

Hell's Kitchen is Burning (Voice article)

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We're sending this long article separately so as not to overload the mailboxes of all you AOLers; it's easy to forget you don't get mail like others on the net and need to download long articles.

This article appeared in this week's Village Voice, and here it is if you missed it (or if you couldn't find the Voice). The 8th Avenue Zoning issue is not the only threat to our neighborhood. This article concentrates on the Clinton Urban Renewal Area. It's a complicated issue with much history and many players.

Even this article can't cover all the issues we face. There are proposals to build a skyscraper or top of Port Authority, three theaters on Theatre Row are slated to be demolished, the Javits Center wants to expand to 42nd St., the Coliseum looms as a monstrous development. Oh yes, Yankee Stadium.

And we have few friends in City government. Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Speaker Peter Vallone and Borough President Virginia Fields are going orgasmic sliding up the west side with deals for themselves and cronies. Some in the community will gladly sell it out (see below, fourth paragraph from the end of the article) to get site control in the Urban Renewal area and line their own pockets.

We aren't kidding when we say that Ninth Avenue will be next.

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Hell's Kitchen is Burning

With a ravenous market and a pro-development mayor, West Side tenants say they don't stand a chance

Village Voice, September 2, 1998
by J. A. Lobbia

On a map, Hell's Kitchen looks like a perfectly squared-off and straightforward neighborhood, a grid par excellence. Especially in its northern end, from 42nd to 59th streets, block after block is gridded out with die-cut precision from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson River. But the West Side community's cartographic clarity belies the complications it faces as an onslaught of development promises--or perhaps threatens--to permanently reshape it.

"This place is arguably the most pressurized urban area in the city, maybe even the country," says Bob Kalin, who for 19 years has worked as a local housing organizer. "As we head into the next century, who knows where we'll end up, with all that's going on?"

What's going on is the pairing of an unbridled real estate market coupled with a mayor whose policies spur rather than control that market. The combination leaves tenants in Hell's Kitchen, long a neighborhood of affordable and even cheap rents, in a squeeze. Increasingly, the low-rise community finds itself surrounded by megaprojects like the Disneyfied Times Square, Trump's Riverside South, a proposed Yankee Stadium and convention center expansion, and an ever-rising wall of luxury towers moving in from the east.

And next week, top real estate moguls will meet to contemplate bidding on a city-sponsored market-rate development project on Tenth Avenue. Bids are due at the end of this month.

"It's amazing," says Marge Pearson, a broker for Douglas Elliman, Manhattan's biggest high-end realty agency. "You're moving the East Side over to the West, and it's going farther West than it has ever gone before. Very clearly, the whole city is becoming one."

Not everyone shares Pearson's enthusiasm for such a unified New York. "When everything becomes the same, when tourists rule and Ranch One is the main restaurant, you have to ask if this is really a place that will attract people with different kinds of talents, interests, and new ideas," asks Joe Restuccia, who heads a local nonprofit housing group. "Will it still be a city? It looks like

it's going to be Afghan Kebab House or Ranch One."

Longterm Hell's Kitchen residents and activists are wary of media pronouncements--whether by The New York Times or Time Out New York--that their neighborhood is "hot." Indeed, in a neighborhood steeped in history--the dominant political club is 106 years old and local gangs have been the stuff of Hollywood movies and Broadway plays--being declared a cutting-edge community is itself a tradition.

For 15 years, the Times has regularly deemed Hell's Kitchen--or Clinton, as it is also known--as up-and-coming, a backwater where renters could still enjoy the ambience of an authentic immigrant neighborhood without spending Uptown sums for rent. And it's true that, though rare, a few two-digit rents survive in some Clinton tenements; many old-timers shriek at the \$1000 walk-up studios that many New Yorkers consider standard. But while rents and co-op and condo prices have crept up over the years, more often than not, the Kitchen has cooled off as regularly as it has heated up.

But the same West Siders who shun media labels for their neighborhood agree--in fact, fear--that this time, those labels might stick. That's because the robust market is bolstered by an unprecedentedly clear shift in city policy that backs developers and landlords. In early August, for instance, the City Council rezoned Clinton's Eighth Avenue border to allow larger buildings, despite bitter community opposition. In the upcoming months, the city department of Housing Preservation and Development will be carving up the Clinton Urban Renewal Area, and on one site has already scrapped plans for affordable housing, instead seeking a predominantly luxury building. All this happens as community members complain that the city's Department of Buildings has abandoned a law intended to protect their neighborhood.

"This is the moment that I think people have feared the most since the 1960s, when the city condemned land and wanted to bulldoze the entire neighborhood," says Mary Brendle, a longtime resident who has written a history of Clinton. "There was a time when Robert Moses wanted the People Mover, which would be a second-level street with commercial buildings underneath it and luxury residential on top. Now, on 42nd Street beyond Tenth Avenue, suddenly there's luxury towers. Trump is moving down, Eighth Avenue is getting much bigger, and we'll be left stuck inside this little box."

FOR 35 YEARS, Anna Soares has lived in a studio on 53rd Street just off Eighth Avenue. There's nothing fancy about the place--Soares's kitchen features a dorm-style half refrigerator and hot-plate stove--but Soares, who, at 76, still works as a secretary, says it's always been plenty for her.

But recently, she's had complaints. Increasingly, new tenants are arriving in groups to share rents of \$1500--more than three times Soares's own rent. And they're young, playing "I don't know what you'd call it; I guess it's music," loud enough to send Soares shopping for another place to live.

"I go to 888 Eighth Avenue every time my lease expires," she says, referring to a nearby 22-story postwar building down the street. "I'm there so often they know me. But the studios are \$1500!" She's shopped at the soon-to-be-opened Gershwin, a tower built by developer Jack Resnick at 50th and Eighth Avenue. "But they want \$2200 for a one-bedroom!" gasps Soares. "The sign outside did say 'Luxury.' I guess I was warned."

It's not unexpected that the Eighth Avenue corridor is burgeoning, since it arguably belongs more to Midtown and the theater district than to Clinton. It's the area west of Eighth Avenue and off 42nd Street, along the low-rise side streets that slope to the river, where the boom is more surprising.

Between Eighth and Tenth avenues, tenants are paying \$2000-plus rents not for luxury high-rises, but for renovated tenements. Even west of Tenth Avenue, where 1996 rents in low-rise rehabbed buildings ran from \$800 for a studio to \$1550 for two-bedrooms, they now range from \$1100 to \$1900. Studios there in relatively new high-rise buildings ran from \$1200 and two-bedrooms were \$2200 in 1996; now, they fetch \$1500 to \$2800.

Erich Giebelhaus, a 28-year-old who works in public relations for a health care association, came to Hell's Kitchen two years ago to snag what he calls a deal: a \$1200 studio loft on 39th near Ninth Avenue. "This was my first New York apartment," says Giebelhaus, who moved from Minnesota, "and I went door-to-door in the neighborhood because I heard you could get more for your money in Hell's Kitchen, and I found that to be true."

Giebelhaus appreciates the "true and honest specialty shops and the real neighborhood feel here; it's very genuine." And he's happy he arrived when he did. "This area has definitely priced up since I got here, so now it's not much different from most of Manhattan."

Still, Giebelhaus knows he's not living on Sutton Place. He finds some stretches "a little rough around the edges," and, sounding more like an old-timer than a newcomer, reminds: "Not too long

ago, even Ninth Avenue was not a place for the fainthearted."

In fact, just west of Ninth Avenue on 45th Street is the site of a rough bit of Hell's Kitchen history that is not unrelated to the neighborhood's current housing dilemma. Just after midnight on August 29, 1959, a handful of Puerto Rican teens came to the May Mathews Playground, a lot that spans 45th to 46th streets, "to beat up Irish and Italians," according to a police report. Among the youths was 16-year-old Salvatore Agron, a member of the Vampires gang who made it a habit to wear a cape to rumbles. Agron stabbed to death two Hell's Kitchen teens, who stumbled into a pair of West 45th Street tenements to die. Agron entered legend as the Capeman.

The Capeman murders ultimately prompted something more successful and long-lasting than Paul Simon's Broadway musical. In response to the violence, the community formed the Clinton Planning Council. One of its most enduring accomplishments came in 1974, when the council and other community groups got the city to create the Special Clinton District (SCD), a series of laws designed to keep the neighborhood's housing supply solid and affordable.

Under the SCD's rules, Clinton landlords cannot get alteration permits unless they prove to the city that they have not harassed tenants. And the SCD attempts to keep the neighborhood's low-rise character, in part by limiting buildings to the standard tenement height of six stories. The presumption was that if old tenements were preserved and new towers prevented, the gentry would be kept away.

That presumption was wrong. "People who were attracted to the neighborhood in the mid '80s were interested in living in the city," says Restuccia. "I remember someone telling me how wonderful it was to have a tub in the kitchen, how convenient!"

Restuccia says that until recently, the district succeeded in keeping development at an even pace, but he asserts that now, the SCD has been compromised, and not by the charm of the cold-water flat. Instead, he says, the Department of Buildings (DOB) readily gives permits to owners who, for a number of reasons, should not have them, or allows those with permits to do construction and demolition work well beyond what the permit allows. DOB did not return calls for this story.

The results are varied: sometimes, a 30-unit SRO becomes a 12-unit rental apartment; other times, apartments are split to make several units out of one. In the process, tenants are sometimes endangered. In one West 47th Street building, subdivided apartments left people in five units with not a single means of secondary egress in case of a fire; two others had no fire escape at all.

Hell's Kitchen resident Meg Black says it's "extremely frustrating" to combat illegal alterations when the city is unwilling to enforce its own laws. "The attitude of this administration," says Black, "is that it will lie down for developers any day but refuse to ever stand up for the community."

Sources say one particular Clinton building shows how the SCD has eroded and suggests that DOB will cave in to pressure from landlords. The building, at 364 West 51st Street near Ninth Avenue, is owned by James Kinsey. He bought it in 1994 and, since 1995, has purchased 10 other buildings in Hell's Kitchen, including so many on West 47th between Eighth and Ninth avenues that he owns practically the whole block. Kinsey did not return calls.

Shortly after Kinsey bought the 51st Street building, DOB granted permits to install new partitions and renovate kitchen and bathroom fixtures. But in the summer of 1996, DOB revoked the permits, saying that the building's location within the SCD required Kinsey to get a "certificate of no harassment" to prove tenants had not been forced out. (In 1981, the city had found that a previous landlord had indeed harassed tenants.)

But by the time the permits were revoked, the work had been completed, including turning a cellar space into the lower level of a "duplex" apartment, which, according to a 1996 record, was the highest-renting apartment in the building, fetching \$2250 for five rooms. (In contrast, rent listed for one of three longtime tenants was \$109 for four rooms.) Kinsey's monthly rent roll for the single property was \$22,184.30.

Kinsey took the case to the Board of Standards and Appeals, a quasijudicial city agency. There, DOB staunchly defended its revocation of the permits as recently as late March. But in June, DOB offered to restore the permits. "Accordingly," a DOB attorney wrote to Kinsey's lawyer, "your application before the Board of Standards and Appeals will be withdrawn."

Restuccia was stunned. "The owner goes to BSA and DOB starts rolling over? It's very curious. Why is it okay all of a sudden? It's clear that the special district means nothing."

Kalin says ignoring the SCD is just one reaction to a superheated real estate market. Cash offers to get tenants to leave, especially in SROs, are also common. "Buyouts are coming back in a big way," says Kalin. "I have one tenant who was offered \$50,000 to leave an SRO, and another \$75,000."

SROs have long been a key piece of the Clinton housing stock, though even the 8000 units there now are about half as many as a decade ago. Many SROs have been converted to tourist-class hotels. One of the most famous is the Longacre on West 45th, where Kalin says that only about 40 SRO tenants remain of the more than 100 who lived there in 1995. In the spirit of Disney, the hotel is now known as the Aladdin and is primarily for tourists.

Indeed, SRO tenants were among Hell's Kitchen's first casualties in the 1980s, when landlords converted old hotels to co-ops and condos. Some rousted old tenants by moving in criminals. Others torched buildings. And others relied on unadorned thuggery. Megadeveloper Harry Macklowe used the cover of night, ordering the midnight demolition of four SROs on West 44th Street in 1985.

Ironically, this month Macklowe will open his 26-story luxury high-rise at 50th and Eighth Avenue, complete with terraces, health club, and prewired fiber optics. Alcove studios rent for \$1800. Macklowe has named the tower Longacre House.

IN LATE JUNE, a pack of the city's most powerful real estate interests assembled downtown to hear the details of a potentially lucrative scheme: The city was seeking a developer to build housing on Tenth Avenue near 54th Street. The highest bidder would be free to charge market rents for 80 per cent of the apartments, providing 20 per cent were set aside for low-income tenants. Tax breaks were offered. The deal was sweet enough to attract titans such as The Brodsky Organization, Rockrose Development, Harry Macklowe Real Estate Company, Helmsley-Spear, and Donald Zucker to a prebid conference. Bids are due to the department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) September 30.

HPD's description of the site--close to Midtown and in "one of the most popular and vibrant communities in the City"--might sound like a real estate come-on. To many Clinton residents, it also sounds like the city's commitment to affordable housing has gone down the toilet.

The lots for sale are part of the Clinton Urban Renewal Area (CURA), a square bounded by 50th and 56th streets between Tenth and Eleventh avenues. With 22 acres, including vacant lots and empty buildings, CURA is perhaps the largest parcel of developable city-owned land in Manhattan south of 96th Street--and as such, one of the last areas that can be developed to draw "a large influx of white people," says Kalin.

"Luxury and market-rate apartments are not what urban renewal is supposed to be about," says Cappy Haskins. Haskins moved into a tenement within CURA in 1983 after she and more than two dozen tenants were driven out of a Clinton building by a managing agent who went to jail for his deeds, which included threatening to murder tenants. "HPD's plans are very disturbing." HPD did not return calls for this story.

Tenth Avenue is a prime CURA location, and plans for its development have changed with the mayors. Ed Koch had floated an 80/20 plan for a span of the avenue just blocks south of the site currently up for bid, but it sunk under community opposition. David Dinkins allocated \$16 million for a very low and moderate-rent development on the site that HPD is now selling. In the middle of his first term, Rudy Giuliani trimmed that to \$10 million, and by 1996, he cut money entirely.

Clinton residents say that HPD's current market-rate plans also serve as sort of a shock tactic aimed at forcing the community to move forward on a long-embattled second CURA parcel. That is a turn-of-the-century tenement called The Flats on Eleventh Avenue between 52nd and 53rd streets. Opened as part of the Model Tenement Movement, The Flats featured a day-care center and co-op store on the first floor, along with a courtyard and exterior stairwells to enhance fresh air and light. But since the city took over the building when it declared the urban renewal area in 1969, the 63-unit Flats has dwindled to housing only 13 families. Four of seven floors are boarded up.

"My rent here is \$70 a month," says longtime tenant Melody Brooks, "but sometimes, with leaks that last a year and no heat and hot water in the winter, it's a pain to pay even that." Brooks says some of her neighbors pay even less.

Brooks is part of the Clinton Preservation Local Development Corporation (LDC), a group that for years has planned to develop The Flats into 49 units of primarily low- and moderate-income housing, but which has never been able to win HPD approval. Now, with a hot market looming and the LDC's site control on the land about to expire, some fear that HPD may put The Flats up to bid for a market-rate development "if we don't get our act together," LDC chair John Glynn told a Community Board 4 committee this summer.

In the meanwhile, another group, CARE, has an alternative. It wants to develop both The Flats and an adjacent Eleventh Avenue site, a low-rise building that houses the We Can recycling center. Executive Director Mary D'Elia says CARE would add one story to The Flats and build a 99-unit building at the We Can site. In all, CARE's plan would add 137 low to moderate-income apartments.

Both groups have detailed plans and long local histories--the LDC was formed in opposition to Koch's luxury plan, and CARE formed to manage the low- and moderate-income apartments the city required developer William Zeckendorf to rehab when he built his massive Worldwide Plaza on Eighth

Avenue. But political credentials will be key in determining which group, if either, gets to develop along Eleventh Avenue.

CARE is seen as an arm of the powerful McManus Democratic Club, a group founded in 1892 and still considered the most effective political machine in Manhattan. The club's clout soared last year when Jimmy McManus shocked Democrats by endorsing Republican mayor Giuliani's reelection. Says one Clinton insider, "HPD knows that CARE has to be part of the action on the urban renewal site."

McManus himself acknowledged CARE's ties to his club, with a twist: "People say Mary's my stooge," McManus told the Voice. "That's not true. I'm her stooge. She tells me what to do. I only help her get what she needs to accomplish what she wants." McManus added that he secured City Hall's "help on the urban renewal site" by not vocally opposing the mayor's proposal to upzone Eighth Avenue.

The LDC is headed by Glynn, who ran a local housing advocacy office and who is seen "as a nice guy but sort of out of his league." Where Glynn is frequently chided by HPD, D'Elia says she's had preliminary discussions about CARE's plan with HPD high-ups.

Even those who are no fans of the McManus Club say that with luxury towers looming, it's time to get practical. "Look," says one source. "McManus can access money better than anyone. They're friends of Rudy's. And they're not morons. Otherwise, I think we're going to get screwed."

Haskins, who moved to Clinton just one year after the urban renewal area was declared and who has battled at least one menacing landlord, now worries that City Hall itself is the main threat to her community. "The pressure on this neighborhood is so much greater now because this is the last big parcel and we are ever more the last frontier," says Haskins. "Under this administration, it could become a huge assault."

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