

## Introduction

THE CENTRAL PART of East New York in Brooklyn, home to 100,000 people in 1965, was largely destroyed in the following decade. The destruction accompanied a racial shift in the population, from 85 percent white in 1960 to 80 percent black and Puerto Rican by 1966.<sup>1</sup> During that period, the racially biased policies of real estate brokers and speculators and their unrestrained exploitation of house-hungry blacks and Puerto Ricans, the redlining of the community by the banks, and the almost total neglect of the situation by the city and its agencies brought the area to the brink of collapse.

Following riots in the summer of 1966, the city finally decided to use its housing resources toward rebuilding in the riot-torn areas of the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and East New York. My consulting firm was given the contract to develop the housing program for East New York. Working with a community committee, we developed a Vest Pocket and Rehabilitation housing improvement program for 2,300 units of new and rehabilitated low-rent and moderate-income housing. Ten years later, despite the successful completion of the 2,300-unit construction program, nearly half of East New York had been destroyed.

The community destruction phase actually began in the early 1960s, when up to 200 real estate firms worked overtime to turn East New York from white to black. "Ripe" blocks were flooded with scare literature; brokers and speculators paraded black families up and down the streets to frighten whites into selling. Middle-income minority families bought houses at inflated prices during the early 1960s, but, as whites moved out, as stores and institutions closed, and as welfare families moved in, middle-income blacks began looking elsewhere for housing.

The East New York story is typical of ghetto communities in big cities across the country. In the St. Louis Model Cities area, for example, 31 percent of the housing stock was vacated and vandalized or demolished between 1960 and 1966, creating a ghost town that stretched for

blocks at a time. In Newark, massive urban renewal clearance in its Central Ward, combined with rapacious real estate tactics in adjacent wards, accelerated a transition from white middle- and working-class to almost totally black fringe neighborhoods. In Cleveland, to view a darker (more racist) side, newly emerging black ghettos were rezoned to permit bars, gambling dens, and houses of prostitution. Nevertheless, East New York remains a fair enough example of what happened to blacks and other minorities who moved into newly created ghetto communities.

The ghetto was ruled by standards and laws different from those that operated in white society. The ruthless exploitation of helpless black and other minority families, not only by private parties but by government officials and agencies as well, was typical. Deception, profiteering, negligence, criminality, and community-destroying behavior were practiced on a grand scale, unfettered by ethical, professional, or (often) legal standards. An example: top FHA (Federal Housing Authority) officials and even the prestigious firm of Dun and Bradstreet were indicted for lying about East New York homebuyer incomes, appraised values, and housing quality in the service of unscrupulous mortgage brokers who were paying them off.<sup>2</sup> In East New York, it was open season.

Make no mistake. Ghettos are created by the apartheid policies of white society. In July 1966, Martin Luther King embarked on a campaign to end the extreme segregation of blacks in Chicago, one of the continuing legacies of slavery. He began his campaign with a rally in Soldier Field and a march on City Hall during which he was stoned and spat upon. After meeting with Mayor Richard Daley the following day, he announced that nonviolence had not produced victories in Chicago. The unproductive rally was followed by marches into Cicero and other white Chicago suburbs, after which King said he had never met anything like the concentrated hatred and violence poured out by northern segregationists.

Blacks and other minorities channeled into the ghettos have needs just like everyone else. They want decent homes in decent neighborhoods, with quality schools and a watchful, impartial police force. But none of these things are freely available to them.

In most of its important responsibilities, the New York City government has failed to satisfy the needs of its local communities. These include the need to (1) rigidly enforce an open housing policy through-

out the five boroughs, (2) maintain high standards of housing, police, fire, sanitation, schooling, and similar services, and (3) grapple effectively with the social, physical, and economic problems of the urban ghetto.

Most big cities have long been indifferent to these needs. None of the central agencies are responsible for the well-being of a local community, nor are they used to viewing them as entities. The normal tendency of a city agency is to administer and evaluate its own program as an isolated citywide function; thus, a police force is concerned primarily with the number of arrests it makes, not with the service it provides to the communities it occupies. Even if the inadequacies are exposed, a chronic shortage of funds and a rigid definition of functions inhibits attempts to develop real solutions. Failures and cynical indifference are the inevitable results.

The impacts of racial and economic segregation are manifold. Today, more than 9 million people in the United States live in concentrated urban enclaves where more than 40 percent or more of the residents are poor.<sup>3</sup> These are communities where jobs have moved to the suburbs, the streets are unsafe, and good child care is beyond most working families' means, if it exists at all. In 1997, 5.4 million households with 12.3 million individuals paid more than half their income for rent.<sup>4</sup> These households represented 5 percent of the nation's population and a disturbing one-sixth of all U.S. renters.

For many people, safe, decent housing is an unattainable luxury. Despite a booming economy, 750,000 people currently live on the streets. Five million women struggle alone to provide financial support and child care for their children. Most of these unfortunates struggle for survival in the nation's ghettos.

This book provides a case study of the ghettoization of East New York and its impacts. It shows what really did happen when a pleasant working-class community was destroyed. For many people, including those who lived there or whose families lived there, the process by which their community was destroyed remains a mystery. Coverage in the major media has always been spotty, except when murder or riots get front-page coverage.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that the destruction is noted in the major media, the blame is generally laid at the feet of the blacks and Puerto Ricans who moved into the community.

This book describes the etiology of ghetto formation. It began with steps to prevent blacks from living in most communities occupied by

whites and forced them instead to live in East New York and other communities slated by real estate forces for minority occupancy. It continued with an endless series of real estate swindles, speculations, and foreclosures, followed by an almost universal halt to normal maintenance and repair. This produced a shocking reduction in housing quality within two or three short years.

Once they moved into East New York, minorities were confronted with the lack of services. While families with thousands of children were moving into the community, the New York City Board of Education was not moved to provide the additional school seats needed. A report by my office on school needs in 1969 recommended the immediate construction of four elementary and four intermediate schools. Yet, between 1966 and 1974, the Board of Education was unable (or unwilling?) to build a single school in East New York.

It is my hope that this book will open our eyes to what racial segregation has done to those who inhabit the urban ghettos. It is also my hope that black and Puerto Rican people (and any other ethnic or racial minorities) will learn more fully about the history of their exploitation and oppression at the hands of white society—and that they will feel strongly enough about it to renew their efforts to win the right to live anywhere in this great city and to secure the high quality of services they deserve.

There is also the distinct possibility that blacks and Puerto Ricans will not recognize themselves as victims. When interviewed, many blacks and other minorities felt they were being treated fairly by the police and their government. They saw their problems as their own fault or nobody's fault, according to responses. If they didn't get further ahead, there was something lacking in the home, or perhaps in the school. If there was a lot of crime around, it was not the government's fault or anyone's fault. There just weren't any jobs, so young people got into trouble.

The following pages show that it really was someone's fault and that the perpetrators were usually white. This is not to say that blacks have not committed their fair share of crimes or done their share of exploiting their own people or of profiteering at the expense of their community. But it is to say that much of this misbehavior stems from the social and economic straitjacket into which the black and Puerto Rican community has been crammed.

Many minority crimes and cases of corruption, exploitation, and

profiteering are an attempt by those committing them to find a place in the sun. They are perhaps misguided, and that is something that has to be addressed. To make great strides forward, blacks and Puerto Ricans will have to rally and organize their community in ways they have not yet always been able to manage.

Some progress has been made. Local community organizations have been and are useful instruments for changing the ways things are done. They have a direct stake in the outcome, a detailed knowledge of conditions, experience with the way things are, the spirit and determination to succeed, and the intelligence and imagination to develop new approaches and solutions. Not being part of the centralized governmental bureaucracy, they can develop logical solutions without worrying about agency prerogatives or bureaucratic limits. They can also freely pressure government and public-spirited business to make the needed changes, though getting government to see the light is often the main stumbling block.

Local community activity has already been the inspiration for the construction of more than 1,200 Nehemiah homes and another 1,300 units of new and rehabilitated housing in East New York during the past two decades. Advances in education, child care, health, youth programs, and other social services are also described in the pages that follow. Much more could have been accomplished if it were not for an entrenched political cabal, which ignored community needs and served its own selfish interests. The continuing criminalization of East New York's youth (indeed, almost its entire male population) and the intense concentration of welfare recipients and other desperately poor families remain terrible burdens for the community. The tendency for most organizations to go it alone, to compete rather than cooperate, also impedes progress.

Yet, a glimmer of hope has just appeared on the horizon. As I type these words on the evening of November 6, 2001, I see that the reformer Charles Barron has won the City Council seat vacated by Priscilla Wooten, who held sway in East New York for more than thirty years. Diane Gordon, another newcomer, defeated Assemblyman Ed Griffith, another perennial, in last year's New York state election. If this emerging new leadership commits itself to community improvement, it might just be able to rally all the local organizations around the highest priority community needs and to design programs and plan campaigns to meet those needs. It is not too hard to visualize a coalition of ghetto

communities firmly pressing city, state, and federal governments for the programs and services they need.

A word about the events of September 11, 2001, and how they have affected East New York. Hard though it may be for some to understand, the explosions, fire, and meltdown of the World Trade Center and everything around it had little effect on the community. The East New York ghetto is not part of the mainstream economic system; it is part of an alternate social and economic system. While many individuals grieved along with the rest of the city, while many lost jobs and haven't found new ones, the disaster had no great emotional or physical impact on the community.

This will not prevent the city from using *its* disaster-related fiscal poverty as an excuse to defer the improvement of housing, social services, the small-business climate, and the infrastructure of East New York. Worse yet, the city will likely try to force draconian budget cuts on East New York and other ghetto communities in Brooklyn and the Bronx, just as it did during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. It is not too early to start organizing against any such outcome. East New York deserves sufficient city resources to bring itself out of the hole that has been dug in *its* ground zero over the past forty years.