Nazi siege.”⁸⁰ Opponents of the project at times referred to public housing projects as “concentration camps” for elderly Jews who were trapped in their old neighbourhoods and thus fell prey to theft and violence. On other occasions Holocaust survivors were brought forward to testify at protests and public meetings that they had escaped one horror only to face oppression and violence in America. In December of 1971, Paul Cowan of the *Village Voice* interviewed an elderly man and woman living in Forest Hills. The husband and wife were refugees of Romania who had fled Russia for Newark, Greenwich Village and finally Forest Hills. As Cowan stated, the two “had been chased all their lives—first by Hitler, then by the Communists, then (to a lesser degree of course) by blacks in Newark and Italians in the Village.” Articulating the common concern that Jews in New York would soon have nowhere left to go, the woman asked Cowan, “Do you think we’ll all be chased from New York, too?”⁸¹

This same interview, however, would also expose another important dimension of this victim status, namely the desire to stand and fight the project’s construction. The Jews of Forest Hills did not see themselves as passive victims, but rather as a group whose rights the city had ignored in the past, but who were now determined to take on the city and win. When Cowan joined the couple at a protest at the project’s construction site, the husband alluded to what he felt were the implications of the project for Jews in New York. Linking the potential “refugees” of Forest Hills to those who had faced Nazi concentration camps, this man stated, “You see we’re trying to protect ourselves here. I wish the Jews had done the same thing in Europe.”⁸² This use of the Holocaust to call for resistance to the city could also be found in the remarks of three concentration camp

⁸⁰ Edward Hershey, “Protests Still Echo in Forest Hills,” *Newsday*, 27 August 1972.

⁸¹ Paul Cowan, “‘Them’ in Forest Hills.”

⁸² *Ibid.*

survivors who openly criticized John Lindsay in a November 1971 interview with the *Long Island Press*. One of the three, Eugene Admoni, stated "For three years I was in a Nazi concentration camp. . . How could I possibly have hate against anyone [sic]? All we want to do is live safely." Here Admoni used the Holocaust to underscore his tolerance and to dismiss any claims that he wished to keep poor blacks out of his neighbourhood. Admoni also took issue with those who would criticize the protests on the part of the project opponents: "Why can't we demonstrate?" he demanded. In his next breath, he answered his critics with a much more loaded analogy to his experience in Europe, drawing a direct parallel between the Holocaust and scatter site housing in Jewish communities: "Must we be led to the slaughterhouse like in the concentration camps without resisting?" Admoni demanded. "All the low-income projects are going up in Jewish neighbourhoods!"⁸³

It is apparent in the remarks both by Admoni and the man interviewed by Cowan that the Jews of Forest Hills did not believe that they were powerless, but instead invoked the Holocaust and the image of "being led to the slaughterhouse" in order to call for strong resistance against scatter site housing. As one working-class resident of Queens asserted, while Lindsay had deliberately selected Forest Hills to initiate the scatter site experiment because he "thought it was a soft-touch community and the liberal Jews wouldn't object" the neighbourhood's Jews were determined to fight back, "and boy, we're giving it to him good."⁸⁴ Michael Staub has investigated this use of the Holocaust to argue for Jewish self-interest and maintains that the events of Nazi Germany have held shifting meanings for American Jews in matters of racial politics. By the early 1960s,

⁸³Howard Reiser, "Forest Hills to Fight On," *Long Island Press*, 21 November 1971.

⁸⁴ Mancini and Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article IV: Choosing A Site," *New York Post*, 27 April 1972.

Staub states, a standard analogy had emerged linking Nazism in Europe to the oppressive racism in the United States; the “lesson” of the Holocaust taught Jews to fight racism in all its forms and Jews therefore constructed involvement in the civil rights movement as a “properly Jewish activity.”⁸⁵ By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, leading Jews began to use the Holocaust to denigrate those Jewish radicals who continued to support militant blacks, arguing against “special privileges” for minorities. In this new view, “the key lesson of the Holocaust was that Jews needed above all to fight for themselves.”⁸⁶ While liberal Jews in the 1950s had believed that “the ghetto is a form of concentration camp” for poor blacks,⁸⁷ New York Jews in the 1970s saw housing projects that allegedly imported ghetto conditions into their neighbourhoods as concentration camps for their own people. Although Forest Hills’ Jews did not tend to frame their struggle in opposition to black demands (and, as we have seen, even appropriated these demands), they nonetheless demonstrated this use of the Holocaust to articulate the need to fight for their own interests. This concern with self-interest reflected a new Jewish assertiveness that was bolstered by Israel’s success in the Six Day War of 1967. As Melani McAlistar notes, the Arab-Israeli war had “an extraordinary transformative effect” for many American Jews. The war served to galvanize Jewish identity in the US, as “Jewishness became more important, and identification with Israel became an important aspect of Jewishness.”⁸⁸ While Forest Hills’ Jews believed that they had been targeted for their

⁸⁵ Michael E. Staub, “‘Negroes Are Not Jews’: Race, Holocaust Consciousness, and the Rise of Jewish Neoconservatism,” *Radical History Review*, 75 (1999), 6-8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. While Staub uses this argument to explore Jewish neoconservatism and anti-liberalism, his discussion takes on new depth when considered in the context of Forest Hills Jews’ appropriation of liberal rhetoric and black protest.

⁸⁷ Nat Hentoff, *The New Equality* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 81 as cited in *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁸ Melani McAlistar, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 111-112.

liberal and even meek reputation, they argued, they were now determined to stand up for themselves.

This assertiveness could be found in the remarks of prominent members of the Jewish community who denounced the scatter site plan. Jews must fight back, Rabbi Simcke asserted, because, "We've worked too hard to lose it all now. There is no place left to run." The members of the Forest Hills community "will not be driven out," the rabbi declared. "Jews are sick and tired of being taken advantage of."⁸⁹ While he acknowledged that Jews had a long tradition of welcoming "all groups to live among us," Alvin Lashinsky instructed Mayor Lindsay not to "ask us to place our community's existence in jeopardy for ill conceived schemes which have failed over and over again." Lashinsky stated that in New York City, the role of Jews as a "chosen people" amounted to the city "constantly choosing us over and over again for their experiments in social engineering." The city's Jews had watched as their old neighbourhoods that "crumbled away," but, Lashinsky asserted, "We are resolved that we shall not allow another Jewish community to be sacrificed in the political game of urban confrontation."⁹⁰ This conviction to stand fast and fight back as Jews could also be found in the remarks of Democratic Representative Edward Koch, a Jewish liberal congressman who increasingly embraced the cause of Forest Hills. Koch agreed that City Hall anticipated that the community's Jews "would be easier victims, that they wouldn't fight back. Well, it's another six-day war for us and we're going to win!"⁹¹

⁸⁹ Reiser, "City's Out to Destroy Jewish Communities, Rabbi Charges."

⁹⁰ Lashinsky, "From the Queens Jewish Community Council," 25-26.

⁹¹ Mancini and Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article IV: Choosing A Site."

It must also be noted that, in raising these demands to fight back and stand up for their own interests, the Jewish opponents' of the project again appeared to draw on the African American rhetoric they are often believed to have rejected under the white backlash or the Jewish neoconservatism most often associated with this reading of the Holocaust. This assertiveness on the part of Forest Hill's Jews did not amount to their denigration of the right of communities, in particular minority communities, to have their voices heard, but rather saw them borrow from these demands. As one member of a Queens organization which opposed the project stated, the communities "that holler get the most. Well, we're starting to holler."⁹² Instead, the Jewish nationalism that occurred in the age of black nationalism is further evidence of white ethnics' borrowing from African Americans. As Gary Gerstle notes, the "declaration that one's particularist culture—black, Hispanic, Native America,, Jewish, Italian—was a more authentic and satisfying identity" than a traditionally "American" one is indicative of the spread of black nationalist influence in the 1960s. The example of black nationalism was thus "quickly emulated by a variety of other groups, including those, such as white ethnics, usually regarded as black nationalism's diehard foes." As Gerstle argues, while white ethnics have often been portrayed by scholars (and themselves) as defending American traditions from racial militants, this focus on the antagonistic relationship between blacks and white ethnics "obscures the degree to which these antagonists were watching and imitating each other in the 1960s and beyond."⁹³ Once again, opponents of the scatter site project did not attempt to discredit black demands and the liberal system that attended to

⁹² Mancini and Gratz, "Scattersite Housing: The Battle of Forest Hills, Article IV: Choosing A Site."

⁹³ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Democracy in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 313, 329.

them, but rather appropriated their methods to gain such rewards for themselves, the “victims.”

The white “backlash” described by authors such as Rieder and Greenberg certainly did play a role in the battle over scatter site housing in Forest Hills. Neighbourhood residents on more than once occasion demonstrated their apprehension toward poor African Americans and their resentment toward liberal politicians who they believed were endangering the American middle class. Indeed, the perceived link between the arrival of poor minorities and the decline of one’s neighbourhood was often indicative of this racially charged anti-liberalism. To conclude that the Forest Hills controversy was only a manifestation of this backlash, however, is to tell only half of the story. Residents of this Queens neighbourhood did not reject blacks and liberals out of hand, as can be seen in their appropriation of the discourses of both liberal poverty theory and local African American protest. The opponents of the Forest Hills project instead saw themselves as the victims of both the “New York approach” to politics and its accompanying decades of anti-Semitic redevelopment policies. The construction of public housing in Forest Hills without community approval, they argued, was one more example of an undemocratic city chasing Jews out of their stable neighbourhoods. Rather than a purely antagonistic response to African Americans or liberal politicians, the “backlash” in Forest Hills was therefore rooted in responses to a style of government, and was shaped by a newly emerging and more assertive Jewish nationalism. The city’s response to this opposition in Forest Hills, with its employment of accusations of racism, would serve to challenge these claims to victim status. Lindsay and Golar’s attempts to

discredit the project opponents would thus exacerbate tensions with the already outraged community.

CHAPTER THREE:

Public Allegations of Bigotry and Polarization: The Use of Race in the Scatter Site Controversy

In June of 1971, New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Chairman Simeon Golar used the dedication of Latimer Gardens, a low-income housing project in Flushing, Queens, as an opportunity to publicly condemn those who opposed a similar project in nearby Forest Hills. At this ceremony, Golar very pointedly read from the "Flushing Remonstrance," a 1657 manifesto drawn up by the citizens of Flushing as a response to the colonial administration's orders to suppress Quakers. The Remonstrance called for an end to religious persecution, declaring both the existence of a "brotherhood of man" and the right of "free egress and regress unto our Towne and houses" for all who "come in love unto us." Golar then urged Forest Hills residents to follow the example of their ancestors who had aspired to create "the cradle of American democracy" in this corner of New York. Beyond simply reminding Queens residents of their proud history of tolerance, however, Golar argued that those who wished to block construction of the housing project in Forest Hills were in fact guilty of the same prejudices decried in this historic document. Although this declaration against persecution had occurred over 300 years earlier, Golar stated, "Now in 1971, in the nearby community of Forest Hills, the voice of discrimination is heard again." While the contemporary public forces of

oppression were “[m]ore subtle this time” and attempted to mask their intentions “in a hundred subterfuges,” the head of the city’s housing agency argued, many of those who spoke out against public housing in their community did so in “the very voices to which the ‘Flushing Remonstrance’ was addressed many generations ago.” Quite simply, Golar concluded, the protests in Forest Hills represented “those new voices of an old hatred,” and he went on to label the project’s foes as opponents of liberty and democracy, “those who would dishonor the magnificent traditions of this country and of our city.”¹

This very public criticism by City Hall of those who opposed the low-income housing project in Forest Hills would not be an isolated incident. Throughout the struggle against public housing in this Queens neighbourhood, city officials such as Golar responded to protests against scatter site housing with publicly-aired allegations that the neighbourhood’s opposition was motivated by bigotry. Those in Forest Hills who fought so ardently against the project, the Lindsay administration inferred or directly stated on more than one occasion, simply wished to keep African Americans out of their predominantly white and Jewish community. City officials were not mistaken in identifying racism as a motivating factor in this local opposition; residents of Forest Hills on several occasions made it abundantly clear that their apprehension toward the project was rooted in their fear of poor and allegedly pathological African Americans. Moreover, these officials were not the only group to regard the opposition to public housing in Forest Hills as racist. The NAACP, for example, frequently criticized opponents of the project for their desire to preserve the racial homogeneity of their white, middle-class neighbourhood. What is so striking about this case is not the fact that Lindsay and Golar

¹ Tina Ferguson, “Flushing Precedent Cited for Forest Hills Protesters,” *Long Island Press*, 9 June 1971.

perceived this opposition as having a racial and even racist subtext, but rather their willingness to publicly castigate a significant number of the mayor's constituents as "bigots."

These allegations of racism on the part of officials such as Golar were rooted in part in the framework of moralistic social engineering through which members of Lindsay's administration viewed the actions of those in Forest Hills. According to this ideology, scatter site housing in Forest Hills represented a moral imperative; any opposition to this plan therefore must run counter to this morality. Following this line of reasoning, the city interpreted claims of undemocratic proceedings, for example, as a thinly disguised desire to preserve the racial homogeneity of an almost exclusively white neighbourhood. Furthermore, because the scatter site plan was deemed to be morally necessary and a potential deterrent for urban unrest, it could not be allowed to fail in the face of white middle class protest. The Lindsay Administration's allegations of bigotry therefore appear to have been motivated by strategic considerations as well as ideology; the city actively implemented these accusations of racism in an attempt to discredit any and all opposition to the project. Assured of its own moral superiority and the plan's usefulness in preventing further inner-city riots, the city employed the language of racism to publicly dismiss the objectives of its opponents, undermining their arguments with accusations of intolerance. In this manner city officials could truncate any discussions with groups such as the Forest Hills Residents Association (FHRA), thereby actively preempting what they saw as attempts to undermine their reformist goals. The Lindsay Administration, which had done its best to sidestep issues of race during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis, now actively injected race into the debate surrounding scatter site

housing. In a somewhat paradoxical move whose repercussions would prove difficult to contain, Lindsay and Golar used race conscious politics and the language of racism to press for integration and an ostensibly colour-blind community. In addition, his public condemnation of a number of constituents may further indicate Lindsay's use of the "New York approach" adopted by Moses. The manner in which Lindsay had proceeded in ensuring the project's approval suggests that city officials may have employed these labels because they felt that they could, anticipating no significant challenged from local neighbourhoods which had been traditionally powerless in the face of public authorities.

These officials did not hold a monopoly on using race to bolster their position, however, as opponents of the project repeatedly denied these accusations, hoping to prove their tolerance of African Americans, and arguing that they held no real objections to the principle of integration. Those whites who fought against the project therefore pointed to African Americans throughout Queens who, expressing a similar antipathy toward welfare recipients, also voiced their strong objections to the Forest Hills project. Give their alliance with middle-income blacks—what they saw as "proof" of their own tolerance—neighbourhood residents voiced deep resentment at these charges of bigotry, arguing that they reflected the administration's moralistic condescension toward outer-borough residents. Opponents of the project accused Lindsay and Golar of intentionally introducing the issue of race into the struggle in an attempt to polarize the situation and discredit their position. Moreover, the city's condemnation of project opponents as bigots served as a symbolic denial of the legitimacy of Forest Hills residents' status as victims of anti-Semitism and totalitarian social engineering. Project opponents were dismayed to see their own conception of themselves as innocent citizens whose rights had been

trammled replaced with an image in which they were the offenders against democracy. This frustration with what they saw as city officials' dogmatic adherence to a moral ideology which seemed to deny the significance of their own struggles would only deepen the resentment that the community's white ethnics already felt toward their local government, ensuring that the battle over Forest Hills became even more heated.

Given the racial tensions created by the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school decentralization crisis described in the previous chapter, it would appear somewhat plausible to conclude that the Forest Hills controversy was simply a manifestation of Jewish retribution for alleged anti-Semitism on the part of the city's African American population. Due to the hostilities that had erupted between the two groups and the hysteria over the supposedly anti-Jewish rhetoric of the African American Teachers' Association (ATA), it would hardly seem surprising that some resentment lingered only three years after the conflict first erupted.² Jewish antipathy toward African Americans, poor blacks in particular, was certainly present in Forest Hills. While examples of a racialized resentment of welfare recipients receiving "something for nothing" have already been discussed, those who opposed the scatter site project also raised broader objections to the prospect of racial integration through social engineering, and, as a result, racial tensions ran high through the conflict over low-income housing in Queens. Some opponents of scatter site housing revealed their hostilities toward blacks with statements

² Jonathan Rieder has argued that Canarsie's vicious opposition to school busing in 1972 represented "deferred white vengeance for the New York school crisis of 1968," while both Jerald E. Podair and Daniel Walkowitz point to the lingering racial and class tensions in the wake of school decentralization. Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 216; Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 4-8, 16-17, 144, 165; Walkowitz, *Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 16-17.

such as “[w]hites want to be with whites and blacks want to be with blacks,” as well as with accounts of muggings and beatings by “colored guys.”³ A raucous Community Planning Commission hearing in September of 1972 was marked by “hours of arguments, threats and counter threats with very heavy racial overtones.” On more than one occasion during this meeting, police were forced to step in between whites and blacks who “engaged in name-calling and some pushing and shoving.”⁴ The 1972 groundbreaking ceremony of the new subway line in Queens also saw a scuffle break out between several black women on hand for the ceremony and a group of whites who had come to shout anti-project slogans at John Lindsay. The two sides exchanged shouts of “Go back to Forest Hills where you belong!” and “We’ll stay in Forest Hills if you stay in South Jamaica!”⁵

In addition to these public confrontations, the overwhelmingly white, middle-class community of Forest Hills exhibited a more subtle fear of poor African Americans by regarding them as unmistakably pathological. Even though these fears of the poor were voiced by African Americans themselves, prejudice and discrimination could be found in whites’ arguments that an influx of poor blacks would automatically lead to soaring crime rates. Neighbourhood residents repeatedly voiced their fears of the increased crime rate that an influx of low-income and “multiproblem” families would bring. When white middle- and working-class residents spoke of their fears that increased crime would accompany the presence of low-income housing, they were therefore

³ Schumach, “Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1971; Francis X. Clines, “Forest Hills Compromise Scored at Hearing,” *New York Times*, 21 September 1972).

⁴ Irving Long, “Raucous Session Leaves Forest Hills Issue Up in the Air,” *Long Island Press*, 21 September 1972.

⁵ Frank Maza, “Fight Erupts at Ground-Breaking for Subway,” *Daily News*, 16 August 1972.

speaking in a thinly disguised racial subtext. Rather than simply being afraid of the poor, they were afraid of the *black* poor. The simple fact of the matter was that, due to highway construction, urban renewal, suburbanization and the beginnings of urban deindustrialization, by the late 1960s the majority of residents of urban public housing were African American. Further, the notorious projects of St. Louis, Newark, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago were all overwhelmingly black. The poverty and welfare dependence that would supposedly bring crime and other social problems to Forest Hills therefore had a largely black racial profile. As Mario Cuomo noted, the inductive reasoning of many in Forest Hills ran as follows:

Welfare and Blacks are generally responsible for a great deal of crime; there are Welfare and Blacks in projects; there will be a great deal of crime in and around the project.⁶

This assumption could be found in the dubious profession of racial tolerance from an elderly woman who stated that, when the project came to Forest Hills, “they’re going to kill us,” adding that “they” meant “only a small proportion of the blacks who mugged and beat the elderly.”⁷ As one man who met with Cuomo at the Borough Hall exclaimed, “My wife will be raped and mugged and you expect me to reasonable!”⁸ The comments of this man not only linked poor African Americans with violent crime, but also conjured up the longstanding and deeply racist image of the black male rapist preying upon white women. The fears of crime and violence that many in Forest Hills voiced were therefore not race-neutral, but rather aimed at poor African Americans.

⁶ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 49.

⁷ Murray Schumach, “The Anguish of Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1971.

⁸ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 57.

This fear of poor blacks also revealed itself in the demand that the public housing project in Forest Hills be reserved mainly (or even exclusively) for the elderly. Nash Kestenbaum, president of the National Young Israel Movement, for example, argued that the project in Forest Hills should be constructed as a six-story garden apartment that would only accept only aged tenants. A strategy of housing senior citizens while excluding families, he felt, was "the only way to ensure the success of scatter site housing in the future."⁹ Jerry Birbach likewise told Cuomo that the only project acceptable to him would be one of garden apartments for the elderly.¹⁰ The move to increase the proportion of elderly tenants in public housing was often less a product of altruism than a ploy to reduce the number of poor minority group members that would supposedly turn public housing into a vertical ghetto. While Cuomo noted that this strategy was designed to avoid the "problems" that came with low-income families with children, namely a strain on local schools and the threat of vandalism and crime, in truth the opponents of the project who pressed for housing for the elderly were also pressing for a lower number of poor blacks.¹¹ As Rutgers University economist and public housing expert George Sternlieb noted, the designation of a certain percentage of project units for the elderly was actually "a tactic often used to soften opposition" and appease white "fury" given that the elderly who resided in public housing were "usually white."¹² In an almost

⁹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁰ Ibid, 82.

¹¹ Cuomo, "Report to Honorable John V. Lindsay," in *Forest Hills Diary*, 190.

¹² Sternlieb also argued that, even when the character of the poor and the fear of crime were not publicly expressed, the subtext of race was nonetheless present. For example, the arguments against the overcrowding of schools and local facilities that dominated the earliest protests against public housing in Forest Hills, much like the issues of class masked a deeper fear of African-Americans. Sternlieb called the debate over population density and taxation increases the "Dance of the Seven Veils." If one removed the veils, the "true reason" for opposition to public housing became clear: "People do not want blacks in their neighborhoods." David K. Shipler, "Housing for the Poor: A Typical Reaction," *New York Times*, 19 November 1971.

verbatim repetition of this observation, Simeon Golar also stated that “communities are always more amenable to projects for the elderly—partly because the elderly are usually white.”¹³ The desire to designate public housing as exclusively for senior citizens thus belied the element of racial prejudice and fear of lower-income black families that was present, if somewhat masked, in the hostility to scatter site housing in Forest Hills.

Despite this evidence which would appear to cast this white protest largely as a function of racial retribution, the opposition to public housing in Forest Hills was characterized by repeated denials of racism. Opponents of public housing in Forest Hills reiterated time and again that their objections to scatter site housing were not rooted in racial prejudice. Protesters at one of the many rallies at the project’s construction site, for example, “in almost every instance . . . stressed that they were not against blacks,” pointing out that they lived alongside many African-Americans who were “fine neighbors.”¹⁴ A number of letters to local newspapers expressing opposition to the project or criticisms of Lindsay and Golar began with the caveat that the writer was in no way prejudiced against blacks or any other minority, indicating that their authors anticipated charges of bigotry that they wished to disprove as quickly as possible.¹⁵ One Flushing resident who stated that there was nothing “contradictory or hypocritical” in supporting civil rights while opposing scatter site housing also asserted that “middle-income Negro families have become part of the Forest Hills community with no complaint or opposition.”¹⁶ Jerry Birbach himself declared “We’re not racist or bigots,

¹³ Jonathan Kandell, “Opposition to Scatter Site Housing Transcends Racial and Economic Lines,” *New York Times*, 6 February 1972.

¹⁴ Schumach, “Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project.”

¹⁵ Letter to the Editor, *New York Post*, 1 December 1971.

¹⁶ Letter to the Editor, *Long Island Press*, 10 December 1971.

but we do believe that low-income housing leads to crime.”¹⁷ Joseph DeVoy, Chairman of Community Board No. 6, which represented Forest Hills, also refuted allegations that the opposition to public housing was in any way racist.¹⁸ In addition, this denial of racism was echoed by many of those who opposed public housing developments slated for other areas of Queens, including Woodside and Flushing; residents of these neighbourhoods for the most part insisted that they were “in favor . . . of racial integration.”¹⁹

These denials of racial prejudice were hardly surprising given the liberal political context in which opponents of public housing operated. While civil rights legislation made government-sponsored segregation a legal impossibility, and therefore a pointless demand, the ideals of racial liberalism held by those in power in New York City no doubt influenced many residents to downplay the issue of race. Given the fact that local government under John Lindsay was committed to integration and endorsed the liberal ideology that gave rise to the scatter site program, it would seem unwise, to say the least, to publicly argue for racial homogeneity. In addition, any overt professions of racial bigotry would surely undermine Forest Hills residents’ claims to victim status. As many supporters of the project who accused the FHRA of racism were quick to point out, there was an inherent hypocrisy in the fact that those who claimed to be victims of prejudice also argued for the exclusion of others on the basis of race.²⁰

Despite the tactical advantages of these denials, however, these professions of tolerance also raise the possibility that the reluctance to appear at all prejudiced went

¹⁷ Patrick W. Sullivan, “The Fight Over Scatter Site,” *Long Island Press*, 16 April 1972.

¹⁸ Murray Schumach, “City Approves Low-Income Co-op for Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 27 October, 1972.

¹⁹ Roberts, “Two Housing Plans Draw Protest,” 43.

²⁰ As one columnist noted, New York’s Jews, more than any other whites, “should be able to understand what it is to be persecuted, what is to be discriminated against, what it is to be denied the right where you want to live.” Hal Burton, “What’s Happening in Forest Hills?” *Newsday*, 22 November 1971.

beyond merely the strategic. Some whites in Forest Hills appeared to genuinely believe that they were racially tolerant; the proof was in the fact that they had accepted middle-class blacks and other minorities into their neighbourhoods. The opponents of the project therefore attempted to extricate the issue of class from that of race, arguing that the middle class of any race would be welcomed while poverty, whatever its racial profile, would be accompanied by anti-social behaviour. Queens Borough President and staunch project critic Donald Manes stated that "The fear expressed in Forest Hills is expressed in middle-class communities throughout America . . . no matter what the racial or ethnic composition of its citizens."²¹ As a Mrs. Marion Breuer of Forest Hills claimed while she marched at the construction site, she had "lived with colored people, Puerto Rican people, Indian people and Chinese people, and they were lovely." Her sole grievance with the project, she insisted, was the fact that it would bring "welfare cases," and thus crime, to her neighbourhood.²² Generalizations based on "class" thus seemed perfectly acceptable in Forest Hills as long as one steered clear of issues of racial exclusivity.

In addition to citing fears of crime, opponents of the project also argued that their objections to the three twenty-four story buildings would prove too much of a strain for the area's municipal services. The project's opponents maintained that Queens was already too crowded, and a population increase of more than a thousand people, all of whom would be concentrated in a small area, would only further strain municipal services, including schools, sanitation and transportation, which were already operating at full capacity. As one woman wrote to the *New York Post*, "What is to be gained by

²¹ John Franz and Howard Reiser, "Manes Blasts Project," *Long Island Press*, 7 December 1971.

²² Howard Reiser, "Forest Hills to Fight On," *Long Island Press*, 21 November 1971. This sentiment of class before race was also expressed by Mario Cuomo, who insisted that if the project were to be luxury apartments for *middle-income* blacks, "I don't think anybody would move out." Martin Tolchin, "Forest Hills Compromise Is Assailed by Both Sides," *New York Times*, 27 July 1972.

adding to this already overcrowded condition? There aren't enough schools for the present population. How awful to contemplate the addition of thousands more people."²³ Given that the city would implement this plan without consulting with the community, the arguments surrounding local services further illustrate residents' frustration with what they saw as shoddy treatment of local neighbourhoods. Louis D. Laurino, former head of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, asserted that residents of Queens "have always been regarded as provincial, parochial, rural. We were the stepchild, the borough of cemeteries."²⁴ Residents thus maintained that while they bore the brunt of municipal developments such as expressways and low-income housing, Queens' streets, schools, sewers, and safety were continually neglected. Echoing their assertion that they were the "forgotten man," they argued that "We are the forgotten borough."²⁵ The fact that the city implemented this plan without consulting area residents and then pressed ahead with it despite their subsequent objections represented to Forest Hills residents not evidence of their own racism, but "proof" that the Lindsay administration would only ignore their concerns.

Opponents of the project also attempted to lend further credibility to their position by aligning themselves with local blacks who also voiced their apprehension toward scatter site housing. Much of Queens' African American middle class opposed the project, a fact which the community used to bolster its claims that its actions were not

²³ Letter to the Editor, *New York Post*, 29 November 1971. A letter to the American Jewish Committee also characterized the transportation system, schools, and shopping amenities as "totally inadequate" while stating that Forest Hills already had one of the highest population densities in the city. Letter from Steven L. Cohen to Samuel Rabinove, Esq., Director, Legal Division, American Jewish Committee, 24 September 1971, Scatter Site Housing—Forest Hills, Box 2, Intergroup Relations and Social Action Department/Housing Collection, AJC Archives.

²⁴ Murray Schumach, "Queens: Bastion of the Middle Class," *New York Times*, 10 April 1972.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

racially motivated.²⁶ African American opponents of the Forest Hills project invoked many of the same arguments against scatter site housing as did whites, focusing on crime, welfare, municipal services and neighbourhood decline, and making references to their own struggles out of the inner city. For example, many black homeowners claimed to be “even more concerned” than whites that their community would allegedly face neglect if a large number of welfare clients were to move into the area. The Jewish residents of Forest Hills who were “refugees” of other neighbourhoods argued that they had moved to Queens through “the dint of their own efforts,” pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.²⁷ It was this hard work and struggle out of poverty, they argued, that made the city’s construction of public housing in their new community particularly galling. As one woman stated, “I improved myself to move to a neighbourhood like this. For what?”²⁸ Forest Hills’ African Americans echoing the assertions of self-reliance and upward mobility of their Jewish counterparts, arguing that the presence of the project would jeopardize “the years of hard work and savings that enabled them to rise from life in the slums.” Black opponents of the project frequently remarked that “we worked too hard to get out of the ghetto. We don’t want to see this neighborhood become a ghetto.”²⁹

One black Queens barber did not wish to live near the project “because he feels the low-income and welfare people are destructive and troublesome.” This man did not see the issue as one of race, but rather as an issue of “‘working people’ and nonworking

²⁶ Mario Cuomo, hired by the city as an independent fact-finder, also observed this lack of support for the project on the part of black homeowners. In the frequent discussions with Queens residents that led up to his report to the city, Cuomo noted his difficulty in finding widespread black approval for the scatter site initiative. Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 37-38.

²⁷ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 185.

²⁸ Murray Schumach, “Angry Crowd in Forest Hills Protests Housing Project,” *New York Times*, 19 November 1971.

²⁹ Schumach, “Queens: Bastion of the Middle Class.”

people.”³⁰ The equation of an increased presence of welfare recipients with an increased rate of crime and disorder was thus not exclusive to the white opponents of public housing in Forest Hills, nor, it appeared, was the characterization of the poor as more prone to theft and violence than the employed populations of middle-income neighbourhoods. Both whites African Americans cited incidents of increased crime in areas affected by poverty and welfare dependency as grounds for their opposition to the scatter site plan. Ramona Carter, an African American woman, denounced the project at a Board of Estimate hearing on the proposal to reduce the scale of the project to half of its planned size. Once again invoking a personal struggle out of poverty threatened by the city and by the character of the poor themselves, Mrs. Carter stated that she had been on welfare in the past but had “worked my way up” only to see her property values decreased because “poor people don’t have respect for property.” Carter also stated that other black middle-class homeowners would similarly reject plans for low-income project.³¹

In addition to invoking this upward mobility, many African American homeowners felt the project represented a “double discrimination” against them; blacks in Queens felt both ignored as outer-borough residents while also realizing that, as blacks, their options for affordable housing elsewhere were limited by racial prejudices. As one black homeowner stated, “It’s not as easy for us to find another home as it is for whites.” The construction of scatter site housing thus represented a dual threat to African

³⁰ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 90-91.

³¹ Howard Reiser and George Douris, “Forest Hills Compromise Adopted,” *Long Island Press*, 27 October 1972.

Americans' recently acquired and somewhat tenuous grip on homeownership and the middle-class status that came with it.³²

One of the most vocal opponents of the proposed project was a self-proclaimed black "self-help organization," the National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO). Headed by a prominent black physician, Dr. Thomas Matthew, NEGRO preached a message of self-reliance, black economic autonomy, and the physical and moral improvement of the city's ghettos.³³ Thomas Matthew met with FHRA president Jerry Birbach on more than one occasion, and opponents of the project even lent NEGRO financial support. Matthew, attending a meeting of the city's Jewish leaders and the FHRA, convinced Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt of the Queens Jewish Center to purchase a NEGRO bond, intended to finance the renovation of declining inner city buildings. The Rabbi then stated that he would encourage other members of his congregation to do likewise. At this same meeting, Birbach asserted that "the people of Forest Hills should help NEGRO," adding that he was "in full agreement" with Matthew's plan to refurbish ghetto housing, arguing that it would create jobs and training for poor minorities.³⁴ NEGRO also joined the FHRA in an anti-project rally in January of 1972, sending 75 of its members marching down the middle of 108th Street, blocking traffic in both directions.³⁵ The organization also staged demonstrations at the NAACP's

³² Schumach, "Queens: Bastion of the Middle Class."

³³ Thomas Matthew, interview by Julian Bond, 1970, Moving Images and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center for Black Studies, New York.

³⁴ Turso and Shapiro, "Project Foes Try to Block Expressway."

³⁵ Vito Turso, "'Brutality' Charge Pressed in Clashes at Project Site," *Long Island Press*, 17 January 1972.

New York offices, criticizing the association and its Executive Director, Roy Wilkins, for supporting the scatter site program.³⁶

The project opponents were no doubt well aware that this biracial coalition could substantiate their repeated claims to racial tolerance. In their view, the fact that many of the arguments raised by NEGRO echoed those of white project opponents could only lend further credence to their insistence that their objections to the project were not rooted in anti-black sentiment.³⁷ Much like white opponents of the Forest Hills project, Dr. Matthew claimed the issue was “not one of bigotry;” the citizens of Forest Hills were “rejecting poor people who are likely to become problem people,” rather than excluding them on the basis of racial difference.³⁸ Matthew also appeared to endorse the “black neighbour” argument of many of his white counterparts; dismissing the allegation that the largely Jewish population of Forest Hills was motivated by racism in its struggle to block construction of the project, he asserted that “There are already black families living in Forest Hills.”³⁹ Dr. Matthew, like many members of the FHRA, insisted that the neighbourhood was already integrated, and therefore overt opposition to the presence of blacks was a logical impossibility.

³⁶ Unlike NEGRO, the NAACP characterized the opposition to public housing in Forest Hills as racially motivated. Roy Wilkins, for example, used his column in the *Amsterdam News* to denounce the opposition in Forest Hills as “across-the-board racial selfishness.” In a memorandum released in November of 1971, Director of Housing Programs William R. Morris stated that the organization viewed “with profound outrage the emotionally-charged and racist-motivated actions” by those who fought against public housing in Forest Hills. The NAACP demanded that public housing no longer be used to “force the containment and segregation of Negroes and other racial minorities in slum ghettos.” The organization thus vowed that it would not stand idly by while “racial bigots” denied poor minorities “their right to decent housing at a price within their means to pay.” Roy Wilkins, “Black Stay Back!” *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 December 1971; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Memorandum, From William R. Morris, Re: Forest Hills Housing Project, 22 November 1971, Scatter Site Housing—Forest Hills, Box 2, Valerie Jorin Files, AJC Archives.

³⁷ See also Jewel Bellush, “Housing,” in Bellush and Stephen M. David, eds., *Race and Politics in New York City: Five Studies in Policy-Making* (New York, Washington, and London: 1971), 124.

³⁸ “Black Group Backs Forest Hills Housing Opposition,” *New York Times*, 5 January 1972.

³⁹ Vito Turso and Hal Shapiro, “Project Foes Try to Block Expressway,” *Long Island Press*, 5 January 1972.

In addition, Matthew also invoked the language of psychological damage used by those whites who argued against the project, claiming that economic integration was actually *harmful* to the poor. The city's housing initiative, Matthew argued, "was conceived out of a philosophy of promoting the black man to run away from himself;" scatter site housing, rather than promoting social uplift, in fact resulted in the stigmatization and shame of poor African Americans. Matthew therefore asserted that scatter site housing would represent "psychological violence" against the city's poor black population: "It's traumatizing for a black kid who goes into a store and has the white owner follow him around every minute . . . It's traumatizing for a black man to enter an elevator and have a white woman cringe in fear."⁴⁰ Much like whites who argued that living in a "vertical ghetto," physically separated from the surrounding community, would inflict psychological damage on the poor, Matthew too used the language of behavioural science and mental health to challenge the alleged benefits of this form of integration.⁴¹

For white opponents of the project, the support of NEGRO and African American individuals represented more than simply another middle class ally. Instead, the biracial

⁴⁰ Mancini and Brandes Gratz, "The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim is Integration."

⁴¹ Unlike the FHRA, however, Matthew denounced scatter site housing as a form of black "genocide" that represented a forced dispersal of African Americans into communities in which they would "always be a minority." Another NEGRO spokesperson concluded that the effect of scatter site would be to select upwardly mobile African Americans—"people who have something to offer their own communities"—and disperse them into white neighbourhoods. Scatter site housing, according to NEGRO, was actually a "conscious effort" by the local government to "divert money from anti-poverty programs" and use it for programs which would ultimately benefit middle-income whites. In 1972 Dr. Matthew attempted legal action against the city based on the fact that the scatter site project "violates the civil rights of black people" because of its "discriminatory and bigoted assumption that black communities are inherently inferior and therefore its [sic] black residents must be 'scattered.'" Rather than relocating to white neighbourhoods, NEGRO officials argued, the "black man has to stand where he is and build from the bottom up." Matthew therefore advocated the rehabilitation of inner city properties, a move which, he argued, would give blacks control over their own neighbourhoods, something not possible under the scatter site plan. "Forest Hills Site Scored by Blacks," *New York Times*, 22 December 1971; Anthony Mancini and Roberta Brandes Gratz, "The Battle of Forest Hills, Article II: The Aim is Integration," *New York Post*, 25 April 1972; Turso and Shapiro, "Project Foes Try to Block Expressway."

coalition against scatter site housing represented to whites in Forest Hills the legitimization of their claims to racial tolerance, and thus the broader moral legitimacy of their opposition. Perhaps the most transparent articulation of the symbolic value that black opposition held for whites came at a November 1971 Board of Estimate hearing. At this meeting Mrs. Cora Shuttleworth testified that "I'm a Negro, but I agree that this project is not needed." Facilities such as schools, transportation and hospital services were more urgent issues, Mrs. Shuttleworth argued, and therefore "should be utmost [sic] in our minds." Immediately following this remark one white woman in the audience shouted, "You see, we are not rejecting the project because we don't want Blacks and Puerto Ricans living in our neighbourhood."⁴² Forest Hills' white ethnics cited the existence of black opposition in order to prove, both to the city and possibly to themselves, their lack of prejudice toward African Americans. In addition, the similarity of the arguments raised by African Americans to their own objections was surely not lost on whites. Both black homeowners' trepidation toward the residents of low-income housing and the call for increased services for Queens residents could certainly be used by white ethnics to bolster their own claim that their opposition to the project was not based on race, thereby easing their own consciences as well as safeguarding their status as the oppressed, not the oppressors.

While the project opponents offered this "proof" of their own lack of prejudice, a number of city officials appeared less than convinced by the denials of racism and the invocations of a black-white alliance. Instead, advocates of the scatter site plan countered these claims with their very own public charges of racism, a move which was sure to anger many in Forest Hills. Golar's 1971 reading of the Flushing Remonstrance and

⁴² Lesley Jones, "Racism Charged in Project Ban," *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 December 1971.

subsequent condemnation of the "bigots" of Forest Hills at the Latimer Gardens opening would only be the first of several allegations of bigotry launched at the opponents of the Forest Hills project. Over the next six months Lindsay and his political allies would issue several more accusations of racial intolerance. In October of 1971, Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, for example, accused the neighbourhood of "sending a sad message to all minority groups" by implying "that communities do have the power to exclude others." By attempting to keep poor African Americans out of their neighbourhood, Sutton told Forest Hills residents, "you are saying [that whites should have the power to bar blacks] just as (Gov. George) Wallace said it at that school door in Alabama. That is sad."⁴³ The allusion to arch-segregationist Wallace was an unmistakable accusation of racial hostility on the part of middle-class whites. Sutton would make a similar statement at a Board of Estimate hearing two months later, noting that "the last time I felt this kind of emotion I was on a bus traveling from Atlanta to Jackson, Mississippi."⁴⁴ Once again Sutton publicly and pointedly drew parallels between the opposition to scatter site housing and the Deep South's resistance to the drive for civil rights and integration. The residents of Forest Hills who wished to defeat the scatter site initiative, Sutton implied, were as equally guilty of racism as George Wallace or Bull Connor.

John Lindsay himself did not refrain from launching these public accusations of white racism in Forest Hills. In December of 1971 the Mayor used the ground-breaking

⁴³ Reiser and Douris, "Forest Hills Compromise Adopted." Round brackets in original.

⁴⁴ Lesley Jones, "Racism Charged in Project Ban," *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 December 1971. Democratic Congressman Herman Badillo also alluded to the struggles over desegregation in the South, stating that the opposition to the integration of the poor in Forest Hills "is the same economic argument people raised in the South when they didn't want their children to go to school with poor rural Blacks." Badillo, "The Forest Hills Affair: Beyond Stereotypes," *Village Voice*, 2 December 1971.

ceremony for a low-income housing development in Williamsburg as an opportunity to attack politicians and community leaders' opposing other public housing projects as "little men leading residents down a path of hatred and bigotry." While the Mayor did not explicitly single out any one group in this public condemnation, there was little doubt as to whom he was referring; less than three weeks earlier a torchlight protest at the project's construction site had ended in attempted arson while rocks rained down on the construction trailers. The intended targets of Lindsay's speech became especially clear when Golar, also present at the ground-breaking, directed his remarks specifically at the Forest Hills dispute. Golar referred to Forest Hills as a place "populated by people with short memories" who "still do not know how the other half lives and do not care to."⁴⁵ The residents of Forest Hills, Golar once again declared, this time with Lindsay at his side, were unsympathetic to both black poverty and to the cause of racial equality.

One of the most heated accusations of racial bigotry in the scatter site controversy came later that same month. On 21 December, both Birbach and Golar appeared together on "Man in Office," a local public affairs television program. In what the *New York Times* described as "a rancorous televised confrontation," the two men exchanged insults, each accusing the other of lying. Golar at one point shouted at Birbach that he was "pained by the shabby, destructive, yes, bigoted, leadership that would deny decent housing to the poor people of New York City."⁴⁶ This incident once more clearly

⁴⁵ John Belmonte, "Mayor Slams High Rise Project Foes as Bigots," *Daily News*, 10 December 1971.

⁴⁶ Michael T. Kaufman, "'Bigot' and 'Liar' Mark TV Clash on Forest Hills Project," *New York Times*, 22 November 1971; Michael Iachetta, "Golar, Project Foe Sizzle in Hot TV Confrontation," *Daily News*, 22 November 1971.

demonstrated that, in the case of Forest Hills, high-ranking city officials were not unwilling to go on record as accusing thousands of their constituents of racism.⁴⁷

Given the frequency and the bluntness of these accusations we must question what motivated members of Lindsay's administration to make these allegations. This, after all, was the same administration which had been so reluctant to respond to charges of black anti-Semitism during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis. Mayor Lindsay, for example, had responded only tepidly to alleged incidents of anti-Semitic remarks and publications by members and allies of the African American Teachers' Association (ATA), the rival organization to the UFT.⁴⁸ During the fall of 1968 several Jewish teachers reported incidents of violence on the part of some of their black students, while the UFT recounted a number of anti-Semitic slurs that made reference to "Christ killers" and gas chambers.⁴⁹ In addition, in December of 1968 Leslie Campbell of the ATA visited a local radio station and read a poem titled "Hey Jew Boy" on the air. Written by a local African American student and directed at Jewish UFT president Albert Shanker, the poem opened with the lines: "Hey, Jew boy with that yarmulke on your head/ You pale-faced Jew boy—I wish you were dead."⁵⁰ This event drew further cries of discrimination from the city's Jewish community. Despite these repeated accusations of anti-Jewish sentiments, a city-commissioned bias report, while acknowledging an "appalling amount

⁴⁷ Golar also characterized those who formed picket lines with torches around his house as "For all the world like the Ku Klux Klan." Barry Jacobs, "Forest Hills Has Changed Its Mind," *Village Voice*, 11 December 1984.

⁴⁸ While Jerald E. Podair notes that black anti-Semitism was by no means universal among those who supported community control and was often exaggerated by the UFT, it nonetheless represented "a real and deeply troubling issue" at Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Aside from its raw racist implications, the anti-Jewish sentiment among some African American leaders and parents served to rob the black community of moral authority on the issue of decentralization while also giving Jewish New Yorkers a pretext for turning their backs on the struggles of African Americans. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 207-209.

⁴⁹ See for example Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 328.

⁵⁰ Leslie Campbell, quoted in Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 143.

of racial prejudice” on both sides of the dispute, avoided explicit mention of black anti-Semitism, appearing to downplay or even overlook it. An Anti-Defamation League report, by contrast, discovered a “crisis level” of anti-Semitism that originated in the black community but was aided and abetted by Lindsay and Ford Foundation head McGeorge Bundy, who both “looked the other way in the interest of community control.”⁵¹ The actions of Board of Education president John Doar further fueled accusations that city officials were insensitive to the concerns of New York’s Jewish population. In the fall of 1968, Doar defended one woman who picketed the UFT office with a menorah mounted on a coffin as a “fine, fine Christian woman.”⁵²

Why then was Lindsay so willing to introduce the issues of race and bigotry in the battle over Forest Hills? If perceived prejudice alone had not been enough to make Lindsay act in the past, what was the impetus for these remarks? These accusations on the part of city officials were rooted in part in the moral high modernism to which they subscribed. Under this ideology, scatter site housing represented not only a new policy initiative, but a “moral imperative.” The Forest Hills project was after all rooted in the reformist aims of integration, greater racial equality, and the amelioration of the supposedly crippling effects of poverty and ghettoization. Given the moral lens through which the architects and proponents of scatter site housing sometimes viewed the Forest Hills project, it is hardly surprising that they would regard opposition to the project in equally moral terms. If scatter site housing was designed to desegregate public housing, then protests against the project must automatically represent an underlying opposition to integration; if the goal of the Forest Hills project was to allow racial minorities to escape

⁵¹ Ibid, 143.

⁵² Ibid, 121.

the ghetto, then those who wished to block construction of the project must desire to see these people remain trapped in declining inner cities.⁵³

As much as it was rooted in the ideological desire to prevent the country from moving toward two separate and unequal nations, the response to the Forest Hills opposition was also motivated by more pragmatic concerns about the consequences of this segregation. Lindsay, as a member of the Kerner Commission, was deeply concerned about the prospect of inner-city riots, and wished to keep New York free of this violence. The scatter site housing plan, along with education welfare reform, represented a strategy of reducing the conditions that had led to this unrest in other major cities. Scatter site housing, the plan's supporters believed, was therefore necessary for the safety of all Americans in addition to fostering greater equality and democracy.

Given these concerns about the broader implications of scatter site housing in Forest Hills, city officials no doubt saw the strategic benefits of these charges of racism. Since scatter site housing was a moral necessity and could prevent New York City from becoming engulfed in civic disorder, it could not be allowed to fail because of white discontent. What better way to silence the opposition than by undermining its most explosive criticisms? Within this conception of the struggle, the project's opponents emerged not as victims, but as the perpetrators of injustice, while the administration could seize from them the "higher ground" of community control and democratic city planning. By countering allegations of anti-Semitism or lack of concern for middle-class whites with accusations of bigotry, the Lindsay administration could undermine the

⁵³ It is certainly not my contention to argue that racism was absent from the opposition to scatter site housing. As I have illustrated earlier in this chapter, despite the reluctance of many of the project's foes to discuss the issue, racism certainly formed a key aspect of the objections to low-income housing in Forest Hills.

victim status that Forest Hills residents attempted to carve out for themselves, discrediting the opposition by robbing it of any legitimate moral authority based on its claims to represent the rights of exploited ethnic groups or neighbourhoods. Very publicly laid charges of anti-black sentiments could strip the projects' foes of any assertions that they stood for "democracy" or the rights of the black poor. These accusations would then serve to remind the public of the administration's alleged moral superiority in the arenas of race, poverty and housing, reinforcing the very necessity of the scatter site plan.

The very public castigations of Forest Hill residents also further suggests Lindsay's adoption of the "New York approach" which had frequently suppressed the voices of the city's "little people." While the little people under Moses had been underprivileged minorities, white ethnics of the "forgotten boroughs" now saw themselves as those whose voices were overlooked in Lindsay's housing plans. Furthermore, given the centralized powers of public authorities and their history of imposing plans on lower-middle-class neighbourhoods, Lindsay and Golar's use of these remarks may have also indicated that they felt they could make such statements with little consequence. Perhaps, in a city with a history of displacing large numbers of its residents, they did not anticipate a great deal of effective opposition to their strategy, believing that power still lay with the city's housing and transportation authorities and not with the residents of local communities.

Within the racially charged and legalistic atmosphere of the early 1970s, John Lindsay must have anticipated the possible repercussions of his actions; accusations of racism would surely spark wider debate and scrutiny of Forest Hills, while framing

opposition to the project as opposition to integration itself would simultaneously remind the public of federally mandated requirements to end segregation of public housing. As newspaper columnist Walter Goodman observed, "one way for an outside observer or a public official to deal with a controversy that pits poor blacks against the felt needs of the community is to mutter 'Racism' and close the discussion."⁵⁴ The allegations of racism served the Lindsay administration as peremptory remarks intended to cut short any opposition that appeared to threaten the scatter site initiative. The accusations against those who wished to block construction of the Forest Hills project therefore illustrate New York City liberals' willingness to use the very loaded language of race to press for the "moral imperatives" of social engineering and integration.

This effort to recapture the moral high ground and thereby undermine the opposition ultimately backfired. The accusations of racism only increased tensions and resentment in Forest Hills, as many saw these labels as a condescending government's cynical attempt to polarize the situation and Forest Hills itself, artificially pitting blacks against whites. On more than one occasion the projects' opponents accused Lindsay and Golar of deliberately introducing the issue of race into the struggle in order to polarize the conflict and discredit their arguments that Forest Hills was entitled to community control or had been targeted as a Jewish neighbourhood. A Mrs. Charlotte Krauss, a Forest Hills resident speaking at a Board of Estimate hearing, took direct aim at the Mayor and the head of the Housing Authority, claiming that "the people who call us bigots and racists wish to polarize us."⁵⁵ FHRA president Jerry Birbach charged that Lindsay intentionally transformed the struggle over the housing project into a "black and

⁵⁴ Walter Goodman, "Fair Game: Heavy Winds in Forest Hills," *The New Leader*, 27 December 1971.

⁵⁵ Joseph Berger, "Two Views on Forest Hills," *New York Post*, 27 October 1972.

white battle." Birbach alleged that the Mayor, whom he labeled the "Pied Piper of polarization,"⁵⁶ had willfully injected racism into what was strictly a *legal* controversy. By arguing that the opposition was based on anti-black sentiment, Birbach implied, the Lindsay administration was trying to deflect criticism away from the undemocratic way in which the city had implemented scatter site housing.⁵⁷ Birbach also declared that Lindsay was "solely responsible for pitting black against white, and black against Jew." Any racial hostilities that existed, he reasoned, were manufactured by Lindsay rather than reflecting the attitudes of those in the community.⁵⁸

This conclusion was also echoed by Oscar Chase, an attorney for the Community Action for Legal Services, Inc., a firm which the FHRA had hired to seek a temporary injunction blocking construction of the project. Chase, much like his clients, stated that city officials, "sought to confuse and befog the issues in this case by making a racial issue out of this action . . . the charges are ludicrous."⁵⁹ Queens Borough President Donald Manes also criticized the "bigots who call the people of Forest Hills racists for wanting to live in peace and harmony." The cry of racism, he argued, was ill-advised and "can only divide those who have a common heritage of persecution and prejudice," namely blacks and Jews. Residents of Forest Hills were not prejudiced, Manes insisted; "they are Americans, and their wants and desires are the same as anyone else's."⁶⁰

A number of the area's Jewish organizations also raised the argument that charges of racism were laid by the city with the intention of undermining the position of those

⁵⁶ Peter McLaughlin, "1,000 Picket Forest Hills Site for 2 Hours," *Daily News*, 29 November 1971.

⁵⁷ Hal Shapiro, "Birbach, NAACP Oppose Cuomo Compromise," *Long Island Press*, 27 July 1972); Michael Iachetta, "Racism Charges Hurlled in Project Controversy," *Daily News*, 25 August 1971.

⁵⁸ Reiser and Douris, "Forest Hills Compromise Adopted."

⁵⁹ Iachetta, "Racism Charges Hurlled in Project Controversy."

⁶⁰ Franz and Reiser, "Manes Blasts Project."

who opposed the project. Alvin Lashinsky of the Queens Jewish Community Council (QJCC), for example, directly refuted charges of racism and once again attempted to extricate class-based fears from those based on racial prejudice. The problem in Forest Hills, he stated, “is not a racial one, it is a problem of what to do with the multi-problem welfare family.”⁶¹ Lashinsky also asserted that his organization “deplore[d] certain politicians and city officials falsely bringing in racial overtones, where none existed before.” Worse yet, Lashinsky stated, these officials were simply “doing this for their own selfish political reasons.” Lashinsky, like other critics of Lindsay and Golar, raised the possibility that politicians who supported the scatter site initiative launched these allegations in an attempt to further their own political agenda. In addition, in December of 1971, several Jewish organizations, including the QJCC, held a joint news conference at which they denounced city officials, accusing Lindsay of “arrogance” and alleging that Golar had uttered “inflammatory statements.”⁶² Yet again, Golar stood accused of attempting to polarize the fight over public housing.

These accusations of polarization were also voiced by several of those in the media who were at least somewhat sympathetic to the cause of residents of Forest Hills.⁶³ Walter Goodman, for example, argued that the city “seemed less interested in tapping the good will in the community than in once again putting itself forward as the champion of the underdog.” This stance, he argued, amounted to an “effort to provoke passions rather

⁶¹ Seymour Samet, Director, Department of Social Action, American Jewish Committee to Anita Miller, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 26 May 1972, Scatter Site Housing—Forest Hills, Box 2, Intergroup Relations and Social Action Department/Housing Collection, AJC Archives.

⁶² Murray Schumach, “Queens Jews Join Foes of Forest Hills Project,” *New York Times*, 11 December 1971.

⁶³ Contrary to the allegations from Forest Hills residents that those in the media displayed a distinct lack of sympathy for their cause, a number of journalists in both local and metropolitan newspapers, including Clark Whelton, Pete Hamill, and John Roche were quick to defend the community’s middle-class whites.

than assuage them.”⁶⁴ City officials, Goodman implied, appeared to be solely concerned with implementing the moral imperative of scatter site housing to the point that they were willing further divide the community between black and white if it allowed their plan to move ahead. Journalist Pete Hamill, a voice for the working and lower-middle classes, also accused city officials of increasing tensions and hostilities with its accusations of bigotry. Referring to the televised dispute between Golar and Birbach, Hamill wrote that “To have the head of the City Housing Authority call a citizen a liar on TV is to inflame an already desperate situation.” Hamill also added that to dismiss all those who opposed the Forest Hills project as racists was “to distort the situation and to ignore the very real fears of many people in this city.”⁶⁵ Clark Whelton of the *Village Voice* came to a similar conclusion about the motivations of the Lindsay administration, which, he alleged, “brushes aside all objections by crying ‘racist’ and ‘bigot’ at all who dare to criticize”⁶⁶

In addition to raising these accusations of intentional polarization, Forest Hills residents also voiced a sense of deep personal resentment at the charges of bigotry, arguing that these allegations reflected the moralistic condescension with which the Lindsay administration regarded residents of the city’s outer-boroughs. While Jewish sociologist Nathan Glazer noted in *New York Times Magazine* that the people of Forest Hills “will, apparently, quite willingly brave the charge of racist for the chance to spare themselves” the decline of their neighbourhood, a closer examination illustrates that most opponents were not at all willing to accept these accusations.⁶⁷ Mrs. Krauss of Forest Hills, speaking at a public hearing, clearly bristled at the allegations of racism: “I have a

⁶⁴ Goodman, “Fair Game: Heavy Winds in Forest Hills.”

⁶⁵ Pete Hamill, “An Old, Sad Song” *New York Post*, 23 November 1971.

⁶⁶ Clark Whelton, “But Not Where I Live,” *Village Voice*, 9 December 1971.

⁶⁷ Nathan Glazer, “When the Melting Pot Doesn’t Melt,” *New York Times Magazine*, 2 January 1972, 27-28.

black neighbor. But why do I have to prove that I'm not bigoted? . . . The press and the politicians and the ignorance of people on both sides have put me in that position."⁶⁸ Mrs. Krauss evidently bore a certain resentment toward city officials, activists and media personalities who supported the project, alleging that they forced her to publicly defend herself against unjustified accusations of racism.

A *Daily News* reader asserted that African American clergymen who labeled Forest Hills residents racist were "out of line;" according to this individual, "anyone fighting to prevent a couple of thousand persons from moving into one square block of any neighbourhood is doing the rational thing and should be congratulated."⁶⁹ Jerry Birbach too displayed his resentment at being forced to defend his position responding to Sutton's query at the Board of Estimate hearing. Upon being asked whether he would accept a "90 per cent black mixture" of elderly tenants, Birbach replied in the affirmative, adding that "the people of Forest Hills are not on trial before this body . . . but the city administration is."⁷⁰ Rabbi Louis Bernstein of a local chapter of Young Israel similarly declared, "I resent the call of racism." It was unfair to make these allegations, the rabbi inferred, against a group whose sole concern was "maintaining some kind of viable community in Queens."⁷¹ In addition, Rep. Edward Koch, a Manhattan Democrat who increasingly embraced the cause of Forest Hills, stated that the community's residents had "a rational fear of increased crimes and loss of property values," adding that "I resent bitterly anyone who labels them a racist."⁷²

⁶⁸ Berger, "Two Views on Forest Hills."

⁶⁹ Letter to the Editor, *Daily News*, 11 December 1971.

⁷⁰ Reiser and Douris, "Forest Hills Compromise Adopted," *Long Island Press*, 27 October 1972.

⁷¹ Arnold, "Queens Jewish Leaders Fear Effects of Forest Hills Project," *New York Times*, 2 December 1971.

⁷² Vito Turso, "Of Picketing and Peace," *Long Island Press*, 29 November 1971.

In the eyes of these outer-borough New Yorkers and their supporters, Lindsay and his fellow liberal elites clung to their moral “missionary mentality”⁷³ despite the decline it would bring to a vital neighbourhood, only to label those who would be adversely affected as racist. Forest Hills resident Ethel Travis, writing to the *New York Post*, stated that she would “like to ask Mr. Simeon Golar and Mayor Lindsay as well if it’s bigotry to want to keep one’s neighborhood from deteriorating through overcrowding.”⁷⁴ Clark Whelton, who had established himself as an ally of Forest Hills, accused New York Congressman Herman Badillo, an advocate of scatter site housing, of “playing racial politics” while indulging in the “lofty moral arrogance of the Lindsay administration.” Both Badillo and his fellow liberals in City Hall, Whelton asserted, maintained their own self-appointed position of moral superiority, portraying themselves as crusaders for the downtrodden while actually infringing upon the rights of others. Whelton also argued that the city’s stance on the scatter site project was akin to that of the White House on Vietnam: “It’s too late, we’re committed, there’s no turning back, we can’t back down.” Like the containment of communism in Southeast Asia, Whelton stated, the building of low-income housing in Forest Hills represented to its advocates a deeply held belief that could not be abandoned even though it was not succeeding in its stated aims. Despite the fact that an initiative allegedly designed for the “greater good” appeared to be reaping more chaos than benefits, it could not be abandoned because of its larger ideological and symbolic significance. City officials, under the sway of “Messiah complex” of John Lindsay, thus appeared to be “living on some kind of a moral mountaintop,” cut off from

⁷³ Clark Whelton, “The Hole in Forest Hills,” *Village Voice*, 24 August 1972.

⁷⁴ Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 29 November 1971.

the realities of neighbourhood life.⁷⁵ City Hall, in the view of many of those who opposed scatter site housing, or at the very least the city's manner of implementing it, seemed to be indulging in reform for its own sake, even when it would allegedly cause harm to a significant number of people.

More disconcerting, perhaps, for the residents of Forest Hills was the fact that these accusations of racism appeared to undermine their status as "victims," both of anti-Semitism and of decades of undemocratic social engineering. The allegations of hostility toward African Americans thus carried the greater symbolic significance of denying the legitimacy of the opposition to public housing in Forest Hills. As Richard Sennett observed in his afterward to Cuomo's *Forest Hills Diary*, the "covert plot" of the controversy began with "the city's denial of moral legitimacy to the community." The community, after all, had attempted to "assert its legitimacy in defiance of the politicians" by "acting as if only the people of the community know what it is to suffer, only the people of the community can judge the moral worth of a proposition." The city's ultimate de-legitimization of this suffering and these claims to moral authority therefore "provoke[d] a peculiar rage within the community."⁷⁶ Glazer also added that when city authorities attempted to minimize the impact of the project, "they obscure the realities that have to be dealt with." The city had thus convinced "the people of the area that something is being put over on them, and increase[d] their resistance."⁷⁷

Opponents of the Forest Hills project thus felt doubly wronged by the city. First, they alleged, the Lindsay administration had approved a project for their neighbourhood

⁷⁵ Whelton, "But Not Where I Live."

⁷⁶ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 159. While Sennett argues that this rage came from the city's "passivity" in the face of opposition, I contend that it was a response to the city's public allegations of racism.

⁷⁷ Glazer, "When the Melting Pot Doesn't Melt," 28.

without seeking their approval, only to deny the legitimacy of their grievances against this process. In launching these accusations of racism, the project opponents argued, city officials minimized what these middle-class Jews saw as their own hard-won struggle out of the ghetto. Worse yet, they maintained, the city forced these "victims" to defend their actions, placing the onus on them to prove that they were not racist. Rather than a neighbourhood which faced anti-Semitism and was denied its right to community control, opponents of the project found themselves portrayed as villains, as bigots no better than Southern segregationists. Residents therefore attempted to counter these charges of bigotry by reinforcing their claim that many officials exhibited an anti-Jewish bias. One woman protesting at the construction site, for example, carried a sign proclaiming "Golar: Biggest Bigot of All!"⁷⁸ Jerry Birbach also labeled Golar "a racist" who was "for the blacks and not the 250,000 Jews who need housing."⁷⁹

The anger that many Forest Hills residents felt at these allegations would only provoke a greater determination on their part to see that no project was ever built. Their frustration with what they saw as city officials' condescension and dogmatic commitment to social engineering would only serve to increase the resentment that the neighbourhood's white ethnics already felt toward their local government, ensuring that the battle over Forest Hills escalated and was further prolonged. This local anger would eventually force the city to back down from its plans; Lindsay would soon seek out a compromise designed to prevent white flight and thus that ensure economic and racial integration would in fact be feasible in Forest Hills. The results of this compromise agreement in fact significantly modified the project to the point that many of the city's

⁷⁸ Sullivan, "The Fight Over Scatter Site."

⁷⁹ Bill Baber, "Birbach, Kirshblum Clash Over Housing Project," *Long Island Press*, 27 March 1972.

aims for the scatter site plan were undermined. The Forest Hills project would thus illustrate a shift in New York City politics and mark the decline of the New York approach. The Forest Hills compromise would demonstrate that political power had been transferred to—or rather seized by—local neighbourhoods, and no longer rested in the hands of the boards of public authorities.

EPILOGUE & CONCLUSION

On 16 May 1972 former Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio placed a call to Queens attorney Mario Cuomo to discuss the escalating tensions surrounding scatter site housing in Forest Hills. During this conversation, Aurelio raised the mayor's concerns that "the embittered Forest Hills community might boil over," as well as Lindsay's fears surrounding the neighbourhood's "increasing racial polarization, and the threat it posed to the city's housing program." Aurelio then addressed "the possibility of using some sort of independent fact-finder" in the scatter site controversy, and asked Cuomo if he would be interested. Cuomo accepted the position the following day, and that same afternoon a press release from City Hall announced that Cuomo would investigate the situation in Forest Hills and "report back to the mayor, Board of Estimate and other city officials, as soon as possible with respect to a possible solution."¹

For the next several weeks Cuomo made himself "available to any individuals and groups who wished to be heard and were willing to make an appointment," and was engaged four nights a week at the Queens County Borough Hall in sessions that frequently went past midnight.² In late July he presented his recommendations in a report to City Hall. Among his conclusions was the prediction that local hostility to the project

¹ Cuomo himself noted that "I was totally free to do as I saw fit and to report precisely what I felt." *Forest Hills Diary: The Crisis of Low-Income Housing* (New York: Random House, 1974), 24-27.

² *Ibid*, 178.

could in fact undermine the entire purpose of scatter site housing; if middle class whites fled Forest Hills in the wake of its construction, public housing would only serve to spread ghetto conditions, and the neighbourhood would become a “racially-concentrated low-income area.” Echoing and lending further credence to one of the chief arguments raised by project opponents such as Jerry Birbach, Cuomo also stated that three 24-story towers were too large to effectively meet the aims of economic integration. Rather than integrating the poor into the surrounding community, he stated, a project of this size would create a self-contained community that would differ greatly in character and racial composition from the surrounding neighbourhood, thus negating the possibility of assimilation. Cuomo therefore recommended that the number of units for the housing project be reduced from 840 to an “acceptable” 432 apartments contained in three twelve-story buildings. Even so decreased in size, he maintained, the project would still retain the principles and “symbolic significance” of scatter site housing; the reduction in scale was simply “the necessary price for assuring the project’s success.”³

In the days after its release by City Hall, Cuomo’s plan was almost immediately criticized by those on both sides of the scatter site debate. While New York City Housing Authority chairman Simeon Golar rejected the compromise as “outrageous” and “manifestly absurd,” lamenting “the direct loss of 408 desperately need homes for the working poor,” Jerry Birbach labeled the proposal “totally unacceptable,” arguing that the Cuomo plan “is not scatter site housing—it will scatter people.” The Forest Hills

³ Cuomo, “Report to Honorable John V. Lindsay Concerning the Proposed Low-Income Housing Project at 108th Street, Forest Hills, Queens,” in Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 169, 182, 187, 191-192. Arguing that the issue was one of class, not race, Cuomo stated that if the city were to build apartment which would be “totally occupied by low-income blacks . . . I don’t think anybody would move out.” Cuomo concluded that the “principal problem” of the original plan, and thus the need for the compromise, was residents’ concern that 840 low-income units “would bring as its inevitable concomitant increasing crime, vandalism, exodus and deterioration.” Martin Tolchin, “Forest Hills Compromise Is Assailed by Both Sides,” *New York Times*, 27 July 1972.

Residents Association therefore pledged continued its campaign of “no project, no way,” vowing to stop the project in its entirety.⁴ Despite these strong responses from both proponents and opponents of the project, Lindsay remained “steadfastly silent” in the weeks following the release of the so-called “Cuomo compromise.” While his office insisted that “the mayor is studying the report,” construction continued at the project site on 108th Street, a fact which led Alvin Lashinsky of the Queens Jewish Community Council to speculate that “perhaps Mr. Cuomo, we, and everyone may have been used as a pawn, as a stalling move on the part of the mayor.”⁵

On 19 August 1972, twenty-two days after Cuomo had filed his report, Lindsay at last announced that he would “reluctantly” accept the compromise and proposed that the City Planning Commission and Board of Estimate hold hearings on the matter.⁶ This decision infuriated liberal and African American groups, who accused Lindsay of “scuttling the advancement of human rights.” A stiffly worded telegram from the Metropolitan Council on Housing, the Queens County Liberal Party, the NAACP, and the Queens County New Democratic Coalition labeled the mayor “a political opportunist who is willing to pit group against group so that he might profit.” The signatories of this telegram also pledged that “Just as we will not kneel down and kiss the feet of a racist in

⁴ At an FHRA meeting on 27 July, Birbach announced the community’s demand that a school be built on the project’s 8.5 acre construction site, asserting that Forest Hills was “in dire need” of increased educational services. In a move unanimously endorsed by the 175 FHRA members present at this meeting, Birbach also announced that the only housing acceptable to his organization was “a two-story garden apartment complex for senior citizens with a geriatrics center and adjacent playground facility.” Vito Turso, “Residents Opposed to Project, Demand A School on that Site,” *Long Island Press*, 28 July 1972.

⁵ Howard Reiser, “Cuomo a Lindsay Pawn in Forest Hills Study?” *Long Island Press*, 9 August 1972.

⁶ Francis X. Clines, “Lindsay Accepts Compromise Plan for Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 2 August 1972; Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 120-121.

Alabama, we will not kneel down before a racist in Forest Hills.”⁷ Jesse Gray, Chairman of the Harlem Tenants Union, also took umbrage with Lindsay’s acceptance of the Cuomo plan, stating that the move did not represent a “compromise” but rather amounted to “a total surrender to the racist pressures of the predominantly Jewish, white middle class Queens community.” Gray also called Lindsay “the kind of fair-weather liberal you find in the North,” one who was only responsive to African Americans’ concerns when he was in need of black votes.⁸

On 12 September over 700 neighbourhood residents attended a standing room only public hearing of Community Board No. 6, which represented Forest Hills. The majority of those in attendance at this meeting, called by the Board to gather opinion for its recommendations on the project, were “overwhelmingly against” low-income housing in Forest Hills, whether in its original form or in the scaled-down version proposed by Cuomo; virtually all of the 70 scheduled speakers voiced their unyielding opposition to the project.⁹ While the compromise was assailed by both sides as either asking too much or offering too little, Community Board No. 6 took Cuomo’s recommendations and tacked on two provisions to be presented to the Borough President, the CPC and the Board of Estimate: the project was to be converted to low-income co-operative housing, and occupants were to be limited to quotas of 65 per cent elderly and 35 per cent veterans.¹⁰ Less than two weeks later, the CPC met at City Hall to discuss the

⁷ Owen Moritz, “Liberal Groups Rap Mayor for Approving Cuomo Plan,” *Daily News*, 28 August 1972.

⁸ “Jesse Gray Hits JVL’s Decision on Forest Hills,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 August 1972.

⁹ Robert Kappstatter, “Forest Hills Plan: Audience Against It in Any Version,” *Daily News*, 13 September 1972.

¹⁰ Murray Schumach, “City Approves Low-Income Co-op for Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 27 October, 1972. In defending this quota, Joseph DeVoy, chairman of the Community Board, stated that many people did not see the difference between a low-income cooperative and a low-income housing project, and the presence of the elderly and veterans would “give them the feeling it would be more safe.”

compromise plan. Hundreds of Queens residents came out to this raucous public meeting to denounce the plan, which "drew a torrent of boos and shouts within seconds of being presented" to the commissioners. When Senator Emmanuel Gold attempted to persuade the Commission that "The community will work to make the project acceptable," he was greeted with shouts of "No! No! No!" from the audience.¹¹ After reserving decision on the matter, the CPC released its decision on 4 October, voting 4-2 in favor of the compromise.¹²

The compromise plan, complete with the co-operative and tenancy restriction proposals, now came before the Board of Estimate. On 26 October, after a "frequently turbulent" and "emotionally charged" twelve hour public hearing that was interrupted by charges of racism, the Board approved the co-operative plan while rejecting the CPC's proposed tenant quotas. Under this agreement forty per cent of the units would be designated for the elderly, with the remaining apartments reserved for non-elderly low-income families. After "more than a year of uncertainty" the Nixon Administration also granted its approval of the compromise plan, making Forest Hills the nation's first large low-income public housing co-operative.¹³

The co-operative plan drew a mixed response from the residents of Forest Hills, but many in the neighbourhood saw it as a "stabilizer" rather than the threat to the area represented by low-income rental housing. The "principal attractiveness" of the co-operative was its "illusion of proprietary interest;" those who backed the plan felt that the

George Douris and Howard Reiser, "Forest Hills: New Compromise?" *Long Island Press*, 25 October 1972.

¹¹ Francis X. Clines, "Forest Hills Project Compromise Scored at Hearing," *New York Times*, 21 September 1972.

¹² Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 135.

¹³ Joseph P. Fried, "US Approves Co-ops at Forest Hills Project," *New York Times*, 4 June, 1974.

co-operators would have a greater sense of ownership in the buildings, and thus a “stronger sense of responsibility” for both the property and the surrounding neighbourhood. In voicing his approval for a co-operative over a low-income project, Borough President and Board member Donald Manes stated that the residents of the co-op would “have that vital interest in the county and the Forest Hills community” and could “help transform this sense of alienation that the Forest Hills community feels into a sense of purpose.” In addition, co-operative housing would allow for a board of directors to be drawn from area residents, thus offering “a good vehicle for community input.” As Manes assured the public, the local co-operative board would have “the power to approve all prospective tenants to insure that the people moving into this co-operative would be families just as dedicated, just as devoted to the Forest Hills community as are its present residents.”¹⁴ Overall, the introduction of co-operative public housing was aimed at securing a less “dangerous” low-income population, and therefore gave the residents of Forest Hills a de facto form of tenant screening. Perhaps, one noted, “now that it’s becoming a co-operative people will stop running.”¹⁵

Despite these assurances, the protests against low-income housing in Forest Hills continued, even as construction of the now twelve-story co-operative neared completion. In December of 1972 Jerry Birbach led about 20 Forest Hills residents in a four hour sit-in at the downtown office of Simeon Golar, reiterating his organization’s demands that

¹⁴ Howard Reiser and George Douris, “Forest Hills Compromise Adopted,” *Long Island Press*, 27 October 1972; Murray Schumach, “City Approves a Low-Income Co-Op for Forest Hills,” *New York Times*, 27 October 1972.

¹⁵ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 127; Schumach, “. . . but in Forest Hills Some See Co-op as a Stabilizer,” *New York Times*, 6 June 1974. Paul Sandman of the Forest Hills Neighbors, a group formed during the height of the controversy to ease the fears of the neighbourhood and welcome project tenants, praised the announcement of the city’s acceptance of the co-op plan. Sandman stated that “entire community should be delighted that the co-operators in the development will be motivated, upwardly mobile newcomers who will be easily absorbed into the community.” Douris and Reiser, “Forest Hills: New Compromise?”

the project consist of three eight-story buildings exclusively for senior citizens, complete with a geriatric centre and full medical facilities for the aged.¹⁶ The following summer, almost two years after the battle over low-income housing had begun in earnest, embittered opponents declared that they would still not accept the housing complex, arguing that they had no assurance that landlords would be careful in accepting future tenants. "A co-op of what, \$100 an apartment? So who can't afford that?" asked one woman who lived directly opposite the project site. "Half a cancer is still a cancer," added another. Others felt that the damage had already been done by the controversy surrounding the project, as concerned residents had begun to move away. A local furniture merchant noted that, although the area had always had a high turnover with young families buying their first homes while elderly residents moved to warmer locations, "what I see in addition is now the middle class, maybe 35 to 45 years old, is leaving."¹⁷ In April of 1974, as applications for the co-op began to flood in to the Housing Authority, the Ad Hoc Committee to Save Forest Hills distributed flyers denouncing the co-operative plan and advertising a rally against the city's housing plans. These leaflets bore slogans such as "Stop the Exodus of the Middle Class" and "Senior Citizens Only on 108th Street." Between 800 and 1500 people attended the demonstration, at which Borough President Manes and former Mayor Lindsay were both burned in effigy.¹⁸

While the introduction of any low-income housing was sure to disappoint its staunchest foes, the conversion to a co-operative appeared to ease many of the fears of

¹⁶ George Douris, "Birbach Leads New Protest Sit-Down on Forest Hills," *Long Island Press*, 5 December 1972; "Forest Hills Project Is Target of a Sit-In," *Daily News*, 5 December 1972.

¹⁷ Edward Hershey, "Echoes of Protest in Forest Hills," *Newsday*, 27 August 1973.

¹⁸ Confidential Report on April 21st Demonstrations in Forest Hills, Documentary Reports, 1974, Box 2, Valerie Jorin Files, AJC Archives.

people who were "not like us." Because the Housing Authority, now under new chairman Joseph J. Christian, sought tenants "with the potential for homeownership in a co-operative," the Authority admitted that "well under" ten per cent of the co-operators would be welfare recipients. The city denied any charges of discrimination on this matter, arguing instead that these numbers came about because of the "very nature of the co-operative program, which requires upwardly-mobile families."¹⁹ Following the "key criteria" set out by the Housing Authority, prospective tenants would be selected on the basis of: "upward mobility," or "the ability of a low-income family to increase its future earnings over the years;" location, with families in the four nearest postal zones receiving priority; veteran status; and income limits, which were expected to rise from the annual ceiling of \$9,000.²⁰ On 30 June 1975, when the Forest Hills housing development "quietly received its first families," all 430 units were occupied by Queens residents, and seventy per cent of these tenants were white.²¹

In the end, those who opposed low-income housing for the most part got their way: they forced the city to back down from its initial proposal, successfully imposing their own perceptions and demands on both the size and the nature of public housing in Forest Hills. The reduced scale of the three buildings would lessen the number of new residents to the neighbourhood, thereby preventing an oft-predicted strain on municipal services, while co-operative requirements and tenant priorities assured many residents that fewer "pathological" welfare recipients would bring crime and decay to their middle-

¹⁹ Joseph P. Fried, "Queens Project To Be 70% White," *New York Times*, 10 June 1975.

²⁰ The elderly, for whom forty per cent of the apartments were reserved, were exempt from the expectation of upward mobility. Jay Itkowitz, "Forest Hills Project: Tenant List Due Soon," *Long Island Press*, 9 June 1974; Fried, "Queens Project To Be 70% White." The Housing Authority also estimated that, since veterans were normally given preference in public housing, at least 35 per cent of the apartments in the complex could be occupied by veterans and their families. Fried, "New Forest Hills Co-op for Poor Draws 10, 000," *New York Times*, 3 July 1974.

²¹ Fried, "Queens Project To Be 70% White."

class neighbourhood. The co-operative that opened in 1975 therefore bore little resemblance to the low-income project proposed by the city almost ten years earlier. While the original intent of the scatter site project had been to desegregate public housing and to integrate the allegedly culturally deprived with the upwardly mobile, local protest had necessitated a compromise which ultimately prevented these goals from coming to fruition. In short, the co-operative did not house in any significant numbers those for whom the project had been originally conceived.

The battle over scatter site housing in Forest Hills therefore exposed the irony, what may even be termed the fatal flaw, of racial liberals' integrationist aims. By making the white middle class the lynchpin of the scatter site initiative, the Lindsay administration unwittingly acted to undergird white hegemony in the city. As Cuomo noted in his report to the mayor, economic integration would not be feasible if middle class whites chose to leave Forest Hills due to their fears of the poor. Quite simply, Lindsay had to keep the crucial centre of the scatter site plan in place: the middle class could not be allowed to flee Forest Hills. Evidence of the city's obvious need to back down in the face of growing local anger could be found in Lindsay's solicitation of Mario Cuomo's services as a fact-finder. The Mayor, after all, approached Cuomo because he was concerned that tensions in the neighbourhood might "boil over" and ultimately threaten the city's housing program. Furthermore, Lindsay had long insisted that the scatter site plan would "absolutely not" be altered in any way.²² In December of 1971, for example, Lindsay was asked at a City Hall Conference, "Mr. Mayor, will there be any chance of a compromise [in Forest Hills]?" Lindsay shook his head and emphatically

²² Clines, "Lindsay Accepts Compromise Plan for Forest Hills."

declared, "No."²³ By August of 1972, however, the mayor felt sufficient pressure to accept Cuomo's compromise plan: "I come to this decision reluctantly, but with a view that the extreme polarization caused by this project overrides the merits of the original design of this project."²⁴

Lindsay's need to prevent polarization and white flight thus allowed Forest Hills whites to establish their position as the final arbiters of government-funded programs; municipal policies, even those not designed specifically for middle-income whites, would not be allowed to proceed without their approval. By placing integration at the centre of its anti-poverty program the city was ultimately forced to negotiate aid for low-income blacks with middle-income whites, effectively undermining its own ambitions in the process. The Forest Hills compromise therefore marked the death of scatter site housing as a viable political issue in New York City, simultaneously feeding and gaining momentum from a turn to the right in local politics. The scatter site debate helped to delineate the limits of racial liberalism across the city and identified what white middle-income New Yorkers were willing to tolerate in the name of social justice, helping to shift the political direction away from concerns for civil rights and the poor and toward "law and order" and "safety in the streets." As Cuomo noted in 1974, "the popular liberal phrases that had predominated only a few years earlier" had all but disappeared; no candidate in that year's municipal elections argued for integration or the dispersal of ghetto residents. Instead, with a "new and safer" emphasis on ghetto rehabilitation, it was as if "the clock had been turned back nearly two decades."²⁵ This rising conservatism would be further entrenched by the city's fiscal crisis of 1975, as growing numbers of

²³ John Franz and Howard Reiser, "Manes Blasts Project," *Long Island Press*, 7 December 1971.

²⁴ Clines, "Lindsay Accepts Compromise Plan for Forest Hills."

²⁵ Cuomo, *Forest Hills Diary*, 136-137, 149.

middle-class whites called for a policy of fiscal retrenchment in the face of dwindling municipal coffers, demands which translated into cuts to welfare and social programs that aided large numbers of minorities.

The struggle over public housing in Forest Hills, however, reveals more than simply a reassertion of white hegemony in New York City or the growing conservatism of middle-income whites. Of course, the racial antipathies and anti-liberalism associated with the white backlash of this era certainly informed Forest Hills residents' responses to the prospect of low-income public housing in their neighbourhood. Even when white neighbourhood residents professed their tolerance of their middle-class African American neighbours, they nonetheless displayed ambivalence and fear toward the black poor, arguing that the presence of underprivileged and "pathological" African Americans would automatically lead to vandalism, muggings, and wider urban decay. Forest Hills' obvious mistrust of poor blacks could certainly be seen in their greater acceptance for a co-operative that would effectively reject most unemployed African Americans. In addition, as we have seen, the project's opponents often framed their struggle against scatter site housing as a battle to save the middle-class from "murder" at the hands of elite liberal politicians. While the backlash explanation is essential to understanding the protest in Forest Hills, it represents only one aspect of this complicated response to public housing on the part of Queens residents.

The battle between city officials and the opponents of scatter site housing illustrates a backlash against a style of government which had shaped New York City politics for decades. Rather than responding only to their fear of poor blacks or their resentment of liberals such as John Lindsay, Forest Hills residents also voiced their

objections to the New York approach to the politics of development. Since the 1940s the power of public authorities and the sweeping changes envisioned by Robert Moses had left little room for dissenting voices emanating from local neighbourhoods. The city had often imposed its development schemes on surprised and confused neighbourhoods, physically transforming them while displacing large numbers of their residents. While many in Forest Hills attributed the decline of their old neighbourhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx to the “pathological” blacks and Puerto Ricans who arrived in the 1950s, they also blamed the city for building the housing projects that brought poverty to these communities. In addition, many former residents of the Bronx would remember the physical destruction wrought by Moses’ Cross-Bronx Expressway, when this roadway had cut a swath through seven miles of housing, reducing the area to a stretch of gaping pits, smoldering fires, and boarded-up buildings. Residents who argued that they were “refugees” of these neighbourhoods were determined that they would not be “forced out” yet again by another wave of city-planned redevelopment.

The fact that Lindsay was forced to back down and accommodate the opponents of the project illustrates the decline of this style of government and the realization of demands for greater accountability from local officials. The Forest Hills controversy therefore marks a turning point in New York City politics; power began to shift away from public authorities and their influential members and toward local neighbourhoods. The adoption of the co-operative compromise demonstrated that one community in Queens was able to take on City Hall and the Housing Authority and, for the most part, impose its demands on these bodies. Lindsay’s lack of success in attempting to adopt the apolitical methods of Robert Moses would thus mark the end of an era in the

development of public policy; the Forest Hills controversy demonstrated to city officials that the New York approach would no longer be tenable in the 1970s.

As was evident in Forest Hills, this shift in local power owed a great deal to the integrationist aims that had originally motivated the architects of the scatter site plan. Because local neighbourhood residents could determine the success or failure of a de-segregation initiative, they held a certain amount of leverage in their dealings with city officials. It is important to note however, that this transition was also rooted in white ethnics' borrowing from African Americans. Firstly, Forest Hills residents appropriated the language of community control articulated at Ocean Hill-Brownsville. City officials would very quickly discover that black demands for greater local accountability in the education system would prove difficult to contain, and would soon be taken up by other groups desirous of greater accountability from local agencies. The growing clamour for community control thus coincided with residents' increasing frustration with the local decision-making process, virtually ensuring that neighbourhood residents would fight to have their opinions heard. Secondly, the Jewish nationalism that informed the opposition in Forest Hills was also influenced by a growing black consciousness in the 1960s. As particularist pride spread beyond the black nationalist movement and was adopted by other racial and ethnic groups, New York City's Jews began to develop an assertive identity that emphasized the defense of Jewish self-interest. With the racial homogeneity of neighbourhoods such as Forest Hills, the "attack" on the middle-class community translated into an attack on Jews themselves. Conversely, the desire to stand and fight as Jews would require the defense of a particular Jewish neighbourhood. Growing pluralist

esteem thus played a crucial role in allowing local neighbourhoods to exert a greater influence in the development of public policy.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the demand for greater neighbourhood power was spurred by the growing feeling on the part of many New Yorkers that the state increasingly threatened their safety and well-being. Rather than looking out for the welfare of its citizens, the state, in the form of Moses, Lindsay, and public authorities, had come to represent an entity unresponsive to their needs and concerns. While the New Deal had provided many of the city's white ethnics with a stepping-stone to homeownership and middle-class status, its legacies, in particular public authorities and government-built housing, now appeared to many to threaten their upward mobility. As Marshall Berman said of the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway,

we were sure it couldn't happen here, not in America. We were still basking in the afterglow of the New Deal: the government was *our* government, and it would come through to protect us in the end. And yet, before we knew it, the steam shovels and bulldozers were there, and people were getting notice that they had better clear out fast.²⁶

Berman's description illustrates the reversal in the macro-conception of the state held by many New Yorkers. While Bronx residents had previously felt that the government belonged to them, and would therefore act in their best interests, it now represented a foreboding presence in their lives, displacing them and demolishing their homes with little ceremony. Berman's response to the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway underscores the sense of disbelief and alienation on the part of outer-borough ethnics, and marks the beginnings of a mistrust of the state's power.

²⁶ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 292.

This feeling that a government which had once protected its citizens now threatened them would also be found in Forest Hills. In voicing their objections to the construction of public housing in this community, residents argued that the city seemed determined to chase them all over New York, allowing them to establish stable neighbourhoods only to destroy them. The Forest Hills controversy therefore carries a broader significance than simply a manifestation of white backlash. Instead, it also represents an important aspect of what a number of scholars have labeled the fall of the New Deal order. While growing racial tensions and frustration with liberal Democratic policies certainly motivated the breakdown of the alliance of African American and white ethnic voters, this transition was also rooted in many Americans' broader conception of the state and its function in the lives of its citizens. Once the state came to represent a menace rather than a source of security, various ethnic and economic groups would come to demand a greater say in the development of public policy. The scatter site controversy in Forest Hills thus signifies a key moment in both the dissolution of the New Deal coalition and the rise of particularist and community-based politics.

* * * * *

Almost a decade after the low-income housing development finally opened its doors to the first co-operators, Forest Hills remained a quiet and stable neighbourhood that retained its Jewish character. The community was "a modest paradise where kids of different nationalities scoot by on bicycles and where neighbors stop to talk with one

another in the halls.”²⁷ The co-op itself was “well-tended, peaceful,” while nearby homes were neatly kept. As Barry Jacobs of the *Village Voice* noted upon visiting Forest Hills in 1983, “It’s heartening to see how wrong the antiproject people were in thinking that these ‘poor’ people would bring drugs and crime into their neighbourhood.” Residents whom Jacobs interviewed described the area surrounding the buildings as “nice” and “quiet,” some even displaying “bewildered reaction” at being asked about “a complex they never think twice about.” Although approximately 1000 residents living near the site fled for other areas of the city, O. Lewis Harris, director of the Forest Hills Community House, stated that he “heard from those who stayed they’re glad they did.” Anthony Atlas, the new Chairman of Community Board No. 6, also added that “A lot of people in Forest Hills changed their mind. The fears were entirely groundless.” Even the worst critics, Jacobs noted, came around to the co-operative idea. Jerry Birbach, for example, agreed that the “co-op is working very well. I think it’s one of the best low-income developments in the world.”²⁸

As the Forest Hills co-operative passed its twenty year anniversary, the original opponents’ fears of “crime and other social ills” continued to prove “unwarranted.” In 1995 *New York Times* reporter David M. Herszenhorn observed that “the quiet atmosphere at the project belies its fiery beginnings, although some residents say the quality of life has worsened.”²⁹ That same year, however, the 108th Street co-operative found itself at the centre of controversy when court-ordered quotas aimed at increasing

²⁷ Vacancies left by departing Jewish families were filled by Orthodox Soviet Jews and Jewish immigrants from Iran and Iraq. Barry Jacobs, “Forest Hills Has Changed Its Mind,” *Village Voice*, 11 December 1984.

²⁸ Birbach, who left Forest Hills for Nassau County, was quick to attribute the success and viability of the neighbourhood to the actions of opponents of the project: “If it wasn’t for the furor of the community, that co-op wouldn’t exist—a ‘project’ would have gone through.” *Ibid.*

²⁹ David M. Herszenhorn, “At the Forest Hills Co-op, a Reminder of Past Fury,” *New York Times*, 22 October 1995.

the number of minority tenants in some projects once again “dredged up the painful issues of race and class.” In 1992 the city admitted to racial discrimination in tenant placements, acknowledging that housing officials had diverted minorities from 31 of the city’s 339 housing projects, including the Forest Hills co-operative.³⁰ When occupancy in the project first began, no more than two per cent of the co-op’s residents were receiving welfare payments, and the vast majority were senior citizens and “struggling working class people.” In addition, the co-op also maintained a racial balance of 70 per cent white to 30 per cent minority, “a cause for some bitterness among minority co-operators” who wished to see quotas which were “more reflective of the city’s low-income population as a whole.”³¹ The city was now forced to comply with the federal courts’ “Davis Decree,” which mandated that three of every four vacancies in these 31 complexes be filled by minority families who had previously faced housing discrimination. In the case of the Forest Hills co-op, this amounted to approximately 31 families.³²

The increased minority quotas brought a new wave of protest from within the community, and those opposing the Davis Decree, like their predecessors in the housing controversy, denied that issues of race lay behind their actions. Echoing the protests of 1971-1972, opponents of the federally mandated quotas couched their opposition in the language of “rights,” arguing that their rights as shareholders in the project would be violated by this initiative. The proposed tenancy figures also conjured up old fears of a

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jacobs, “Forest Hills Has Changed Its Mind.” As of 1995, the project’s population stood at 52.9 per cent white, 19.6 per cent black, 10.2 per cent Hispanic, and 17.3 per cent “other.” Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: Mayor Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 514.

³² Herszenhorn, “At the Forest Hills Co-op.”

white exodus; as Bianca Izaguirre, an original co-operator, noted, "All they have to do is read in the paper that it is 32 per cent black and people are going to run like wildfire."³³

Despite this controversy and the dire predictions that it fostered, Forest Hills has remained a stable middle-income neighbourhood. As Lindsay biographer Vincent Cannato noted in 2001, "Today, the compromise solution appears to be successful;" the area has not fallen victim to crime, drugs and white flight, and Forest Hills has remained "a middle-class enclave, relatively unaffected by the housing project." Whatever their professed fears of the project—whether a strain on municipal services, the dispersal of so-called ghetto conditions, or the isolation of the culturally deprived in one housing development—most residents of Forest Hills found their worries assuaged by the presence of a co-operative for the upwardly mobile. Because opponents of the original scatter site plan were able to assert the power of their neighbourhood and successfully transform the project into housing for the white working poor and the elderly, in the end the "worst nightmare of Forest Hills residents never came to pass."³⁴

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cannato, *The Ungovernable City*, 514.

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