

Context, Community, and Capital: Keywords for the Architecture of Housing under Neoliberalism

Susanne Schindler

The N-word of architectural discourse

Recently over coffee, a colleague who was thinking about mounting an exhibition of what he called ‘innovative’ housing design over the past half-century asked my opinion on a particular aspect of the project: was it really unavoidable that he address neoliberalism in the show? There was a slight hesitation before his mouth formed the word ‘neoliberalism’. Although he didn’t say so outright, it was clear he was seeking legitimation to showcase the architecture of housing without having to consider the socio-economic order of which it is a part. That order, as it pertains to the 1960s, was a well-established welfare state increasingly questioned by both the left and the right. Our socio-economic order today is generally abbreviated as neoliberalism, shorthand for the deregulation, privatisation, financialisation, austerity measures, and growing inequality of a post-welfare state world. Of course, I assured my colleague, he could feature housing in purely architectural terms. But if he wanted to convincingly explain what makes a particularly slender high-rise possible or why its associated ecological features seem desirable, he couldn’t disconnect these architectural elements from their legal, financial, and political aspects. After all, I noted, housing is back on architects’ agendas today because it – or more precisely the lack of affordable versions of it – is back on the public’s agenda. My colleague seemed unconvinced: in our short exchange, I had not given him the absolution he was seeking. What he gave me, however,

was a reminder of how difficult it is for architects to connect built form to questions of finance and politics. To him, merely using the word neoliberalism was fraught with fear of appearing ideological; addressing the entanglement of architecture, power and money seemed to undermine his belief that he, the scholar and critic, alone should be shaping architectural discourse.

There are other architects and scholars, of course, who embrace the term neoliberalism precisely for its shock value, to then make the case for the political role and agency of architecture in face of the inequity which is fundamental to the neoliberal order. In Karen Kubey’s recent issue of *Architectural Design*, ‘Housing as Intervention: Architecture Towards Social Equity’, for example, urban historian Robert Fishman subtitled his essay ‘The Global Crisis of Affordable Housing’ with a call to arms: ‘Architecture Versus Neoliberalism.’¹ Fishman’s point of departure is the paradox that our neoliberal time, characterised by the hugely inadequate financial support for housing for low- and moderate income families, has been one of the most ‘creative’ for architects; he defines creativity as architects ‘problem solving’ and working closely with the many small-scale non-profit developers, responsible for what is today called ‘affordable housing.’² In many ways, this is the point of the larger *AD* issue: to showcase architects who are taking on new roles to advance the production of housing priced below market rates within a neoliberal order.

While the reader can accept the argument that the constraints of working in a complex system of private and public actors demands creative solutions as accurate, in tracing how we got to this point, Fishman makes a basic conceptual error: he conflates housing typologies with financial systems. In his historical meta-narrative, Fishman indicts the 'bureaucratic state' which produced 'towers in the park' as rental housing in the post-war era. In so doing, he equates towers and slabs with the social democracy under which they were built. Accordingly, he welcomes the advent of community- or resident-driven housing development in the early 1970s, which largely produced low-rise typologies often to advance homeownership as a preferred model of tenancy. At the same time, however, Fishman laments the demise of large-scale state subsidies that were precisely what the 'bureaucratic state' was all about, all while revealing, through the choice of illustrations – a photograph of the 1966 Park Hill estate in Sheffield, taken before its renovation and privatisation by Urban Splash in the 2000s – that he, like many architects, in fact admires the architectural qualities produced by the bureaucratic state. Fishman's article thus shows that connecting architecture to the socio-economic order isn't as simple as 'row house equals commodity' or as linear from large-scale to small-scale as we have been accustomed to think.

To make his case for this well-established storyline – the end of bad, large-scale, top down housing development, and the beginning of good, small-scale, bottom up models in the late 1960s – Fishman cites the PREVI project on the periphery of Lima, Peru. This low-rise housing development was designed at that time by well-known architects under the auspices of the United Nations, configured to allow residents to build out and on as their means allowed. In this celebration, however, Fishman not once considers the financial structure that underlay PREVI: individual home ownership

with no resale restrictions, precisely what Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sought in Britain with her right-to-buy policies, which he critiques. That is, at PREVI, in contrast to other state-sponsored mass housing of the period, individual households took on the responsibility for their homes, invested in them when they built out or up, and they were eventually rewarded for this risk-taking by accruing the rising resale value. These are the basic tenets of a neoliberal housing policy: to understand the home not as mere shelter, a non-negotiable need, but as an individual's investment, a commodity. Fishman's argument is accompanied by photographs of one of Elemental's many recent projects in Chile, a present-day successor to PREVI's incremental, ownership-based model.³ The comparison of PREVI, Elemental and British Council Housing thus reveals that the architecture of housing is not a reliable indicator of how it functions socio-economically in the lives of its residents.

I point out Fishman's contradictory equation of typological models and financial models not to single him out, but because this conflation is so widespread. This is the case regardless of whether architects seek to see themselves as non-ideological, like my colleague, or claim to be political by siding with the vaguely defined needs of residents. In either case, resorting to words like 'innovative' or 'creative' – generally connoted as positive – allows architects to avoid precisely describing the terms that they accept – the neoliberal order – in being innovative or creative. Perhaps it is easier for non-architects to see clearly what is at stake. In his new book *Capital City*, geographer, planner, activist, and scholar Samuel Stein addresses planners, not architects. He sets out to question whether planners' widespread conceit that they are working for the 'public good' is still possible in the neoliberal age. Is it possible to talk of public good when planners' main task is to incentivise private real estate development, which inevitably leads to gentrification and

displacement? According to Stein what is at stake for planners, and I would argue also for architects, is an 'existential question': 'If the city is an investment strategy, are they just wealth managers?'⁴ Stein's approach, in contrast to my colleague's and Fishman's, helps him to address and describe how planning decisions are made and how the results play out. This is an approach that architects can learn from.

The terms of housing: New York City, ca. 1965

In this essay, I focus on the language we use to talk (or not) about the intersection of architecture, housing, and neoliberalism. Terminology, I argue, plays a powerful and underrecognised role in allowing architects to avoid what is at stake. To reveal the role of language in any paradigmatic turn, as stipulated in this issue, I trace the emergence, evolution, and codification of two such terms, 'context' and 'community', as central to New York City's gradual shift to neoliberal housing policies between the mid-1960s and the present day. 'Context' generally designates urban design and architecture that is considered sensitive to existing surroundings, in particular by referring to the scale and aesthetics of neighbouring buildings, almost invariably cast as the opposite to Fishman's 'towers in the park.'⁵ 'Community' is generally used to invoke the participation of residents in planning decisions, or, again in Fishman's terms, the opposite to the 'bureaucratic state.' Looking at 'context' and 'community' reveals that the neoliberal turn in US housing policy emerged precisely in conjunction with – and not in opposition to – experiments in small-scale housing design and more user participation as early as the mid-1960s, and that the two notions were often connected, even then, and have remained so to this day.⁶ There was a third term that was central to this shift: 'capital.' The term is not one much invoked by architects or activists today; 'capital' or 'capitalism' is just too close to 'neoliberalism.'⁷ 'Capital', however, is and was synonymous

with various governments' concerted attempts to attract more private-sector involvement in the provision of low-income housing. 'Capital' thus gives us the third C in a trinity that I posit is central to the architecture of housing in the neoliberal age.

In New York City, the case for stronger citizen involvement in planning decisions at the local level, coupled with a call for more 'private investment in the ghetto', dates back at least to the mid-1960s. This was the era of 'advocacy planning', powerfully advanced by lawyer Paul Davidoff.⁸ Davidoff was a founding member of Planners for Equal Opportunity, of a group of young planners who, in 1964, challenged the role of the profession as advancing only the interests of the powerful. In his best-known essay, 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning,' Davidoff argued that planners were no longer to see themselves in the role of the expert charged with developing a singular plan focused exclusively on the physical environment. Rather, he argued, planners should work with local residents to articulate broader goals for improving their lives, which they would then translate into possible planning options.⁹ Invoking more participation was part of the larger movement to expand civil rights to formerly disenfranchised citizens, prompted and made urgent by growing civil unrest. In this spirit, Mayor John V. Lindsay, elected in late 1965, proposed Neighbourhood City Halls to expand on the power of Community Planning Boards, set up a decade earlier. Lindsay also actively embraced a new federal programme, launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his Great Society and War on Poverty programmes, the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act, better known as Model Cities. The programme was approved by the US Congress in November of 1966 and aimed specifically to provide funding to regenerate poverty-stricken and underserved residential neighbourhoods; the federal grants were to benefit closely coordinated social and physical

programmes, designed by local citizens; the money could be spent on anything from job training to transportation, sanitation to health services. While programme elements were defined by citizens, they were to be implemented by city agencies and they were to draw to the largest possible extent on private-sector involvement.

The decentralisation of decision-making and the call for more private investment – two key tenets of neoliberalism – thus went hand in hand. Importantly, however, in the late 1960s, this involvement of the private sector did not mean a withdrawal of the state, on the contrary. It meant its expansion. As housing historian Alexander von Hoffman has shown, it was Johnson's programmes, not Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan's later policies, which positioned the private sector as central for the provision of low-income housing; in fact, Johnson was the first president to use the term and advocate for 'public-private partnerships'. Federal mortgage subsidy programmes like Section 235 (for homeownership) and Section 236 (for rental housing), which lowered the interest rate of conventional mortgages to 1 percent, were passed as part of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act. Between 1969 and 1973, the two new programmes generated roughly 508,000 homes; in contrast, the long-running and well-established public housing programme produced only 415,000 homes.¹⁰

Housing and its design ended up playing a central role in Model Cities, even though the programme was explicitly conceived as taking on a novel, broader approach to inequality, of which the physical environment was only one part.¹¹ To jumpstart Model Cities, the Lindsay administration launched a 'vest-pocket housing and rehabilitation' programme in mid-1966, even before the federal programme was approved; 'vest-pocket' designated sites that were smaller than a full block, an approach which then and now is more frequently called 'infill

housing'.¹² By mid-1967, relevant municipal entities had approved the plans prepared by local citizens working with appointed planners to site roughly 1,600 apartments in five areas, which, combined with other initiatives came to a total of 14,500 apartments to be developed in this new manner. Most of these were envisioned as 'head starts' to New York City's proposed Model Cities neighbourhoods called Central Brooklyn, Harlem–East Harlem, and the South Bronx, encompassing the city's poorest and most racially segregated areas. This was a significant reorientation in the city's post-war housing policy, which to date had privileged building non-profit, often union-sponsored middle-class housing with a sprinkling of public housing to stabilise areas deemed on the verge of decay, but easily salvageable.¹³

As the authors of a 1967 pamphlet on the vest pocket programme wrote, the goal was to generate much-needed affordable housing on 'long-neglected, vacant, and underused sites' through buildings that would 'fit into the neighbourhood, including 3, 4, 5, and 6 stories'.¹⁴ The authors directly connected housing typology and citizen involvement. As they wrote: 'Too often in the past, housing projects have been planned and built in a vacuum, a vacuum of non-participation. The result has been large, impersonal towers that destroy the smaller scale of the neighbourhood.'¹⁵ The assumption that 'context' and 'community' are inherently connected was already well formed at this point, even if these terms were not used. 'Fitting into the neighbourhood' was seen as the solution to the challenge of not only designing in democracy, but to providing its basic services.

As to who would provide the capital to make the connection of context and community possible, the assumption was, at the time: federal, state, and municipal programmes, even if the ultimate goal was to attract 'private investment in the ghetto'.¹⁶

The general formula for the five vest pocket housing studies commissioned in 1966 was to incorporate in equal parts rehabilitation of existing housing and new construction, to balance low- and moderate-income housing, and coordinate it with new schools and other facilities.¹⁷ [Fig.1] The Housing Authority, responsible for low-income public housing, was to take the lead; the non-profit organisations were to follow with moderate-income rental housing; and the private sector, ultimately, was to come in with a variety of housing types, including for ownership. This last step was deemed possible only once an area had been made attractive again for private investment – or, in the words of the authors of an early task-force report leading up to Model Cities, ‘turned around’.¹⁸

A shift to new actors, ca. 1970

How would the triangulation of citizen participation, contextual design, and private capital, following a public-sector lead, work out? Model Cities proved to be a catalyst in entangling context, community, and capital in housing in ways the programme’s authors, implementing municipal authorities, and participating local residents likely had not imagined.¹⁹ At first, the vest pocket housing plans did jumpstart the larger Model Cities planning as the Lindsay administration had intended. However, significant delays caused by the acquisition of land through eminent domain (compulsory purchase), the relocation of residents, approvals of financing under a new set of federal housing programmes, and continuously rising construction costs – in short, the same problems that had plagued the earlier urban renewal efforts – led, by 1969, to a situation where little or no progress was visible on the ground and in some cases, conditions had even deteriorated. In parallel, faith in the promise of community participation and the ability or willingness of the established bureaucracy to implement local planning decisions was quickly waning. This was the case both on the part of local residents who waited for results, and

on the part of the general public, to which reports on the sometimes violent infighting among local groups about who would control the funding did not convey a positive picture.²⁰ All this occurred against the backdrop of a nationwide conservative reaction against big government, the counterculture, and urban protest, which had contributed, in part, to the election of President Richard Nixon in late 1968. By 1970, then, the Lindsay administration – under intense pressure to deliver results – was open to embracing actors other than the public and non-profit sectors originally stipulated to develop the housing which had so carefully been planned. In the Central Brooklyn Model Cities neighbourhood, for example, housing was envisioned in a range of typologies including three-story rowhouses emulating historic brownstones, to six-story perimeter blocks along the new edges of two city blocks which had been combined to create a large landscaped courtyard replete with tennis courts.

The Mott Haven vest pocket housing area in the South Bronx reveals the simultaneous emergence of new architectural forms and new development models as public and non-profit developers proved unable to deliver in a politically expedient manner. In 1970, it was a Boston-based for-profit developer working with private investors who took on the renovation of over thirty-two tenement buildings with over 1,300 apartments. The historicist facades and characteristic fire escapes of the six-story, early twentieth-century tenement buildings were preserved, while their interiors were gutted and adjacent buildings were combined to allow for the insertion of modern amenities like elevators and the creation of larger apartments that met current building codes. The project, named Beekman Houses and designed by Beyer Blinder Belle, indicates a broader rethinking on the part of the municipal authorities in the face of the accelerating abandonment of existing rental buildings no longer deemed profitable by owners. Large-scale

rehabilitation, paralleled by a citizen-led drive for broader historic preservation, came to replace new construction as a vehicle of choice of policymakers. [Fig. 2, 3]

What made the project possible? Beekman Houses was financed through low-interest mortgages made available to private developers as part of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act. Critically, however, the project's attractiveness as an investment was boosted by generous tax incentives, including multiple ways to deduct losses and shelter taxes, by the 1969 Tax Reform Act. The two community organisations that were officially co-sponsors of Beekman Houses optimistically hailed 'the operation as a most imaginative and effective blending of government, financial, private, and community resources, in which each participant is doing that which he does best'.²¹ The actual decision making in the project resided with the developers who had access to capital; the community co-sponsors merely served to pave the way politically; and without the federal and city subsidies, none of it would have worked out financially. Context (in the form of literally preserving existing buildings), community (in the form of local political support, but no financial stake in the project), and capital (delivered by wealthy individuals seeking tax shelters) thus came together in a new way in this project.

Mott Haven was also the site where a new form of non-profit developer, the community development corporation (CDC), emerged on the basis of earlier experiments, including in Brooklyn.²² The particular entity founded here, the South Bronx Community Housing Corporation (SBCHC), was formally incorporated in 1971 and launched its inaugural project in 1972: a complex of forty-four row houses with two apartments, each with an individual entrance, clustered on four separate sites. The project expanded on the principles of the vest pocket housing

programme, which were focused on infill sites and low-rise construction, by embracing ideas that were being simultaneously advanced by architect Oscar Newman in his 1972 book *Defensible Space*.²³ Written as a solution to the growing problem of crime in low-income neighbourhoods, Newman made the case for new low-rise, high-density typologies with clearly delineated public, shared, and private space. Plaza Borinquen, designed by Ciardullo Ehman Architects, provided just that. But let us not jump to conclusions and assume that Plaza Borinquen's split-level rowhouses were part of a quest to promote individual home ownership. No, the split-level apartments were rentals just like the single-level apartments at Beekman Houses, financed through the same mortgage subsidy programme mentioned above, Section 236. [Fig. 4, 5]

While Beekman Houses and Plaza Borinquen seem strikingly different – one was about the rehabilitation of existing tenement housing, the other about the new construction of a new form of individual townhouses; one was built by a nationally operating for-profit developer, the other by a locally rooted non-profit organisation – they both relied not only on federal financing programmes but on private capital to come through. In the case of SBCHC, it was – at least at first – not so much investment of privately held capital, but rather the political clout of those managing capital in large-scale firms. SBCHC was made possible politically only through the presence of major Wall Street players on the new entity's board, who legitimated the new local actor and pressured the Lindsay administration to transfer the three-year, seven-million-dollar Model Cities housing budget and designated Model Cities sites – previously under the purview of a city agency – to the new group.²⁴ In other words, by the early 1970s, essential steps in the neoliberal turn in the architecture of housing had taken place in Mott Haven. Both for-profit developers and community development corporations had taken the lead in low-income

housing production replacing public sector agencies and authorities. The public sector had not disappeared, however, since it was essential to financially incentivising the private developments, overseeing the community developers, and guaranteeing the private investment in both. Politically, the shift was acceptable since private investors were generally partnering with, and thus were being legitimated by, the newly formed community groups. Architecturally, all of this took the form of what today is known as contextual design, whether through the preservation of existing stock or the new construction of midrise apartments or low-rise townhouses. Contextual design can therefore also be understood as a strategy to make the shift from direct public-sector action to a community-cum-capital approach more acceptable.

A shift in architectural discourse, ca. 1975

Architecture critics and theorists at the time were not keen on making this connection between contextual design, community participation (or lack thereof), and the roles of private capital. While the buildings realised at Mott Haven were barely covered in the architectural press, those realised as a result of the Twin Parks vest pocket housing plan, in a slightly more affluent area of the Bronx, were, and as such allow us to understand how architectural discourse, too, shifted. Just as in Mott Haven, the housing at Twin Parks was to be realised by the Housing Authority and a local non-profit organisation, in this case a group of churches. When there were delays in securing funding, the trajectory was slightly different than in Mott Haven, however. Here, the clergy did not set up its own CDC or partner with individual investors, but partnered with the just-founded New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC). This public-benefit corporation was founded in 1968 to centralise and expedite the development process of low-income housing. It did so by enlisting the private sector in a slightly different fashion. The UDC partnered with for-profit

developer-contractors who would not only build, but ultimately own and operate the new buildings. The UDC would facilitate the process by issuing bonds to raise private capital, while drawing on the same federal low-cost mortgages and tax incentives that the private developers at Mott Haven made use of.²⁵ In other words, while the housing trajectory at Mott Haven was one of fragmentation into various independently acting development entities, at Twin Parks there was a process of consolidation due to the establishment of the UDC. For both versions of early neoliberal housing policies, private investors were central, however.

The best-known of the projects at Twin Parks is a building complex sited on three adjacent city blocks with over five hundred apartments designed by then-emerging architect Richard Meier. [Fig.6] Meier sited seven- to sixteen-story building parts around existing buildings, creating a whole that emphasised both street frontages and created urban markers through its high-rise components and created a new public plaza at its centre. As such, when completed in 1973, Meier's buildings became central to a new discourse in architecture, which by now had received a more compelling name than 'fitting in': 'contextualism'. Yet this discourse, however, explicitly and consciously severed any connection of how 'context', understood as form, was connected to the political dimensions of 'community' or the economic dimensions of 'capital.'

How this disconnection happened is beautifully illustrated by a twenty-page essay in the second issue of the theory journal *Oppositions*. In it, architect Stuart Cohen took Meier's project to advance the case for a new design process in which buildings were devised in response to their sites, both at the level of spatial organisation and at the level of symbolic imagery. The title of Cohen's piece, 'Physical Context/Human Context: Including It All', suggested that Cohen might argue for linking



Fig. 3

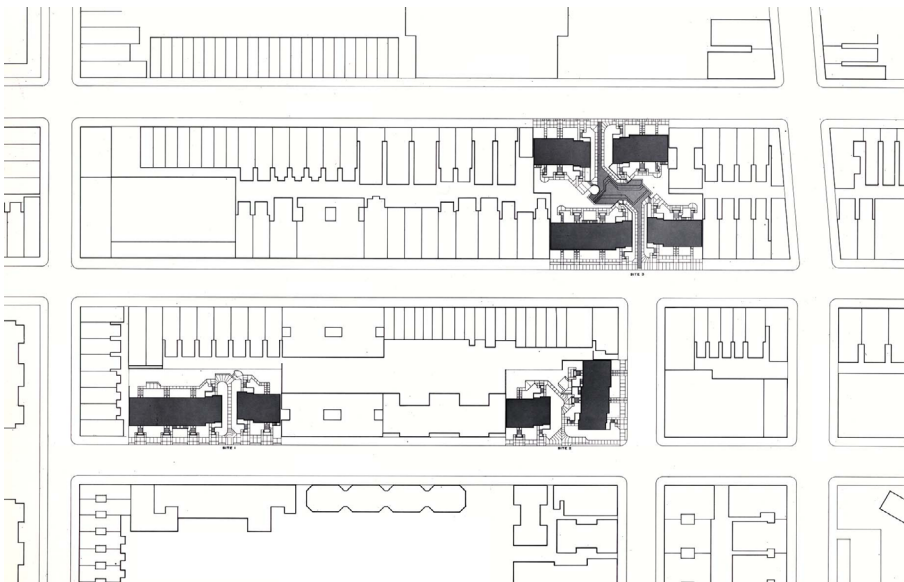


Fig. 3: Review of Beekman Houses in *Progressive Architecture*, March 1976. Courtesy Hanley Wood.

Fig. 4: Ciardullo Ehmann, architects, for SBCHC, developer, Plaza Borinquen, site plan, 1973. Courtesy John Ciardullo P.C.

the building (the physical) and its inhabitants (the human). Cohen, however, had little to say about the role of residents and users. Rather, underlying the 'contextual' *modus operandi*, Cohen wrote, was the assumption 'that one could morally operate in this [contextual] way, making decisions that did not directly relate to many of our urban problems, because Modern architecture had already amply illustrated the inability of built form alone to solve problems of largely social or economic origin.'²⁶

In other words, by focusing on morphology and building type, Cohen argued, architects could avoid falling into the trap of trying to solve the social or economic problems of residents and instead focus on the buildings themselves.

Cohen's explicit rejection of architecture's entanglement with 'problems of largely social or economic origin' – that is: those problems that arise from community and capital – to argue instead for the embracing of 'context' was published in the year that the political and economic conditions that had made the housing at Mott Haven and at Twin Parks possible came to an end. New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy, and shortly thereafter the UDC defaulted on its bonds, in part as a result of changing housing policies at the federal level. In early 1973, the Nixon administration had proclaimed a moratorium on all programmes that had financed low-income housing, and with the passage of new federal housing programmes in late 1974, Model Cities and the various low-interest mortgage programmes were officially ended. Subsequently, it was no longer through direct action that the federal government sought to stimulate low-income housing production, but by way of tax credits and other incentives which were administered by local and state authorities, who in turn delegated the actual planning and realisation to the many emerging community development corporations and/or the private sector. The 'decentralised

network' of very different stakeholders – as David Erickson has aptly characterised today's neoliberal order²⁷ – emerged pre-1974, was codified post-1974, and has remained remarkably stable to the present day. The experiments of the late 1960s, although frequently portrayed as part of a different era, were central to the emergence of our current order. This emergence has involved the codification not only of investment vehicles and forms of governance, but also design principles.

Indeed, despite the end of the federal, state, and municipal housing programmes launched a decade earlier, many of those programmes' underlying principles were soon codified at the very high point of New York City's fiscal crisis.²⁸ For example, in 1975, Lindsay's successor, Abraham Beame, reaffirmed the role of community boards as the vehicle for local residents involvement in planning decisions.²⁹ That same year, Beame signed into law 'Zoning for Housing Quality', a programme to promote small- and mid-rise infill development.³⁰ Over the coming decades, in response to ever shifting economic fortunes, the city honed the tools required to attract the private sector to provide low- and moderate-income housing, namely zoning incentives and various forms of tax incentives. Strikingly, the terms 'context' and 'community' remained central in this pursuit of private capital toward the public good.

Fast-forward to 2016

However, in the four decades since the mid-1970s, the world of development and housing in New York City has changed radically. Let's simply say that the city, including the former Model Cities neighbourhoods, is challenged not by disinvestment and demographic shrinkage, but rather by overinvestment and growth. Upon this backdrop, invoking context and community to enable private capital as the main vehicle to build low-income housing, no longer goes unchallenged. This was made amply clear in March of 2016, when fifty of the fifty-nine



Fig. 5

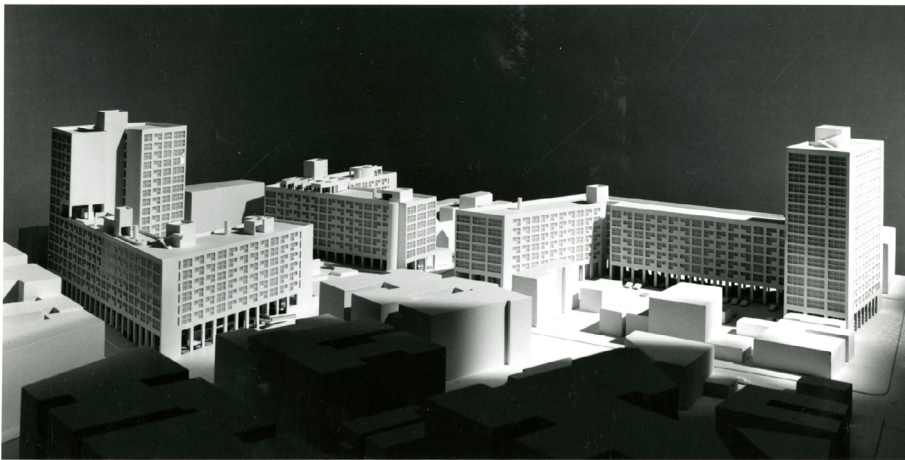


Fig. 6

Fig. 5: Ciardullo Ehmann, architects, for SBCHC, developer, Plaza Borinquen, photograph of completed interior courtyard, c. 1975. Courtesy John Ciardullo P.C.

Fig. 6: Richard Meier, architect, for Urban Development Corporation and the DeMatteis Companies, developer, Twin Parks Northeast, photograph of site model, c. 1970. Photo: Ezra Stoller/Esto.

community boards rejected two proposals placed before them for comment, in which a slight readjustment of the roles of context, community, and capital was suggested.

Spearheaded by the Department of City Planning, the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio had crafted these programmes – Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) and Zoning for Quality and Affordability (ZQA) – to address the severe lack of affordable housing. Despite his self-declared progressive identity, the administration did so not by proposing new publicly-headed housing construction programmes, but rather embraced the well-honed tools of neoliberal housing policy: extending zoning incentives, often coupled with tax incentives, to the private market. The premise of MIH was to harness the booming private real estate market to generate below-market rate housing. According to the proposal, all residential development in areas that would henceforth be rezoned, which generally meant allowing for more floor area on a given parcel, would be required to include permanently deed-restricted housing. Inclusionary housing was not a new tool; as an instrument, it has been well-established in US municipalities, including New York City, at least since the 1980s, to produce affordable housing as an integral part of any new development. MIH, however, went beyond previous requirements by demanding that the income- and price-restrictions of these apartments would never expire, that is, never ‘revert to the market’ as is the case in most such market-driven programmes.³¹

The language of context – describing physical attributes – and community – describing democratic aspirations – was central to the connected MIH and ZQA proposals; the concepts were often linked as if one depended on the other, as had been the case with the vest-pocket housing programme. In its promotional material, for example, the Department of City Planning described ZQA as a policy that

‘foster[s] diverse, liveable communities with buildings that contribute to the character and quality of neighbourhoods.’³² City planners formulated ZQA to support MIH’s upzoning by adjusting certain design guidelines, among them limits to building height and bulk in ‘contextual zoning districts’. These districts had been codified in the Zoning Resolution in 1987 in order to advance urban design based on uniform building heights and continuous street edges. In so-called ‘non-contextual districts’, these urban design goals were incentivised by giving developers floor area bonuses, or the right to build more than allowed by zoning.³³ The 1987 contextual zoning rules were based directly on the design principles introduced to the city’s Zoning Resolution in 1975, mentioned above; the main change in comparison to the earlier voluntary programme was to make these contextual design guidelines either mandatory or financially attractive by incentivising them. By the mid-1980s, these incentives for contextual design were coupled with incentives for affordable housing provided through a property tax abatement.³⁴ [Fig. 7a and 7b]

It was these combined zoning guidelines that came under scrutiny in 2016, in particular those aspects of ‘contextual zoning’ that prevented developers from making full use of the floor area allowed by zoning. In other words, a certain parcel may have been zoned to allow for five thousand square metres of new construction, but the maximum building height, set-back restrictions, or other dimensional design requirements may have limited the actually buildable square metreage to 4,800 square metres – which, in terms of housing policy, translates to up to four unbuilt apartments. In its report ‘The Envelope Conundrum’, produced as part of the lead-up to the 2016 revisions, the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council (CHPC), an influential policy think tank, argued that the ‘unused allowable floor area’ – that is, the floor area that could not be realised due to conflicting regulations

Example of Inclusionary Housing designated area Bonus in an R8A District

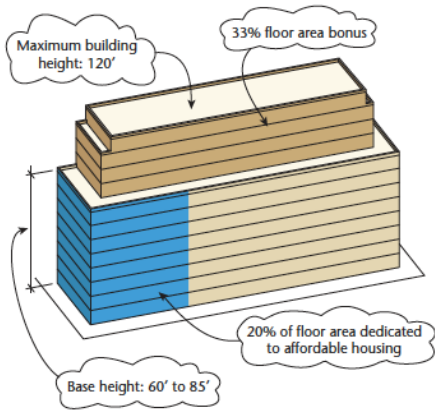


Fig. 7a

A portion of an R8A district mapped along 4th Avenue in South Park Slope in Brooklyn Community District 7 has been mapped as an Inclusionary Housing designated area.

- The base FAR in most R8A districts is 6.02
- The base FAR in an R8A district within an Inclusionary Housing designated area is 5.40
- The maximum FAR for a development that provides affordable housing in an Inclusionary Housing designated area, including the bonus, is 7.20

Using the Inclusionary Housing designated areas Program, the floor area may be increased by 1.25 square feet for each square foot of affordable housing provided, up to the maximum FAR—a bonus of 33 percent for providing 20 percent of affordable housing.

“Contextual” Building Envelope

As a response to public dismay over height factor buildings, in 1987 the Quality Housing Program was established, which sought to restore neighborhood fabric by including street wall location provisions, maximum base heights and maximum building heights. These provisions are mandatory in ‘Contextual Zoning Districts’.

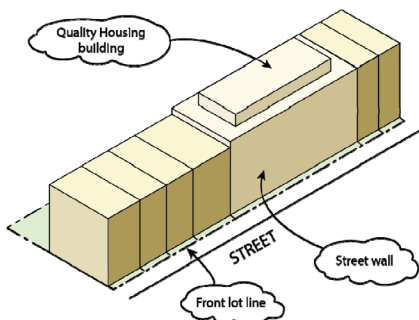


Fig. 7b



– was a main deterrent for the production of housing in the city. Significantly, the authors of the CHPC report criticised existing regulations by conjoining notions of ‘community’ and ‘context.’ Its authors wrote: ‘Increasingly viewed as providing community protection from excessively tall buildings, 43 percent of New York City zoning lots are now zoned as contextual districts.’³⁵ The CHPC posited that the ‘contextual’ zoning restrictions passed to limit tall buildings, ostensibly to protect the ‘community’, were in fact hurting that community by limiting the production of housing, whether affordable or not. In its critique, the CHPC never addressed the role of ‘capital’ and how that might be adjusted in these dynamics.

Given the rhetorical centrality and assumed connection between context and community in advancing these housing programmes, it is telling that the community boards rejected them nearly universally. Residents of low-income neighbourhoods were not convinced by the argument that new market-rate housing, even if it generated up to 25 percent permanently affordable apartments, would not raise prices throughout the area, thereby displacing long-term residents not protected by rent regulation. Residents of high-income areas, in contrast, especially those of historically land-marked districts, were opposed to the proposed universal five-foot increase to allowable building heights to make ground floors more useable, and to the proposal that one to two additional stories would be allowed for any new affordable senior housing. Despite the adamant local objections from various community boards, the city council, which holds decision-making power in land-use matters, approved MIH and ZQA in April of 2016. It did so after making some revisions in response to local objections, including maintaining the existing building height restrictions in historic districts, and demanding that more of the new affordable housing be reserved for households of very low incomes.

In 2018 in New York City housing and planning policies, then, in a neoliberal age navigated by self-identified progressive mayors, the notions of context – a placeholder for better urban design – and community – a placeholder for more democracy – have become simultaneously institutionalised, incessantly invoked, and virtually meaningless. One reason may be the lack of willingness not only on the part of architects, but even more so on the part of policy makers, to explicitly connect them to the central role of capital and the conditions under which it will, or will not, participate in contributing to the public good in the form of low-income housing.

Afterthoughts

In tracing the role of terminology in the neoliberal turn of the architecture of housing circa 1970, it may be worth re-reading some of the canonical writings of that time. It could help us to reframe architecture and its socio-economic entanglements, rather than wishing the realms to be independent (as my colleague, who was mounting the exhibition, did) or connected in a kind of linear dependency (as Robert Fishman did).

Toward that end, it is worth re-examining Paul Davidoff’s essay ‘Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning’, mentioned above. Among architects, advocacy planning has been received as undervaluing the role of design, as leading to endless discussions with no outcome. In fact, the reverse is true: when I recently read Davidoff for the first time, I found that he unswervingly embraces the power of the plan. As he writes, ‘lively political dispute aided by plural plans could do much to improve the level of rationality in the process of preparing the public plan.’³⁶ To Davidoff, a competition between alternative plans advanced by different stakeholders was a strategy not only to upend the dominance of the ‘unitary plan’ put forward by the city-planning department, but to improve the quality of the plans. Davidoff saw design as an instrument to advance democracy (or ‘community’), not in opposition to it.³⁷

Architects have been also critical of Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*, another text mentioned above, but for the opposite reason. Newman has generally been received as over-emphasising the role of design in shaping the behaviour of residents, while giving too little weight to the socio-economic factors in their lives. Again, in actually reading his words, I found that Newman addresses these in great detail as they play out for single parents on welfare, traditional middle-class families, and well as those wealthy enough to employ full-time nannies. He positions the design of the physical environment as only one part in the attempt to address the system that has led to poverty and crime: 'the root causes of inner city and ghetto crime lie deep in the social structure of our nation. Criminal and victim alike come from that strata of the population without the power of choice.'³⁸ While Newman's writing can certainly come across as paternalistic, he is highly attuned to how certain architectural features (the elevator is his favourite example) can only function if adequately maintained – the result not of design, but of whether a building is sufficiently funded and staffed.

But we may also need to start reading texts that have barely been noticed, in particular because the authors just mentioned – Davidoff and Newman – connect context and community, but do not touch on capital. Some of their contemporaries did. In her 1976 essay 'Toward a Theory of Environment', Lynda Simmons, an architect turned philanthropic housing developer who for decades played a central role in post-fiscal-crisis housing in New York City, makes an explicit case for the necessity that architects understand the power of capital. Simmons argues that architects need to consider broader forces than just design if their work is to make a change. In support of her position, she deploys a multi-level diagram in which she at once separates and connects process and product, economic value and use value. Interestingly, Simmons locates the term context under process, not product: 'context

comprises the physical and the social setting of the proposed project; the natural setting and resources underlying its potentiality. The power relationships involved, and their origins in geography, economics, history, ideology.'³⁹ Reading Simmons's text reveals that even in the mid-1970s, context was being debated not only as urban morphology, but in connection to community and capital. As Simmons sums up her essay: 'Environmental change is the name of the phenomenon being studied; its economic name is Real Estate Development. Architecture is only one part of the phenomenon.'⁴⁰

In short, re-reading well-known and reading little-known texts written by architects and planners at the time of the neoliberal turn of 1970 might be helpful not only in understanding the changing meanings of keywords since then, but in the task of re-conceptualising what is happening today.

Notes

1. Robert Fishman, 'The Global Crisis of Affordable Housing: Architecture Versus Neoliberalism', in *Housing as Intervention: Architecture towards Social Equity*. Architectural Design, guest edited by Karen Kubey (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 22–29.
2. In the US, the term 'affordable' had replaced 'low-income' or 'moderate-income' by the 1980s to describe governmentally regulated, price- and income-restricted housing. While the former terminology described the eligibility of residents in terms of their income levels, and thus was also considered stigmatising, 'affordable housing' is a more flexible and in theory all-encompassing term, since 'affordable' is defined by the federal government as no more than 30 percent of one's income. It is worth noting that the terms 'mass housing' and 'social housing' so common to most post-war European housing programmes conceived to serve all citizens, not just the poorest, were never in use in the US.
3. The connection between PREVI and Elemental has also been made by Justin McQuirk in chapter 2 of

- Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of New Architecture* (London/New York: Verso 2015). For additional discussion on this link, see also Anne Kockelkorn, 'A Sample Atlas', in *Housing after the Neoliberal Turn*, ed. Stefan Aue et al. (Berlin: Spector Books & HKW, 2015): 59–115.
4. Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London/New York: Verso 2019), 6.
 5. For a brief description of the emergence of the term and its continually changing meanings as it travelled back and forth across the Atlantic, see Adrian Forty, 'Context', *Words and Buildings* (Oxford: Thames and Hudson) 2000, 132–35. The terms 'context' and 'contextual' remain central to today's urban design culture. See, for example, the recent Eric Parry, *Context: Architecture and the Genius of Place* (Chichester: Wiley 2015).
 6. The implicit connection between 'context' and 'community' is revealed in titles of works celebrating traditional architecture, for instance Dhiru A. Thadani and Peter J. Hetzel, eds., *The Architecture of Community: Leon Krier* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005).
 7. For a convincing argument on why we need to reclaim rather than avoid 'capitalism' as an analytical concept today, a short reconstruction as to how 'capitalism' emerged only in the early twentieth century, whereas 'capital' and 'capitalist' were established by the mid-nineteenth, see Jürgen Kocka, *Capitalism: A Short History*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
 8. For an overview of Davidoff's career, see the recently launched research project, Paul Davidoff: The Tapes Project, hosted at the University of Massachusetts Boston. <https://pauldavidoff.com>.
 9. Paul Davidoff, 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 31, no. 4 (1965): 331–38.
 10. Most of this narrative is taken from Alexander von Hoffman, 'Calling upon the Genius of Private Enterprise: The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 and the Liberal Turn to Public-Private Partnerships', *Studies in American Political Development* 27, no. 2 (2013): 165–94. The numbers of housing units produced in the three programmes are cited on page 187, footnote 92.
 11. Model Cities was conceived as a corrective to two existing federal urban programmes. On the one hand, it sought to counteract the purely physical focus of urban renewal, established in 1949, which had largely benefitted central business districts at the expense of the poor who were displaced through slum clearance. On the other, it sought a retreat from the 'maximum feasible participation' mandated by the Community Action Program, launched in 1964, which gave federal funding directly to local non-profit organisations, thereby bypassing elected mayors and city councils. In a nutshell, Model Cities sought to balance improvements to the built environment and increasing socio-economic opportunity, all while involving local residents and elected officials at the municipal level.
 12. Boston's Model Cities programme, for example, included an 'Infill Housing Program' based on a similar idea of low-rise new housing inserted on small lots scattered throughout its target area. The programme sought to produce four hundred new apartments through prefabricated concrete construction; only a fraction was built before the developer became insolvent. See n.a., 'The Infill Housing Program, 1968–1973', n.d. <http://bostonlocaltv.org>.
 13. For a general history of New York City housing policy from the late nineteenth century to the present, see Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner, eds., *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies That Transformed a City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
 14. New York City Housing Development Administration, *People and Plans: Vest Pocket Housing, The First Step in New York's Model Cities Program* (A Report to Mayor John V. Lindsay from Jason R. Nathan, Administrator, Housing Development Administration), July 12, 1967, 1, 3.
 15. New York City, *People and Plans*, 2.
 16. This phrase was used by Robert Kennedy, one of many politicians in the 1960s who proposed new

- vehicles to attract corporations and businesses to invest in what was interchangeably called 'slums' or 'ghettos.' n.a., 'Kennedy Offers Plan on Ghettos', *New York Times*, May 16, 1966. For a comprehensive account of how Kennedy's initiative played out in the case of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, see Michael Woodworth, *Battle for Bed-Stuy: The Long War on Poverty in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
17. For more details of the five very different vest-pocket plans, see Susanne Schindler, '1966 Can Be the Year of Rebirth for American Cities', *San Rocco* 14, no. 66 (April 2018): 100–109.
 18. *Report on the Task Force for Metropolitan and Urban Problems*, 30 November 1964, 17.
 19. Tracing how the early community development and Black Power movements in the late 1960s led to unintended results, namely a form of economic development ostensibly rooted in and promoted for 'the community', but largely benefitting those able to invest in real estate development, forms the basis of Brian Goldstein's account of Harlem's transformation over the past half-century. Goldstein does not consider Model Cities in his history. Brian Goldstein, *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle Over Harlem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
 20. For a more detailed account of the rapid loss of faith in the Model Cities programme in New York City, see Susanne Schindler, 'Model Conflicts', *e-flux architecture*, July 2018, <https://e-flux.com>.
 21. Departmental Memorandum re: 'Bronx Housing Event – 'Project Rehab'', from Albert A Walsh, Administrator, Housing and Development Administration, to John V. Lindsay, 18 January 1971, p. 3. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, John V. Lindsay Papers, Group 592, Box 5, Folder 76.
 22. The most famous of these is the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, from which the Mott Haven SBHC took inspiration. For a detailed history, see Woodworth, *Battle for Bed-Stuy*.
 23. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
 24. New York State Temporary Charter Revision Commission for New York City, *Report on Model Cities* (New York: November 1973): 80–81, 89.
 25. For a concise story of the UDC at Twin Parks, see Juliette Spertus and Susanne Schindler, 'Co-op City and Twin Parks: Two 1970s Models of Middle-Class Living in the Bronx', in *Middle-Class Housing in Perspective*, ed. Gaia Caramellino and Federico Zanfi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 167–90.
 26. Stuart Cohen, 'Cultural Context/Physical Context: Including It All', *Oppositions* 2 (January 1974): 1–40; quote 3.
 27. For an excellent, if uncritical history of the emergence, evolution, and reasons for the endurance of community development corporations in the US as a main vehicle for producing below-market rate housing in partnership with the private sector, see David J. Erickson, *The Housing Policy Revolution: Networks and Neighbourhoods* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2009).
 28. On the connection of the fiscal crisis and the shift to neoliberal governance, see Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2007) and Kimberly Philips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Henry Holt, 2017).
 29. These boards had significantly less power than envisioned for them by Lindsay, or those held by the short-lived Model Cities committees. Their members remained appointed, not elected, and they had purely advisory roles, with neither budgetary nor other powers. Nonetheless, community boards to this day have a central mandate in reviewing all proposed land-use changes. The city's 1989 Charter Revision enabled community boards to initiate their own master planning documents, so-called 197a plans; however, they are provided with neither funding nor technical support to do so, and to date only twelve such plans have been initiated. For a summary of the evolution

- of community boards and their planning competencies, see New York City Department of City Planning, 'Evolution of ULURP, Step 5: Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP)', <http://nyc.gov>, accessed 8 June 2016. For a more detailed historical account, see Thomas Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
30. New York City Planning Commission, 'Zoning for Housing Quality', September 1975 (BYDCP 75-16).
 31. For a concise overview of inclusionary housing, alternately called inclusionary zoning, with many useful links to recent scholarship, see Benjamin Schneider, 'CityLab University: Inclusionary Zoning', *CityLab*, 17 July 2018, <https://citylab.com>.
 32. New York City Department of City Planning, 'Zoning for Quality and Affordability', <http://nyc.gov>, accessed 7 June 2016.
 33. New York City Planning Commission, Report N 870385A, N 870197A, 17 June 1987, p. 11.
 34. A city-wide property tax abatement was first enacted in 1971 as a ten-year provision for any construction on vacant or underutilised land. It was renewed in 1977 as '421a,' and in 1985, shortly before the Quality Housing programme came about, it was reformed so that any development built in high-value areas of Manhattan would receive the tax abatement only if it makes a contribution to affordable housing, either through onsite or offsite construction. These rules have been periodically adjusted and were last overhauled in 2017. For an overview of the history, see Municipal Art Society, 'History of 421a', <http://mas.org>, accessed 8 August 2016. For a summary of the latest revisions, see Charles Bagli, 'Affordable Housing Programme gives Tax Break to Developers', *New York Times*, 10 April 2017.
 35. CHPC, 'The Envelope Conundrum', 2014, <http://chpcny.org>.
 36. Davidoff, 'Advocacy and Pluralism', 332.
 37. In recent years Davidoff's ideas have been rehabilitated in architectural scholarship. See, for example, Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). See also the special issue of *Footprint* dedicated to the 'Participatory Turn in Urbanism', edited by Maros Krivy and Tahl Kaminer. *Footprint* 13 (Autumn 2013), <https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/>.
 38. Newman, *Defensible Space*, 13.
 39. Lynda Simmons, 'Toward a Theory of the Environment', *Journal for Architectural Education*, 29, no. 4 (1976): 18–19; quote 19.
 40. Simmons, 'Toward a Theory', 19.

Biography

Susanne Schindler is an architect and historian focused on the intersection of policy and design in housing. She is currently a visiting lecturer at MIT's School of Architecture and Planning and co-directs the MAS program in the history and theory of architecture at ETH Zurich. From 2013 to 2016, Susanne was lead researcher and co-curator of the research and exhibition project House Housing: An Untimely History of Architecture and Real Estate at Columbia University, and co-author of *The Art of Inequality*. In her current book project, based on her doctoral research at ETH Zurich, Susanne analyses how the little-known and largely discredited Model Cities program played out in New York in the late 1960s and set the stage for many housing practices still with us today. Susanne writes regularly for a range of publications, including *Urban Omnibus*, the online journal of the Architectural League of New York.