

## **BUSHWICK NOTES: FROM THE 70'S TO TODAY**

**- by John A. Dereszewski -**

The following will review the problems afflicting the Bushwick community that culminated in the disastrous blackout and fire of 1979. It will then explain how NYC government and the local community worked collaboratively to develop and implement an Action Plan that has subsequently formed the basis for Bushwick's current revival. Finally, these notes will update Bushwick's redevelopment efforts to the present and hazard a few guesses and recommendations regarding its future fate.

### **WHAT DYNAMICS WERE AFFECTING BUSHWICK AS THE 1970'S BEGAN?**

By 1970, Bushwick had experienced considerable transition and decline to its residential, commercial and industrial base that did not bode well for the future. This would have been the case even if the NYC financial crisis did not occur. Specifically:

- The composition of the mostly 1 and 2 family neighborhoods situated in the vicinity of Bushwick Ave. and in the southern portion of Bushwick had changed as the mostly German and Italian populations left and were replaced by Black and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic residents. This essentially represented a continuum of the process that previously had occurred in neighboring Bedford-Stuyvesant. Though economically somewhat poorer than the prior residents, the new Bushwickites were working class home owners who maintained the stability of the community by, among other things, establishing a significant number of block associations. However, such developments as the FHA housing scandal, which resulted in the abandonment of a significant number of small homes where poorly financed loans had been provided, and the impact of the "redlining" policies of financial institutions, that denied meaningful mortgage access and insurance coverage, were having a negative effect upon this area that made it difficult for the new residents to maintain and improve this rather aged housing stock.
- The central core of Bushwick, i.e., the area in the vicinity of the current Hope Gardens development and St. Barbara's Church, was experiencing deep and critical decline. Rapid population change was occurring in the inferior housing stock that was now occupied by an extremely poor, mostly Hispanic, population. Welfare dependency of these new residents was particularly high. The mostly non-resident owners of these properties were providing minimal maintenance and allowing building conditions to deteriorate. By 1970, a pattern of housing abandonment, frequently accompanied by arson, was already occurring and would only accelerate as the decade continued.
- Unlike neighboring Williamsburg and many other NYC communities, Bushwick had not been the subject of the massive urban renewal plans that radically

transformed their character. While a “Cross Bushwick Expressway“ had been proposed by Robert Moses, it was now a dead letter. In addition, the proposed designation of Bushwick as a Model City area, which could have brought significant residential development to this community, had been rejected in the late 1960’s. There was, however, a proposal to construct an ambitious school plus high density apartment development – P-60 - on the present Hope Garden I site. If implemented, this would have created a super block that was wildly greater than the scale of the surrounding community. But, beyond that, the historic low density nature of Bushwick remained unchallenged by any governmental plan.

- In 1970, a substantial Italian community still resided in the northern portion of Bushwick, specifically in the area north of Knickerbocker and Myrtle Avenues. But this population had significantly declined during the previous decade and the remaining members were poised to join the exodus. While this community had basically considered itself to be part of Ridgewood, the replacement of the Italian with Hispanic residents would, in time, essentially move the de facto Bushwick – Ridgewood border to that of the Brooklyn – Queens boundary line.
- The industrial base of Bushwick was in sharp decline. The once numerous knitting mills situated in the Wyckoff Ave. / Flushing Ave. vicinity were rapidly decreasing in number. Most ominously, all of the remaining beer breweries were either closing or drastically reducing staff. This decline concluded when the Rheingold brewery, the last hold-out, closed its doors in 1976.
- While the commercial districts along Knickerbocker and Wyckoff Avenues were still vibrant – though with a lower price mix of products – the Broadway commercial district was experiencing lower sales and increased vacancies. While this area would not totally collapse until the 1977 blackout, the trends were very negative throughout the 1970’s.
- Through the “War on Poverty” and the Lindsay Administration, a few governmental measures had been taken to enhance City services in Bushwick. A “Little City Hall” experiment had been established that attempted to bring City government closer to the people. An innovative “District Manager” position had been created, but this was an extension of the Mayor’s Office, and the whole initiative was mistrusted by the local political powers that be. The anti-poverty “Bushwick Community Corporation” was a rather ineffectual operation that funded programs that provided little of value; it was not missed when “The Corporation” was rudely terminated in 1978.

## **FROM 1970 TO THE BLACKOUT**

By the time the blackout hit in 1977, the negative trends summarized above had accelerated and worsened. Bushwick was in a crisis situation, but its problems had not yet

entered the general public consciousness. Several governmental actions, however, were beginning to respond to the problems.

- An epidemic of arson and abandonment devastated Bushwick's central core. Well before the blackout, scores of buildings were burned and abandoned. On blocks like Himrod St. and Greene Ave. between Central and Wilson Aves. EVERY building had been abandoned. Due to funding shortages – or perhaps lack of interest from the Beame administration – most of the abandoned buildings, almost all of which were unsalvageable, were not demolished. This created the impression of essentially living in a war zone.
- The population shift accelerated as the bulk of the remaining Italian community fled the area and was replaced by a much poorer and welfare dependent Hispanic population. By 1977, well over 50% of Bushwick's residents were Hispanic, with the non-Hispanic White population barely reaching 10%. As a result of abandonment, the total population of Bushwick sharply declined during the 1970's from 137,900 in 1970 to 92,497 in 1980 – a stark and devastating 32.9% decrease.
- While the population of Bushwick was rapidly changing, the political leadership was not. The mostly Italian establishment was still very much in control and not very interested in dealing with Bushwick's critical issues. (They were hardly enthusiastic supporters of the Model City designation.) Although an Hispanic majority City Council seat had been created in 1973, the person elected was an independent Democrat who was not affiliated with the establishment; he was also not held in favor with the current Beame administration. Given these dynamics, it was not surprising that the problems confronting Bushwick did not receive priority attention.
- Due to the collapse of the designated funding agency and the fact that an additional school was no longer needed, the P-60 project could not go forward as proposed. However, the land had already been acquired by the City and cleared for this project. This required the City agency responsible for this Urban Renewal Plan – the Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) – to identify a replacement<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) entered the scene with what would become the Hope Gardens I development. While the super-block was retained and one of the buildings would be 14 stories tall, the NYCHA project was significantly less disruptive to the existing neighborhood scale than P-60 would have been. Even with these changes, considerable opposition to the “14 story tower” and the “housing project” nature of the development was registered. While it did not stop the project, the first complaint did cause NYCHA – with the community's and HPD's strong support – to agree that all further construction in Bushwick would fall within the scale and street patterns of the existing community. This is why Hope Garden II and III were

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<sup>1</sup> Until 1976, HPD was officially known as the Housing Development Agency (HDA). For consistency sake, the current name is used throughout this document.

constructed in three-story, garden apartment like, components on existing block fronts. (Given the development mentality of the time, this represented a major “sea change” in NYCHA’s thinking.) The very low income levels and high welfare dependency rates existing in Bushwick plus the fact that no NYCHA housing had ever been constructed here undermined the credibility of the “anti-project” argument. This was clearly housing that would meet the most critical needs of the local residents.

- Several governmental actions were taken before the blackout that strengthened the community’s ability to impact future development. In the early 1970’s HPD opened a Neighborhood Preservation Office that was charged with the responsibility to develop a locally based development plan – including and beyond P-60 - for Bushwick. This office took the initiative to develop this plan in close collaboration with the local community board – Brooklyn CB 4 – along with the few existing community organizations engaged in housing development. Since the latter were few in number and poorly organized, the prime means of collaboration was between HPD and CB 4. In addition, the NYC Department of City Planning assigned a full-time planner to participate in this process. Finally, the NYC Charter Revisions that were approved in 1975 strengthened the powers and resources available to CB 4 by giving it a formal role in the land use planning process and providing funding that, in May 1977, enabled it to open a local office and hire a small staff.

### **THE BLACKOUT, FIRE AND IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH**

When the Blackout struck, the toned down P-60 project, while fully approved and funded, was being delayed by an arcane Wicks Law dispute concerning NYCHA’s need to bargain separately with each sub-contractor involved in the project’s construction. This would ultimately postpone – though not frustrate - the construction timetable and significantly increase the resulting costs. The additional components of the Bushwick Action Plan, which had been developed by HPD and CB 4 and would expand residential construction throughout the balance of the central core, was still very much in the proposal stage. Finally, there was no broad City-wide demand to push these items as priorities.

The NYC blackout and the “All Hands Fire” at Knickerbocker Ave. and Bleecker St. were turning points for Bushwick. These catastrophic events, which occurred during a 10 day period in July 1977, changed public perception for good and literally placed Bushwick on the map. The blackout, with the resulting looting and fires that gutted the already depressed Broadway commercial district, underlined the crisis gripping Bushwick, and low income communities like it. The fire, which was an entirely Bushwick event, added an exclamation point to Bushwick’s particular plight and brought the full spectrum of the community’s decade-long descent into arson assisted housing abandonment and absolute despair to the general public’s consciousness.

In the immediate wake of these events, CB 4, at an emergency meeting, strongly reiterated its support for the prompt implementation of the Bushwick Action Plan and demanded that it receive top priority attention by the NYC powers that be. The statement that the Board adopted expressing these concerns essentially became the Bushwick community's platform for governmental action.

In addition, the Executive Editor of the NY Daily News contacted CB 4 and conducted an on-site visit the day after the fire. The News then took the following actions that drastically increased the public's awareness of the crisis plaguing Bushwick:

- In prominent editorials, the News strongly urged that Bushwick's critical problems receive emergency attention by NYC; castigated the Beame administration for its indifference to this problem; and praised the actions of the local City Councilmember for "standing alone" for Bushwick.<sup>2</sup> (Since 1977 was a NYC election year, these actions were extremely timely and certainly contributed to the demise of Beame's reelection effort.)
- The News assigned several reporters to explore Bushwick's problems in depth and prominently bring their findings to the readers' attention.
- As the Mayoral campaign evolved into a two-man race between Congressman Edward Koch and NYS Secretary of State Mario Cuomo, the News, through editorials and community meetings, urged the leading candidates to commit themselves to implementing the Bushwick Action Plan. When Koch ultimately prevailed, he made it clear that he fully intended to adhere to this commitment. (Other newspapers, including the NY Times, also played supportive roles here, but it was really the News that set the tone and made the difference.)

## **FIRST STEPS TO RECOVERY**

While the P-60 (Hope Gardens I) plan fitfully went forward, HPD and the community – now strongly supported by the new Koch administration – pursued the next components of the Action Plan. These essentially called for the construction of additional low-income NYCHA Housing on vacant land situated in the immediate vicinity of P-60. Most of this land was totally abandoned and, for the most part, City owned. In planning this housing, the community insisted that the existing low-rise scale that typified Bushwick be maintained. This meant that the housing would only be two or, at most, three stories high and would be constructed on existing block fronts. In all, NYCHA would construct 1,076 low income and 243 senior citizen housing units in Bushwick during the early to mid 1980's. But there would be no additional "super-blocks" in Bushwick.

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<sup>2</sup> Sadly, the lure of corruption ultimately got the better of this Council Member who, in 1983, was convicted of a crime and removed from office. But, this is a separate story that should not distract from the positive role he performed in the late 1970's.

In addition, all possible efforts were made to locate the new housing on vacant or abandoned land and, to the extent possible, not displace any existing residents. These were common sense principles from the community's perspective, but they represented significant philosophical departures from HPD and NYCHA's prevailing conventional wisdom, which was oriented toward large scale development. These principles would be applied and rigorously adhered to throughout the balance of Bushwick's subsequent development efforts.

When the blackout struck, the critical problems facing Bushwick – and, for that matter, most other poor communities – effectively precluded the use of private investment to support housing development. This is why HPD's contemporary private-public housing programs were of little use to Bushwick and why the participation of NYCHA was so crucial.

Looking beyond the immediate plans, both HPD and CB 4 saw the need to develop housing affordable to working Bushwickites and would be residents who would otherwise be compelled to look elsewhere. To this end, the NYC Housing Partnership, a collaborative effort involving NYC government and the business community, was recruited to develop two family housing that, through a subsidized mortgage rate and tax abatements, was affordable to most working families.

Over the years, Partnership Housing became the dominant form of new residential development throughout all portions of Bushwick. Consistent with the Action Plan, these residences preserved the existing community scale and, being constructed on vacant land, did not displace existing residences. In fact, its infill, non-displacement, nature made Partnership Housing a preferable means of development – at least in Bushwick – to such larger scale initiatives as Nehemiah Housing, which did require a far more significant degree of displacement.

## **BEFORE THERE COULD BE HOUSING**

Although the Koch Administration's support for the Action Plan clearly brightened Bushwick's prospects, the requirements of the capital construction process meant that it would still take years before this desperately needed housing could become a reality. While the "insiders" could cheer every incident of "paper progress" as the projects advanced through the design and pre-construction phases, the actual landscape remained as abandoned and forlorn as ever. For this reason, it was crucial to provide some immediate, concrete, signs of hope, particularly to the long-term residents of Bushwick who had withstood the worst. Two strategies addressed this concern:

- **Demolition** – While the new housing could not immediately be built, the dangerous abandoned hulks that dominated all too much of Bushwick could be eliminated through an aggressive demolition program. To this end, HPD committed a disproportionate percentage of its demolition budget to address

this issue. By the end of the 1970's most of the land had been cleared. Although this was no substitute for new housing, it was far superior – and infinitely safer and less depressing – than the abandoned shells. The community strongly supported this initiative.

- **Tree Planting** – To both address a serious dearth of street trees and – more importantly – provide some valuable incentives to the solid residents of Bushwick, the City initiated a program through which several thousand street trees were planted in designated areas of Bushwick during the late 1970's. The plan, which was developed by HPD and CB 4, especially targeted those stable and organized blocks that had withstood the onslaught of urban blight as well as those transitional areas that were especially vulnerable to further deterioration. This initiative was particularly successful in the stable blocks, where the trees were well maintained and provided a clear incentive to “keep up the good fight”. These are the blocks where the trees that were then planted now dominate the streetscape.

## BEYOND HOUSING

Given the prominent role played by HPD in the development of the Action Plan, it is easy to overlook the non-housing activities that occurred during the immediate post-blackout period. But several other important initiatives occurred that contributed to Bushwick's long term improvement.

- **New 83<sup>rd</sup> Precinct** – The devastating fire that closely followed the blackout began in an abandoned industrial building at the intersection of Knickerbocker Ave. and Bleecker St., a site situated near the center of Bushwick and in close proximity to both the Knickerbocker Ave. shopping district and the Myrtle Ave. “EL” train station. It was, in short, the perfect site for a police precinct to serve the entire Bushwick community. The fire's devastation had, paradoxically, even created ample parking space to serve a precinct's needs. At the time, the local 83<sup>rd</sup> Precinct operated out of a beautiful landmarked building. But it was thoroughly inadequate to the task of performing its responsibilities. The Police Department had proposed relocating the 83<sup>rd</sup> in a facility – shared with a Fire Dept. Company – situated at Bushwick's northern border, near Flushing Ave. CB 4 strongly opposed this site since it would not be accessible to most of the community. In the fire's immediate wake, CB 4 proposed that a stand-alone police precinct be located at the Knickerbocker-Bleecker intersection and, over the next year, relentlessly pursued this position. In the end, the Police Department conceded that CB 4 had the better of the argument and adopted its recommendation. Had CB 4 not taken this stand, the 83<sup>rd</sup> would never have been built here. (It should also be noted that the old 83<sup>rd</sup> Precinct was, after

completing its mission, recycled to provide other governmental services and continues to anchor the busy Wilson and DeKalb Ave. intersection.)

- **Parkland Development** – Beyond its other problems and despite the abundance of abandoned open space, Bushwick possessed an extremely low allocation of designated parkland. In framing the Action Plan, HPD and CB 4 identified a large vacant area at the juncture of Broadway and Aberdeen St., in Bushwick’s southern end, for recreational development. As it was situated next the Broadway “EL”, this was not considered – at least in the late 70’s - to be appropriate for housing. The site was ultimately allocated to the Parks Dept. and now, as the Thomas Boyland Park, provides active recreational services to the community. In addition, a vacant block situated in close proximity to the new 83rd Precinct was converted to a baseball field that now, as Hope Field, hosts the Bushwick Little League and other recreational uses. The development of recreation space has continued over the years and, in 1997, produced a new park next to PS 145 in northern Bushwick. Finally, many of Bushwick’s existing parks, including Maria Hernandez and Irving Square Parks and Hecksher Playground (which serves Hope Gardens), have been fully upgraded over the past two decades.
- **Employment Services-** During the late 1970’s, the Federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funded public service jobs in low income communities. In 1978, the Bushwick community made a concerted effort to secure CETA funding and, with the support of the NYC Department of Employment, won a significant grant. The prime beneficiary of this funding was the then fledgling Ridgewood-Bushwick Senior Council, which utilized the grant to commence the development of what is now Bushwick’s major provider of housing, health, youth, senior citizen and social services. (Several of Ridgewood-Bushwick’s current senior management team began their careers as “CETA workers”.) Ridgewood-Bushwick’s emergence from its CETA roots filled the vacuum of competent community based agencies that previously inhibited local development and magnified the community’s dependence upon directly managed governmental programs and services.
- **Economic Development** – The Knickerbocker Ave. shopping district has remained vibrant throughout the past thirty years and has responded well to changing consumer demands. While the local merchants did organize themselves and received some governmental funding, the continued resiliency of the surrounding area as a result of the Action Plan probably constituted the dominant reason for this. The Broadway commercial district, however, has only partially recovered from the body blow it received in the 1977 blackout. Direct government involvement, including the development of new commercial space and the

construction of a new local Post Office, played significant roles in securing what improvement did occur. As the surrounding community continues to improve, Broadway should follow suit. Finally, none of the few efforts made to revive Bushwick's industrial base met any success. (A late 1970's project to establish a large commercial center at the old Rheingold Brewery went nowhere – and was strongly opposed by neighboring merchant groups to boot.)

## **SUBSEQUENT HOUSING TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS**

The one constant housing trend in Bushwick over the past thirty years has been the continued construction of infill housing in the remaining – and now extremely scarce – vacant areas. This development has also significantly strengthened the stability of the existing housing stock and drastically decreased the incidence of additional abandonment. Where, in the 1970's, significant fire damage to a building was generally a nearly automatic prelude to abandonment, today a similarly damaged residence will usually be promptly repaired and restored to active use. This recovery is also reflected in the 10.9% increase in population Bushwick experienced during the 1980's, a positive trend that has only accelerated since then.

The patterns of this development have, however, evolved during this time and merit more detailed attention.

- **Partnership Housing** – This has been by far the dominant mechanism through which new housing, affordable to working and lower-middle class residents, was constructed in Bushwick. Springing from the central core, Partnership Housing has now impacted nearly every corner of Bushwick – from George and Cedar Sts. in the north to Covert and Cooper Sts. in the south – not to mention the previously devastated Evergreen, Central and Wilson Ave. cross-streets. Built to supplement and “blend in” with the existing housing stock – and not replace it - Partnership Housing has performed an extremely valuable neighborhood stabilization function in Bushwick. Beyond this, the model first tested in CB4 has been successfully replicated, as a key component of Mayor Koch's 10 Year Housing plan, in numerous other low income communities. To date, at least 1,600 units of Partnership Housing have been constructed in Bushwick.
- **Farewell NYCHA** – While NYCHA played a critical role in implementing the initial components of the Bushwick Action Plan through the construction of Hope Garden's three residential components – and the creation of several excellent community centers – it would not be involved in any of Bushwick's subsequent residential development. Instead, the focus shifted from low income to Partnership-like lower middle class affordable housing. In fact, while several low income projects, funded by a variety of government programs and sponsored, for the most part, by the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Council., have emerged since the mid-1980's, the housing needs of Bushwick's poorest residents have not

received the degree of attention they did right after the blackout. This development partially reflected the views of certain Bushwickites, who did not want to see the community inundated with “low income projects”. Still, given the extremely low income nature of Bushwick’s population, this removed an important ingredient from a balanced housing strategy.

- **Ridgewood-Bushwick in Ascendancy** – Since becoming a major service provider in the community, the Ridgewood-Bushwick Senior Council has played the dominant role in the development of new housing and many other programs in Bushwick. A prime sponsor of Partnership Housing in North Bushwick, Ridgewood-Bushwick has also spearheaded many State, City and Federally supported housing initiatives throughout the area. In recent years, Ridgewood-Bushwick sponsored the Renaissance Housing project that is developing a significant number of units of affordable housing at the old Rheingold Brewery site, many of which have already been occupied.
- **Bushwick Initiative** - During the past two years, Ridgewood Bushwick, in close collaboration with HPD and numerous other City agencies, has played a lead role in developing and implementing the Bushwick Initiative, a comprehensive and holistic effort to stabilize and improve housing, combat crime and generally improve the health and quality of life in a targeted area situated in the vicinity of Maria Hernandez Park. This is a community that possesses an aged, low income, residential housing stock that, in many ways, mimics the buildings that were decimated in Bushwick’s central core during the 1970’s. The area has also experienced a deluge of drug influenced crime over the past two decades. Paradoxically, these blocks are also vulnerable to the impact of gentrification (see below) that has been increasingly emigrating from Williamsburg. The success of this venture, which, to date, has been significant, will hopefully both stabilize and strengthen the existing housing stock and maintain, to the extent possible, its low income, largely rent stabilized, character.
- **Private Market Housing** – Over the past decade – and at an accelerating pace – totally unsubsidized, free market, housing units have been constructed in Bushwick. In the late 1970’s, this would have been considered unthinkable, given the non-existent housing market. Yet scores of these three story “Fedders Housing” units are appearing throughout Bushwick and competing with Partnership housing for the few remaining vacant lots. While in other parts of the City – particularly in Queens – these types of units are poorly regarded because of their undistinguished architecture, in Bushwick this development validates the fact of the community’s reemergence as a viable and economically solid community.
- **“Along the L” – Creeping (or Galloping?) Gentrification** – The past decade has also witnessed the continued migration of young artists and professionals from lower Manhattan to Williamsburg and, ultimately, Bushwick along the now very trendy L line. This development has begun to transform the formerly

depressed industrial zone along Bushwick's northern border into a gentrifying district of converted lofts, coffee houses and exciting bars and restaurants. It has also steeply increased the property values and rental costs in this previously low income community. The potential impact of this development was vividly underlined by the recent construction of a – for Bushwick – high-rise luxury condo in close proximity to the Wyckoff-Myrtle subway station. In addition, condo conversions also related to this migration have already appeared near the Wilson Ave. L train station, which is situated near Bushwick's southern edge. In short, the implications of gentrification in Bushwick - for good and for ill – remain very much an open question at this time.

### **ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN THE “OTHER BUSHWICK”**

Beyond the exciting developments summarized above, life went on in Bushwick much the same way as it has in most of New York's other low income communities. The changes wrought in the following areas were, with a few exceptions, more dependent upon City-wide trends than upon anything generated within the local community. A short summary follows:

- **Crime** – All of the Action Plan's physical improvements could not protect Bushwick from the ravages of crime, youth gang violence and, in particular, the scourge of the crack epidemic that afflicted all low income New York City communities in the 1980's and early 1990's. In fact, and as noted above, the vicinity of Maria Hernandez Park – named after a community leader who was killed by drug dealers – became a notably notorious haven for the drug trade during this time. Prostitution also prospered along Bushwick's Flushing Ave. border. Such negative factors certainly retarded the impact of Bushwick's positive developments until at least the mid 1990's. The significant decreases in crime levels that have occurred here over the past decade, while certainly welcome, essentially mirror similar City-wide trends. (While such recent developments as the Bushwick Initiative do qualify this statement to an extent, they only constitute exceptions to the general rule.)
- **Education** – With one notable exception – a middle school for the gifted that was established, in the early 1970's, by the local school board and that has consistently been one of NYC's highest rated institutions – public education levels in Bushwick have consistently been rated as among the worst in the city. While several recent developments – including the establishment of several small schools to replace the former, poorly performing, Bushwick High School and the creation of a few Charter Schools - offer hope for the future, these all remain very much works in progress.
- **Poverty** – Until the decrease in the public assistance rate that occurred as a consequence of the mid-1990's welfare reforms, over 40% of Bushwick's residents were, in one way or another, dependent upon government income

support programs. Despite the physical improvements that had occurred, welfare dependency had not diminished. While Bushwick did experience – along with all other NYC communities – significant decreases in income dependence during the past decade, this basically reflected National and City-wide trends. (The ultimate impact of the welfare reforms upon this population still needs to be determined.) Finally, a large proportion of Bushwick’s inhabitants, whether on public assistance or not, remain at the lowest City-wide income levels and find themselves in increasing competition for the declining number of low rent housing units.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Before concluding, I will attempt to sketch out the principal dynamics that, as I see it, are affecting current and future development in Bushwick, identify several issues and concerns that they raise and suggest several possible solutions – or, at least, planning alternatives. This discussion will be very tentative and may either provide an incomplete picture of current developments or state observations that may very well be off the mark. But at least it will hopefully provoke a healthy discussion.

From the perspective of 2007, the major dynamic forces affecting development in Bushwick, and their potential consequences and possible resolution, appear to be the following:

- **Continuing Impact of Gentrification** – Unless a drastic downturn to the City’s economy occurs, the “L Train Migration” from Williamsburg will only accelerate, and will spread well beyond the train route. In particular, the residential and semi-industrial blocks situated south of the Jefferson St. and DeKalb Ave. stations are increasingly experiencing significant population change, with many former industrial lofts already converted to residential use. As time passes, the new, mostly white, migrants will increasingly compete with the current low income, mostly Hispanic, residents for the available rental housing in the context of steeply rising property values. Picking a winner here will not be a very difficult task, though the impact of the Bushwick Initiative, which targets this community, may give the lower income interests a fighting chance. In time – and, based on the contents of some blogs, it may already be happening – Bushwick’s other train line – the “J” on Broadway – should also provide a conduit for new settlers. Given the fine architecture along and adjacent to nearby Bushwick Ave. (something that the “L Train” neighborhoods that have already been subject to gentrification lack), this will be a highly desirable area to settle once it is considered sufficiently “safe”. If this occurs, conflict between the new and current residents should also materialize. Finally, gentrification will also strengthen and transform Bushwick’s existing commercial strips. This is already happening on Wyckoff and Flushing Aves., and the impact will also be felt on Knickerbocker Ave. and, if I am right about the “J” train, along Broadway as

well. This development might be the variable that actually “brings Broadway back”.

- **Lack of Available Space for New Development/Use Re-Zoning Options** – Until recently, ample vacant space existed to meet Bushwick’s housing development needs. The amount of available unutilized land – and, in particular, City-owned land – is rapidly disappearing and what is available is becoming increasingly expensive. These developments may very well diminish the future potential for additional Partnership Housing. Since the need for affordable housing clearly remains, new development strategies are required. One possible option involves the re-zoning of Bushwick’s remaining – and mostly underutilized – industrial zoned districts to permit residential development. This approach has already been pursued when Renaissance Plaza was constructed on the old Rheingold Brewery site, and one can anticipate the likely replication of such re-zoning driven initiatives in other areas. The problem here, of course, is that most of Bushwick is already zoned for residential use. Thus use re-zoning will, beyond the immediate short term, provide only a limited remedy. Even here, however, it is crucial that any re-zoning proposal be targeted to a specific, affordable housing development plan. Without this caveat, use re-zoning will only accelerate the gentrification of this portion of Bushwick, which is situated in close proximity to both East Williamsburg and the “L” train.
- **Lack of Available Space/The Pressure for Greater Density** – New development can occur both horizontally or vertically. In Bushwick’s case, the preferred option – at least after Hope Gardens I – has almost exclusively been the former. Lack of available space may, however, require this position to be re-considered and possibly modified. But this is an extremely tricky area, since the need to maintain Bushwick’s historic housing scale was one of the principal driving forces behind the original Action Plan. Perhaps new developments with greater density can be constructed in areas not currently occupied by housing, such as in the remaining portions of the industrial zoned district, or in those mostly adjacent residentially zoned areas where the current housing stock is in fair to poor condition. But this whole question needs to be addressed with the maximum of sensitivity lest it blow up in the unsuspecting planner’s face. (The one thing that must, at all costs, be avoided, is the significant displacement of viable low-to-mid density housing by substantially higher density developments.)
- **Increasing Need for Low Income Housing** – As rents soar and gentrification proceeds apace, the unmet housing needs of Bushwick’s many low income residents grow exponentially. For this reason, the construction of a substantial number of low income housing – the first such development since Hope Gardens III – is called for. Without such a remedy, conflict between Bushwick’s poor, and the organizations that represent them, and the other segments of the population will only increase. Besides, this is just a good idea.

- **Preservation Initiatives** – Finally, special attention should be given to the preservation of Bushwick’s most stable and architecturally significant neighborhoods. As the recent construction of a high-rise luxury condo near the Myrtle/Wyckoff Ave. intersection vividly attests, as-of-right development in an R-6 district – Bushwick’s dominant zoning – can have an extremely disruptive impact upon the existing neighborhood scale. As land becomes increasingly scarce and expensive, the urge upon and willingness of local private developers to “build as big as the zoning allows” will only increase. In other neighborhoods, numerous solid, low-density, buildings – many possessing significant architectural value – have been purchased, demolished and then replaced with higher density and infinitely less distinguished garden apartments. The same can happen in Bushwick. For this reason, it would make sense for the community to pursue such strategies as the Landmark Designation of targeted portions of Bushwick to preserve their unique historic and architectural qualities and guard against such wrongheaded over-development. Much of Bushwick Ave. – which is beginning to experience the dubious impact of poorly designed “Fedders” housing - would certainly qualify. (In fact, the development of high quality, scale-maintaining, apartment houses that would not displace solid existing housing should positively be encouraged here.) In addition, the large brick and masonry community situated near Irving Square Park, which contains housing that is at least as distinguished as that portion of Ridgewood that has already received landmark designation, should follow suit. Beyond this, the extensive wood-frame community that occupies much of southern Bushwick will be especially vulnerable to private market over-development. As this community contains some of the most distinguished housing of that variety in NYC, it also merits significant preservation attention. Finally, the possible down-zoning of a selected portion of this area to R-4 should be seriously considered as it more accurately reflects the existing scale of the area. This is an option that has recently been employed in many other NYC communities. In any event, the active pursuit of such neighborhood preservation strategies will provide needed balance to a plan that would support the targeted development of higher density construction in other portions of Bushwick.

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In sum, I hope these notes have provided a detailed summary of Bushwick’s tumultuous crisis years, its hard road to recovery and the challenging options this vibrant community faces as it confronts an uncertain, though hopeful, future.