

Islands of the Poor:

Single-Room Occupancy Housing on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, 1930-1990

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Introduction

In the summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City's Department of Homeless Services moved 283 homeless men into the Lucerne Hotel in the heart of Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was an effort to reduce the spread of coronavirus in the city's congregate shelters, where dozens of residents sleep side-by-side in the same rooms. For the men, their new lodgings were a welcome upgrade from the shelter system, offering them privacy, personal space, and a modicum of stability. Their time in the Lucerne would be short-lived, however. Many of their affluent neighbors were outraged by their arrival in the community. Charging the men with public drug use, urinating in the street, and harassing pedestrians, a contingent of West Siders formed a nonprofit group, raised more than \$200,000, and hired a lawyer to threaten a lawsuit against the city if it did not move the men out. Despite the protests of the homeless men, homeless advocacy groups, and many sympathetic community members, the city ultimately sided with those who demanded their eviction.¹

For long-time neighborhood residents, the Lucerne controversy felt like a flashback to an earlier era. Fifty years ago, before the Lucerne was renovated into the high-end tourist hotel it is today, it was one of dozens of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels operating on the Upper West Side. These were old residential hotels, tenement apartment buildings, and brownstone

¹ Miriam Elder, "When NIMBY Met MAGA on the Upper West Side," *Curbed*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.curbed.com/2020/10/upper-west-side-lucerne-hotel-homeless-residents.html>; Mary Harris, "Homeless New Yorkers Don't Want to Go Back to Normal," *Slate*, July 19, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/07/nyc-homelessness-crisis-lucerne-hotel-coronavirus.html>; Daniel E. Slotnik, "Homeless Men Must Leave Upper West Side Hotel, Judge Rules," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2020, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/25/nyregion/nyc-homeless-hotel-lucerne.html>; Megan Evershed et al., "How an Upper West Side Hotel Came to Embody the City's Failure on Homelessness," *The New Republic*, March 31, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/161811/homelessness-eviction-lucerne-nyc-housing>.

townhouses that had been subdivided into single furnished rooms with shared bathrooms and (sometimes) cooking facilities, offered at an inexpensive weekly rate. In the midst of a predominantly middle-class community, SROs housed low-wage and often immigrant workers, elderly and disabled people, discharged psychiatric patients, alcoholics, drug addicts, ex-convicts, and queer and gender nonconforming people. Several other neighborhoods had concentrations of such buildings—including Brooklyn Heights, Murray Hill, the West Village, and Midtown around Times Square—but none had as many as the Upper West Side. In 1965, there were an estimated 100,000 units of SRO housing citywide; a quarter of these were found between 72nd and 110th Streets west of Central Park.²

For decades, what came to be known as the “SRO problem” was at the center of debates about the future of the Upper West Side. As the neighborhood teetered between disinvestment and development in the post-World War II years, its status as an attractive yet affordable residential and commercial area seemed precarious. It appeared to be positioned on a razor’s edge between becoming a slum and becoming an affluent enclave like the Upper East Side. Single-room occupancy hotels—widely regarded as a neighborhood blight yet recognized as a vital source of housing for low-income people—posed a conundrum for the planners and community members striving to improve the area, who shared the liberal ideal of an economically and socially integrated community but disagreed on what that looked like in practice and how to achieve it. In the face of an uncertain neighborhood trajectory, the presence of SRO housing generated controversy over a range of important questions: What constitutes a

² “A Program for Tenants in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) & for Their New York City Neighbors: A Report Prepared for the Borough President of Manhattan, Community Planning Board #7, and Its Council of Advisors” (New York: Center for New York City Affairs, New School for Social Research, June 1969), 6–7, Municipal Library.

livable neighborhood? How should city and state governments shape neighborhood development? How does a city provide adequate affordable housing in a real estate market oriented around the affluent? And who should bear the responsibility for housing those who are unable to provide for themselves?

Using the SROs as its focal point, this thesis examines how city officials and community members responded to these questions from the Great Depression through the 1980s. Drawing from newspapers, city government records and reports, and the archives of social service organizations, I trace the development of single-room occupancy housing on the Upper West Side through four distinct phases: first, the emergence of SROs as a response to the chronic underproduction of housing in the 1930s and 1940s; second, the targeting of SROs in the urban renewal efforts of the 1950s and early 1960s; third, the city's increasing dependence on SROs to house welfare recipients (particularly patients discharged from mental hospitals), alongside growing neighborhood reinvestment in the 1960s and 1970s; and finally the rapid decimation of the SRO supply and mass displacement of residents in the real estate development wave of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Throughout this history, the perspectives of neighborhood residents and policymakers on SRO housing were marked by ambivalence. On one hand, the buildings were seen as sources of nuisance, crime, and spreading deterioration. They were a detriment to the physical fabric of the neighborhood, to the quality of life of their neighbors, and to the residents for whom such buildings were the only option. While surveys of the SRO stock found that the majority were well-kept and managed, there was a significant subset of "problem buildings" that dominated the image of SROs: poorly maintained structures with little to no security or screening of tenants. Local residents were frustrated by the rundown appearance of the buildings and the garbage

thrown from windows onto streets and back yards. They complained about the people congregated outside the buildings at all hours, making noise, consuming drugs and alcohol, and blocking the sidewalk for pedestrians. Most of all, they objected that SROs were hotbeds of prostitution, drug activity, and muggers. As the buildings increasingly filled up with single welfare recipients in the 1960s and 70s, many Upper West Siders sympathized with the population of mentally and physically disabled SRO dwellers, whom they saw as victims of exploitative landlords and the failure of government to provide adequate environments for their care. For many, however, the SROs were fundamentally at odds with their vision of a good neighborhood.

At the same time, SRO buildings met an essential need. What started as an illegal form of housing became, in the 1960s, a de facto public policy solution to the problem of housing single, unattached poor people—many with chronic physical and mental health problems—who were discriminated against by private landlords and the public housing authority. While New York City government worked for decades to regulate, restrict, and reduce the SRO stock, the city's Department of Social Services (DSS) depended on SRO hotels to house its public assistance clients, enabling them to persist. As one social worker put it, the DSS was “the unwilling economic backbone of SROs.”³

Beginning in the mid-1960s, a coalition of social workers and leftist community organizations and politicians called for the preservation and expansion of SRO housing. They pointed out that eliminating the buildings would only disperse the problem elsewhere, without addressing its root causes. While they agreed that SRO buildings were unacceptable as they

³ Joan Hatch Shapiro, *Communities of the Alone: Working with Single Room Occupants in the City* (New York: Association Press, 1971), 42.

were, they argued that they could be improved with onsite service programs, non-profit management, funds for rehabilitation, and enforcement of housing codes. The problem was not the SRO model in itself; indeed, for single individuals who did not need institutionalization but were incapable of living completely independently, SROs offered advantages over conventional apartments. SROs allowed residents to receive housekeeping and social services while maintaining independence and autonomy. They enabled single poor people to live affordably in a neighborhood with great amenities, and in a community of other people in similar situations.

The decline of SRO housing has been widely recognized as a significant factor contributing to the massive rise in public homelessness that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s. In recent years, a number of affordable housing advocates and policy researchers have proposed a revival of SRO-type housing models to address the gap in the housing market once filled by single-room occupancy hotels.⁴ Yet despite recognition of the value of SROs in housing the poor for much of the twentieth century, the history of SRO housing in New York City has remained remarkably understudied. Paul Groth's expansive treatment of the history of residential hotels in the United States is an invaluable touchstone for this work, but his study primarily focusses on San Francisco.⁵ New York historians Jonathan Soffer and Benjamin Holtzman have documented the destruction of SRO housing in their discussions of the city tax benefit program that

⁴ Karrie Jacobs, "It's Time for New York City to Bring Back SROs," *Curbed*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.curbed.com/2021/06/sro-hotels-nyc-bring-back.html>; Eric Stern and Jessica Yager, "21st Century SROs: Can Small Housing Units Help Meet the Need for Affordable Housing in New York City?" (New York: NYU Furman Center, February 20, 2018), https://furmancenter.org/files/Small_Units_in_NYC_Working_Paper_for_Posting_UPDATED.pdf.

⁵ Paul Erling Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

incentivized their conversion into self-contained apartments after 1975.⁶ Scholars have not examined the complicated and contradictory government policies that enabled SROs to flourish while also making them a target for neighborhood redevelopment to attract middle- and upper-income residents. Nor have they looked at the neighborhood politics that emerged as the city channeled welfare recipients into a gentrifying area. The history of debates over the value of single-room housing on the Upper West Side offers a new perspective on questions of affordable housing provision, homelessness, and gentrification in the contemporary city.

⁶ Benjamin Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 167–99; Jonathan M. Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, *The Columbia History of Urban Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 276–81.

Chapter I: The Rise of SRO Housing, 1930-1955

Setting the Stage

Why did the Upper West Side become the foremost SRO neighborhood in New York City? To understand the emergence of the landscape of SRO housing, a brief overview of the area's initial development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is instructive.

Lagging behind the East Side, the construction of the Upper West Side began in earnest with the completion of the steam-powered elevated railway in 1880 along what is now Columbus Avenue, which linked the area to the commercial centers of lower Manhattan. Developers rapidly built out the side streets with three- to five-story row houses (known as brownstones for the color of their sandstone facing), homes for the upper- and middle classes. The noise, soot, and shadows of the El made Columbus Avenue less desirable.⁷ Dumbbell-shaped tenements ("old law") went up below the tracks, as well as on some of the blocks between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues. These became home to a working-class Irish population.⁸

The opening of the subway along Broadway in 1904 instigated another development boom, particularly in the western areas furthest from the El. As property values skyrocketed, brownstone construction was no longer economical, so the new structures were primarily apartment buildings or residential hotels offering a mix of permanent and transient accommodations.⁹ The advent of the electric elevator in the late 1890s enabled the growth of new class of high-end apartment houses. Multi-family dwellings had previously been considered

⁷ The El was dismantled in 1940.

⁸ New York City Planning Commission, "Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration" (New York, 1958), 15.

⁹ James Trager, *West of Fifth: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Manhattan's West Side*, 1st ed (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 30.

the exclusive domain of the working class, but the large buildings cropping up on Riverside Drive, West End Avenue, and Broadway at the turn of the twentieth century offered some of the most luxurious housing in the city. Labyrinths of bedrooms, parlors, dining rooms, libraries, and servants' quarters, some of the latest apartments were more spacious than many single-family homes.¹⁰

Even more fashionable were the residential hotels, also known as apartment hotels or family hotels. Hotel lodgings could be just as spacious as apartments, but typically lacked individual kitchens—instead, residents took their meals in opulent dining rooms. With small armies of workers, residential hotels provided extensive services while eliminating the need to maintain a household staff. More than in perhaps any other neighborhood, luxury hotels proliferated on the Upper West Side in the early 1900s—many of which would come to serve a very different clientele later in the century.¹¹

Also built in great numbers before World War I were smaller, six- or seven-story apartment buildings, often supplanting older brownstones or tenements on the side streets. Built according to the requirements of the new tenement house law of 1901, they were typically

¹⁰ Elizabeth C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 129–31.

¹¹ In 1889, *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* extolled the advantages of the then-brand-new housing form: "All one requires to do is eat, drink, sleep and pay one's check when it becomes due, the cares of housekeeping being shouldered upon the proprietor of the hotel. Ladies who have for years been breaking their hearts over their troubles with servants will no doubt welcome with open arms the new era of apartment hotels which has just dawned upon us." "The Hotel Beresford," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, September 21, 1889, Columbia University Libraries Digital Collections. See also: Groth, *Living Downtown*, 27–55.

designed with an H-shaped footprint. Such buildings offered more moderately priced lodgings than the larger, flashier developments nearby.¹²

The construction of apartment buildings and hotels continued apace in the 1920s, with buildings reaching new heights. On Central Park West, Broadway, West End Avenue, Riverside Drive, and the six wide east-west thoroughfares, developers erected apartment houses of 16 stories or more. These buildings became home to large numbers of upwardly mobile Jewish families who moved in from the Lower East Side and Harlem.¹³

That was virtually the extent of new construction in the neighborhood for the first half of the twentieth century. With the onset of the Great Depression, development rapidly ground to a halt. In 1929, nearly 11,000 apartment units were constructed in Manhattan. In 1933, that number had dropped to zero.¹⁴ For the next couple decades, the housing supply stagnated, while demand for affordable housing ballooned. In response, landlords carved up homes designed for single families into multiple dwellings.

From Apartments to Rooming Houses

“New York City has a rooming house problem,” declared a 1940 report from the Committee on Housing of the Community Service Society, one of the city’s largest charity organizations.¹⁵ They were concerned about the number of New Yorkers living in buildings

¹² Trager, *West of Fifth*, 32; New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration,” 16.

¹³ New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration,” 16.

¹⁴ Gordon D. MacDonald, *Apartment Building Construction, Manhattan, 1902-1953* (New York: Real Estate Board of New York, Research Dept, 1953), 8.

¹⁵ Committee on Housing, “Life in One Room: A Study of the Rooming House Problem in the Borough of Manhattan” (1940), a, series XIV, box 418, Community Service Society records, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

illegally converted into single-room occupancy dwellings, which often lacked adequate safety and sanitary features. The Depression had prompted an influx of jobseekers to the city from all over the country, inflating demand for cheap furnished rooms. Owners of distressed properties were eager to supply them. By the end of the 1930s, an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people in the city were living in single rooms.¹⁶

Illegal rooming house conversions were hardly a new phenomenon in Depression-era New York City. Architectural historian Elizabeth Collins Cromley notes that beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, as wealthy families moved uptown from lower Manhattan, landlords subdivided the stately houses they left behind into smaller units for less prosperous tenants.¹⁷ Prior to the 1930s, however, the practice was mostly confined to brownstones in neighborhoods becoming homogeneously working class. During the Depression, the pace of conversion rapidly accelerated, spreading to tenements and apartment buildings in neighborhoods like the Upper West Side that retained a significant middle-class population. Never before had New York seen such a variety of converted rooming houses in the midst of a middle-class residential area.

Brownstones remained the most ubiquitous form of converted rooming house. On the Upper West Side, row houses were less desirable than apartments, so they were the most likely structures to be converted to single-room occupancy. To maximize rentable space, landlords erected plasterboard partitions in the spacious living rooms, parlors, and hallways of the old one- or two-family houses, creating twelve to twenty-five rooms that could accommodate up to forty people. Only occasionally were any bathroom facilities added in the conversion process; the most common arrangement was for all the tenants to share a single toilet and bathroom on an

¹⁶ Committee on Housing, 37–41.

¹⁷ Cromley, *Alone Together*, 16.

upper floor. Tenants also did not have access to a kitchen, as the only cooking facilities were found in the basement where the landlord typically lived.¹⁸

Running a brownstone rooming house was not especially profitable in the 1930s. In most cases, rooming house operators leased the buildings from their owners and were responsible for the costs of heating, repairs, and maintenance. A Harlem real estate agent who specialized in converted rooming houses explained that “ninety percent of the persons taking over private dwellings to be used as rooming houses do so for the purpose of making a living rather than for the amount of money inherent in the proposition. In other words, a family may lease a rooming house simply to have a place to live.” Minus the high overhead costs, the rental income covered the operator’s housing expenses, but it was rarely enough to sustain a commercial operation.¹⁹

A more recent development was the conversion of apartments into rooming houses. By the 1930s, the Upper West Side’s massive pre-World War I apartments had fallen out of demand due to shrinking family sizes, the high cost of domestic labor, and increasing rents. The few families who could afford to rent them preferred more modern apartments with larger rooms and better layouts. The many small rooms of the old flats readily lent themselves to rooming house purposes. Someone without much capital could easily lease an apartment, furnish all the rooms as bedrooms, and sublet them individually, keeping one or more rooms for their own living space.²⁰

¹⁸ Committee on Housing, “Life in One Room: A Study of the Rooming House Problem in the Borough of Manhattan,” 1–2.

¹⁹ Committee on Housing, 29–30.

²⁰ Committee on Housing, “Apartment Rooming House Survey: A Report on Over 100 Apartments Used for Rooming House Purposes in Manhattan with a Recommendation for Legislation” (1941), series XIV, box 416, Community Service Society records, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The Community Service Society estimated that there were at least two or three thousand apartments operating as rooming houses on the Upper West Side above 72nd Street. In many cases, they noted, only a few of the apartments in a building had been converted to rooming houses, with the rest still occupied by single families—though they observed that once twenty percent of the apartments in a building had been converted, the remainder tended to quickly follow suit.²¹

The third kind of rooming house was the converted tenement building, which had also rapidly expanded during the Depression. These were commonly referred to as “residence clubs.” Tenement buildings—particularly the H-shaped “new law” tenements—were easily converted to single-room occupancy with no structural alteration required. In a typical arrangement, the four apartments per floor—formerly rented on a monthly basis—were each split up into six to eight furnished rooms rented by the week. As the apartments in new law buildings consisted of rooms lined up along an interior corridor, all one had to do was put locks on the individual room doors and leave the door to the apartment open. Bathrooms and kitchens became communal.²²

Able to accommodate anywhere from 75 to 300 tenants, residence clubs operated on a much larger scale than brownstones or converted apartments and could yield a significant return on investment. Unlike the other two types, they were run as commercial enterprises rather than simply a way to make ends meet for a mom-and-pop operator. The landlords of residence clubs often operated several buildings and hired superintendents or agents to manage them.²³

²¹ Committee on Housing, 4.

²² Committee on Housing, “Life in One Room: A Study of the Rooming House Problem in the Borough of Manhattan,” 4–5.

²³ Committee on Housing, 31–33.

All three forms of rooming house provided shelter to New York City's lowest paid workers, those who could not afford to buy furniture or sign a long-term lease. While no one conducted a systematic survey of the rooming house population in the 1930s, the Community Service Society's study anecdotally observed that the majority of tenants were younger single men and women employed in the service, retail, and manufacturing sectors. Most had moved from out of town and had no families in New York, as it was more economical to live with one's family if possible.²⁴

Legalization

City officials recognized that illegal rooming houses met a critical need for affordable rooms. The problem was that the buildings were now housing far more occupants than they were designed for, without any proportional increase in sanitary facilities or fire safety features. In many of the subdivided tenements, fire escapes were now only accessible through one of the rented rooms in what was originally an apartment. Stories of rooming house fires began to appear with frightening regularity in the city's newspapers, such as in 1936 when a smoker fell asleep and dropped his cigarette in a West 73rd Street rooming house that lacked a fire escape, starting a blaze that killed five people.²⁵ According to the New York City Fire Department's report for 1936, 12 out of the 77 people killed in fires that year were killed in furnished rooms, more than in any other category of dwelling besides tenements (which housed a much greater number of people.)²⁶

²⁴ Committee on Housing, 37–41.

²⁵ "Five Killed in Fire Caused by Smoker in Rooming House," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1936.

²⁶ Committee on Housing, "Life in One Room: A Study of the Rooming House Problem in the Borough of Manhattan," 87.

In 1939, city and state government passed measures to reign in the “wildcat rooming houses,” as Mayor Fiorello La Guardia termed them.²⁷ With the World’s Fair opening in the spring, municipal leaders were eager to ensure adequate accommodations for the projected 250,000 visitors per day. At a public hearing before City Council, World’s Fair president Grover Whalen urged the city to adopt a rooming house licensing bill. “The housing problem for World’s Fair visitors must be met,” he declared, “or New York will fail in its objective of proving that this is a hospitable city, and not a dollar-chasing gyp town.”²⁸

The problem was of quantity and quality. New York City’s stock of 200,000 hotel rooms was insufficient to meet the expected demand, as the construction of new hotels had been discouraged because they would be unsustainable after the year-long exposition was over. The rooming houses would thus have to play a significant role in housing visitors, but the city needed to ensure they met standards of safety and sanitation.²⁹ Sixty days before the fair’s opening, Mayor La Guardia signed a bill to permit the licensing of about 15,000 rooming houses, explaining that his main goal was to provide protection against fire and disease for the visitors. All buildings with five or more single rooms for rent were now required to have a license issued by the Department of Licenses after inspection by the Fire Department, the Health Department, and the Department of Housing and Buildings.³⁰

While the city now had the power to license rooming houses, a set of standards still needed to be codified by state government. Introduced by Senator Carl Pack and signed into law in June 1939, a new bill amended the Multiple Dwelling Law—the state’s battery of regulations

²⁷ “Residence Clubs Must Be Improved,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 1939.

²⁸ “City Officials Ask Law on Fair Rooms,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1939.

²⁹ “Public Hearing: C 431 Rooming House Bill” (January 27, 1939), box 8, folder 128, Council of the City of New York Collection, New York City Municipal Archives.

³⁰ “Mayor Signs Bill for Fair Lodgings,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 1939.

for multi-family housing—to establish requirements for single-room occupancy units. It mandated sprinklers and fire-alarm systems in every room, means of egress, minimum standards of ventilation, window space, and sanitation, a minimum rental period of one week, and an occupancy limit of either two adults or one adult and two children per room.³¹

The Pack housing bill also attempted to put an end to the conversion of multi-family units into SROs, decreeing that no more conversions could take place after September 30, 1939.³² Supporters of the bill celebrated it as “an important step in the preservation and development of all residential districts in the city,” in the words of the managing director of the West of Central Park Association, a civic group composed of Upper West Side businessmen and real estate professionals who sponsored the legislation.³³ But those in favor of stricter regulation still recognized the single-room unit as a valid and essential form of urban housing, conceding “that such houses offer a haven for persons of modest means and for young men and women who are working or studying here and cannot afford the luxuries and privacy of an apartment.”³⁴ Although the regulators noted that such housing sometimes harbored “floaters’ and other undesirables,” by and large they considered the population of single-room dwellers to be respectable. Single-room occupancy housing had yet to become synonymous with crime and blight in the eyes of city officials and affluent residents.

While building owners initially complained of overregulation, it turned out that the city’s bureaucracy was not sufficiently equipped to exercise its newfound regulatory powers over the

³¹ Lee E. Cooper, “Stricter Regulations for Rooming Houses Due Under Pack Bill Now Before Governor,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1939.

³² This clause of the bill was repealed during WWII.

³³ “Residence Clubs Must Be Improved.”

³⁴ Cooper, “Stricter Regulations for Rooming Houses Due Under Pack Bill Now Before Governor.”

thousands of converted properties. The Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Housing and Buildings called the licensing bill “excellent in its intent” but lamented that his department lacked the manpower necessary to carry out the inspections now required of it.³⁵ The Community Service Society argued that given the lack of resources for enforcement, issuing licenses was “perhaps worse than no control at all.” They explained:

The exhibition of a city license by a rooming house operator might give the residents a sense of security because of the implied approval of the building by a city department. In actuality the license means nothing of the sort and with the existing staff of the departments, cannot mean anything because they cannot find the men or the time for a careful supervision of the licenses, or the necessary re-inspection of the buildings.³⁶

Indeed, far from curtailing the spread of converted rooming houses, by granting the buildings legal status the licensing bill facilitated the continued expansion of single-room housing in the next decade.

War

The outbreak of World War II further hindered efforts to bring rooming houses up to code. In early 1942, the federal War Production Board placed a nationwide moratorium on nonessential construction to conserve materials for war production. Though many rooming house operators stated they were willing to fix violations of the Multiple Dwelling Law in their properties, it was now impossible for them to get the materials and labor to do so.³⁷ The city was forced to hold off on enforcement.

More consequentially, the nonessential construction ban further stifled the growth of New York’s housing supply, exacerbating the problem that started with the Depression. When demand

³⁵ “City Officials Ask Law on Fair Rooms.”

³⁶ Committee on Housing, “Life in One Room: A Study of the Rooming House Problem in the Borough of Manhattan.”

³⁷ “Test Case May Ease Building Law Here,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1943.

surged as thousands of civilians and servicemen came home at the end of the war, New York experienced its worst ever housing shortage. Vacancy rates in Manhattan apartment buildings dipped to less than 0.1% in 1946.³⁸ One returning veteran quipped to the *New York Times* that it was “far easier to locate a sniper in the jungles of China than to find an apartment in New York City.”³⁹

Adding to the squeeze on New York’s housing market in the late 1940s was the dramatic influx of migrants from Puerto Rico. The new arrivals sought an escape from poverty and unemployment on the island as large sugar plantations decimated traditional subsistence agriculture and an exponentially growing population exceeded job opportunities. Right after the war, relatively cheap flight connections from the island to New York City were established, making passage much more accessible than the expensive four-day journey by steamship previously required.⁴⁰ Between 1940 and 1950, New York City’s Puerto Rican population shot up from around 60,000 to almost 250,000.⁴¹

East Harlem was largest and most well-established Puerto Rican enclave, but with its boundaries rigidly enforced by racial discrimination, it could not accommodate all the new migrants.⁴² Puerto Rican communities dispersed throughout the city, including to the Upper West Side, where they began to settle along Amsterdam and Columbus between 100th and 110th

³⁸ MacDonald, *Apartment Building Construction, Manhattan, 1902-1953*, 11.

³⁹ Quoted in Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York Housing* (Urbana, Chicago ; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 9.

⁴⁰ Eric C. Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 37–38.

⁴¹ Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 138–39.

⁴² Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 40.

Streets.⁴³ The new migrants landed in the most crowded and substandard housing, cramming into single room units. A survey of Puerto Rican tenants in the mid-1950s showed that approximately one third shared bathroom facilities with at least one other family.⁴⁴

The New York City Housing Authority's 1947 annual report estimated that to overcome the housing crisis, New York City would need to build 300,000 new apartments, plus an additional 600,000 to replace obsolete and substandard dwellings.⁴⁵ In the meantime, an ever-greater number of city residents found themselves living in subdivided single-room occupancy units.

New York's housing ills were not unique. Urban areas throughout the United States were suffering from an undersupply of housing and the increasing deterioration of their housing stock. With the cost of new construction prohibitively high, private builders were not picking up the slack. To fight the problem, the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1949, enabling cities to undertake massive redevelopment projects. But while urban renewal was touted in part as a solution to the spread of overcrowded and substandard dwellings, its outcome on the Upper West Side was a somewhat different story.

⁴³ Albert J. Gordon, "Officials Worried by Influx Of Migrant Puerto Ricans," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1947; Committee on Puerto Ricans in New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City: The Report of the Committee* (New York: Welfare Council of New York City, 1948), 23–26.

⁴⁴ Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 43.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Committee on Puerto Ricans in New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 30.

Chapter II: Urban Renewal, 1950-1965

Slum Dispersal

In early 1953, regional administrator of the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency Walter Fried began to notice some striking changes in the blocks around where he lived at 94th Street and West End Avenue:

You'd walk past a four-story brownstone. Those brownstones had always been inhabited by—at most—four families. But in front of that brownstone now there might be four large garbage cans. The garbage for four families is not anywhere near four large cans, not when the garbage was being picked up every day, as it was at the time. So you knew that there were many more people living there now than there had been before. And you knew what that meant: the landlords were breaking up the space inside into smaller apartments, so the same space that had been occupied by a family of five might now be occupied by twelve people. When you saw that many garbage cans you knew that the building was being run now as a tenement for very poor families, or even as a rooming house.⁴⁶

The new residents, he realized, were being displaced from Manhattantown, the Title I redevelopment project bounded by Central Park West, Amsterdam Avenue, 97th, and 100th streets that Robert Moses had handed over to developers in 1951. Though no new housing was constructed between 1950 and 1953 in the eight-block area just south of the project site, that area saw a 36% increase in its number of housing units, all from conversion to SROs.⁴⁷

Title I of the National Housing Act of 1949—the Slum Clearance provision—enabled cities to condemn and purchase plots of land that they deemed blighted. Municipalities would then resell the land at discounted prices to private developers who agreed to bulldoze the existing buildings and construct a project, with the federal government paying for two-thirds of the difference between the cost of the land and the price at which it was resold to developers. It was

⁴⁶ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

⁴⁷ “Increase in Slums Found By Survey,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1954.

the cornerstone of the federal government's plan to induce developers to construct housing that middle-income people could afford to rent and to build in less desirable areas that were considered slums.⁴⁸

Title I initiated an expansive reconfiguration of New York's urban landscape in the 1950s and 1960s, fueling the construction of new housing projects, hospitals, cultural centers, and educational campuses in the place of predominantly working-class residential areas. It also entailed mass displacement. Between 1946 and 1953, more than 170,000 New Yorkers—37% of whom were non-white and Puerto Rican—were forced to leave their homes on the sites of slum clearance projects. But while the developers of urban renewal policy had envisioned the seamless relocation of displaced residents into new public housing developments, only 29% had been rehoused in 1954.⁴⁹

In the absence of adequate investment in public housing, private landlords filled in the gap with rooming house conversions. On the Upper West Side, the mass displacement of residents from local Title I project sites—including Manhattantown, Columbus Circle, Lincoln Square, the Amsterdam Houses, and the Frederick Douglas Houses—created lucrative opportunities for the landlords of nearby tenements and brownstones. By splitting up \$40 a month regulated apartments into \$20 a month rooms, landlords supercharged annual rent income from \$4,800 to \$26,000 or more.⁵⁰ Rooms in SRO tenements and brownstone rooming houses rented for \$2.86 per square foot and \$2.30 per square foot, respectively, compared to \$1.30 per

⁴⁸ J. Clarence Davies, *Neighborhood Groups and Urban Renewal*, Metropolitan Politics Series, no. 5 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

⁴⁹ New York City Planning Commission, "Tenant Relocation Report" (New York: City Planning Commission, January 20, 1954), 4.

⁵⁰ "West Siders Seek Landlord Inquiry," *The New York Times*, December 17, 1952.

square foot in elevator apartment buildings.⁵¹ “The profits are so great,” an Upper West Side attorney told the *New York Times* in 1952, “that more and more landlords are trying to force out their tenants and rent their apartments room by room.”⁵²

The influx of displaced tenants into subdivided rooms transformed the neighborhood. The big rent-controlled elevator apartment buildings built in the 1920s remained solidly upper-middle-class and predominantly white and Jewish. But the side streets and the two tenement-lined commercial avenues east of Broadway (Amsterdam and Columbus) were increasingly occupied by low-income Puerto Ricans and Blacks living in furnished rooms, while the Irish who had long inhabited those blocks departed for Inwood or the suburbs. Between 87th and 97th Streets east of Amsterdam, the Puerto Rican population swelled by almost 800% from 1950 to 1956, going from 1,700 to 13,000.⁵³

Tensions grew between the established white community and their new neighbors. With little space of their own, the Puerto Rican migrants crowded the streets and public spaces, alarming white residents and stoking racist anxieties. Middle-income people no longer felt safe in their neighborhood, and they blamed the influx of low-income people of color.⁵⁴ White

⁵¹ New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration.”

⁵² “West Siders Seek Landlord Inquiry.”

⁵³ New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration,” 10.

⁵⁴ For personal accounts of affluent whites reacting to neighborhood changes on the Upper West Side, see: Marya Mannes, *The New York I Know*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), 17–35; Theodore H. White, *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 368–69.

parents pulled their children out of public school, until 75 percent of the neighborhood's middle-income children went to private schools.⁵⁵ Others relocated to the outer boroughs or the suburbs.

What particularly disturbed city officials and community members about this latest wave of single-room occupancy conversion was the preponderance of families with children in single rooms. Prior to then, the vast majority of single-room tenants had been single, unattached adults; children living in SRO dwellings were not unheard of, but rare. In the 1950s, families living in single rooms became increasingly common. The number of children under 15 living in the West Side Urban Renewal Area more than doubled, going from 4,200 to 8,600. Almost two-thirds of the population under 15 years old were in Puerto Rican families, which tended to be larger than Black and non-Puerto Rican white families.⁵⁶

In the years following World War II, the issue of juvenile delinquency loomed large in the public consciousness. While perceptions were colored by sensationalistic media and racist anxieties, there was a significant rise in youth crime and street gang activity in New York City in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁷ In formulating an explanation for this disturbing phenomenon, many New Yorkers pointed to overcrowded SRO housing as a major factor. Responding to a *New York Times* article that mentioned a Puerto Rican family with five sons sharing a single room with two other families, one reader wrote to the editor in 1952: "It is small wonder that our youth turns to crime when they live under such unspeakable conditions. For them there is no place they can call home."⁵⁸ After vandals smashed stained glass windows in a Baptist church and a synagogue on

⁵⁵ Housing and Redevelopment Board, "Neighborhood Conservation in New York City" (New York, 1966), 39.

⁵⁶ New York City Planning Commission, "Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration," 11, 23.

⁵⁷ Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 74–77.

⁵⁸ C. Davidson, "Apartment Overcrowding Protested," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1952.

the Upper West Side in 1953, the president of the Cathedral Heights Citizens Committee—a neighborhood group that had just been formed to combat juvenile delinquency and crime—drew a similar conclusion, telling a reporter that he “attributed much of the trouble to the ‘wholesale, illegal conversion of brownstones to rooming houses.’” Overcrowding, he explained, “resulted in families sleeping in ‘split shifts,’ with youngsters being forced to stay on the streets at all hours of the night.”⁵⁹

Reversing the Tide

Soon after taking office in 1954, Mayor Robert F. Wagner launched an attack on converted rooming houses. Without acknowledging the role that Title I redevelopment projects had played in intensifying the conversion wave, he declared that the subdivision of apartments had resulted in “intolerable conditions which tend to promote delinquency and break down morals” and had created “breeding places for disease and crime.”⁶⁰ If conversions were allowed to continue, one advisor to City Council warned, they would soon “reduce New York to cubicle-room living.”⁶¹ To fight back, in May 1954, Wagner signed a bill prohibiting the creation of new SRO units, which took immediate effect.

The next step was to try to improve the neighborhoods where large quantities of housing units had already been subdivided. Neighborhoods in the early stages of decline like the Upper West Side—which still had mostly solid housing stock and a predominantly middle-income population—became the top priority for urban renewal efforts. City planners identified the Upper West Side as a “grey” area: unlike “black” areas, which were deemed hopelessly blighted and needed to be completely razed and rebuilt, a “grey” area was salvageable—with targeted housing

⁵⁹ “Hoodlums Damage Church, Synagogue,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1953.

⁶⁰ “Mayor Urges Law to Ban Crowded One-Room Flats,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1954.

⁶¹ “New City Law Curbs 1-Room Conversions,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1954.

improvements and social programs, the city could stop decline and restore it to a stable community.⁶² City Planning Commission chairman James Felt explained why the Upper West Side was chosen for urban renewal: “We cannot wait until our problems are insurmountable, until we have to start all over again. We must learn how to save and make use of the great amount of good that still remains.”⁶³

While Wagner initially planned to designate the entire West Side from West 59th Street up to West 125th Street for urban renewal, by 1956 the city had settled on a twenty-block project area, between Amsterdam Avenue and Central Park West from West 87th to West 97th Streets.⁶⁴ Filled with brownstones and old law tenements, the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) contained some of the oldest and most densely populated housing in the neighborhood. The 1958 preliminary planning report prepared by the City Planning Commission detailed the problems facing the area: overcrowded and deteriorating housing, a declining tax base, and a reluctance from institutional lenders to grant mortgages for improvement or new construction. Almost two-thirds of the brownstones had been converted into rooming houses, and fully seventeen percent of the housing units in the area were SROs housing two or more people.⁶⁵ Real estate turnover had increased, and absentee ownership had become widespread.⁶⁶

⁶² Housing and Redevelopment Board, “Neighborhood Conservation in New York City,” 11; Gertrude Samuels, “To Brighten the ‘Gray Areas,’” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1961.

⁶³ New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration,” 9.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Hock, “Political Designs: Architecture and Urban Renewal in the Civil Rights Era, 1954–1973” (Ph.D., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, 2012), 125–26, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1027935704/abstract/3AC732A5C21741CEPQ/1>.

⁶⁵ New York City Planning Commission, “Urban Renewal: A Report on the West Side Urban Renewal Study to Mayor Robert F. Wagner and the Board of Estimate of the City of New York, and to the Urban Renewal Administration,” 20, 26.

⁶⁶ New York City Planning Commission, 27.

However, while the total white population decreased by roughly a quarter from 1950 to 1956, the changes in the area were not a simple story of white flight and decline. In fact, the study found that more than half of the families who moved into the area during this period were white. Even more surprisingly, the median income actually increased by more than one-third, even as many low-income people of color moved in; the new white residents were more affluent than the ones who moved out.⁶⁷ This showed that despite its physical decline, the area remained an attractive place to live, giving its planners “confidence that a strong effective demand can be created for a renewed housing inventory in an improved neighborhood.”⁶⁸

Headed by the newly formed Urban Renewal Board, the plan for the West Side Urban Renewal Area pioneered a new approach to urban renewal, shifting away from the slum clearance model favored by Robert Moses. While it still called for some clearance and rebuilding, it also incorporated extensive rehabilitation. Nearly all of the old law tenements were slated for demolition, as they were deemed functionally obsolescent. With their narrow light-wells, full lot coverage, and cramped interiors, it was hard to imagine a future for them. They would be replaced by high-rise apartment buildings, containing a mix of low-income, middle-income, and market rate units.⁶⁹ However, the Urban Renewal Board believed that the brownstone rooming houses had high potential to be converted back into quality middle-income dwellings. Although existing conditions in the brownstones were “among the worst in the area,” the buildings were still structurally sound and retained desirable features: high ceilings, spacious and well-lit layouts, and private backyards.⁷⁰ Through a combination of discounted acquisition

⁶⁷ New York City Planning Commission, 10–11.

⁶⁸ New York City Planning Commission, 24–25.

⁶⁹ Urban Renewal Board, “West Side Urban Renewal Area” (New York, 1959), 18.

⁷⁰ Urban Renewal Board, 20.

costs, real estate tax exemptions, and long-term, low-interest mortgage loans backed by the Federal Housing Administration, the city hoped to entice middle-class homebuyers to purchase brownstone rooming houses and renovate them for their own living.⁷¹

Necessarily, rehabilitation would involve the displacement of the low-income families currently occupying the brownstones. In an area of 39,000 residents, 3,200 families or individuals—a total of 10,000 people—lived in structures designated for demolition or rehabilitation.⁷² These staggering figures seem to run counter to the plan's stated goal of maintaining the economic and racial diversity of the neighborhood.⁷³ However, the city considered the elimination of overcrowded single-room occupancy units in brownstones and tenements to be an "economic and social necessity." Not only did planners believe it was unconscionable to allow families to live in such substandard dwellings, removing SROs was essential to the plan's other goal of restoring the confidence of building owners and private investors in the area. SROs were inherently seen as a sign of blight and deterioration which needed to be eradicated for redevelopment to take off.⁷⁴

Renaissance

The city's blueprint came to fruition in the 1960s with a brownstone renovation boom. Taking advantage of the tax exemptions and cheap mortgages available in the urban renewal area, young professionals began to purchase the brownstones from absentee landlords, evicting the dozens of tenants and tearing down the plasterboard partition walls. The "brownstoners," as

⁷¹ Hock, "Political Designs," 132.

⁷² Hock, 121.

⁷³ The planners wrote: "The diversity in the area, both economic and ethnic, is a decided asset which the urban renewal plan will strive to maintain." Urban Renewal Board, "West Side Urban Renewal Area," 13.

⁷⁴ Urban Renewal Board, 21.

they were called, typically renovated the two lower floors for their own residence and the one or two upper floors as rental apartments.⁷⁵ Thirty-two WSURA brownstones were sold in 1963; by 1968, 225 of the houses had new owners. Prices shot up. Selling for as little as \$17,000 in the early 1960s, unrenovated brownstones were going for \$45,000 by 1965, and \$60,000 by 1968.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ For accounts of brownstone rehabilitation on the Upper West Side, see Murray Schumach, “Razing of a Tawdry Hotel to Help West 70’s Area,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1967; Nan Ickeringill, “Drabness and Decay Disappear From a Cluster of Brownstones,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1968; “From Forlorn Rooming Houses to Cheery Homes,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 1969.

⁷⁶ Hock, “Political Designs,” 165–66.

Chapter III: The SRO Problem, 1965-1975

“The West Side is the only area in New York where rich and poor are moving in,” noted neighborhood priest and community activist Father Henry J. Browne in 1968.⁷⁷ Just as affluent homeowners increasingly replaced low-income rooming house tenants in the neighborhood’s brownstones, the Upper West Side’s many old residential hotels and SRO tenements were absorbing a disproportionate share of the city’s ballooning welfare population. In the midst of a gentrifying neighborhood, the SROs came to function as “a private poorhouse supported by public funds, without public accountability.”⁷⁸

As welfare recipients with severe mental and physical health problems moved into rundown SRO hotels surrounded by middle-class dwellings, community members and city officials debated what to do about the “SRO problem,” which seemed to jeopardize the continued growth of the neighborhood. While many neighborhood residents saw the buildings as a form of blight that needed to be eliminated, a large contingent of West Siders called for the preservation and rehabilitation of SROs. Their diligent advocacy led the Lindsay administration to create the Mayor’s Office of SRO Housing in 1973 to coordinate improvement efforts, but the nationwide economic recession and declining federal support for subsidized housing and welfare hampered its success.

“Dumping”

In the 1960s and 70s, many SRO hotel properties were facing a worrisome combination of rising costs and diminishing income. Hotel living no longer appealed to the kinds of people

⁷⁷ Richard F. Shepard, “The West Side: A Polyglot of Races, Creeds and Cultures,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1968.

⁷⁸ Shapiro, *Communities of the Alone*, 42–43.

who once called the Upper West Side's grand residential hotels home.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, with New York's industrial sector rapidly declining, there were fewer single workers looking for furnished rooms. The city's ban on family occupancy of SROs may have also contributed to shrinking demand. As vacancy rates climbed, operations and maintenance costs were also on the rise. The buildings were getting old, and the more they aged, the more quickly they deteriorated. Banks refused to provide loans for improvements, considering SRO buildings to be too much of a risk. The long-time owners who had paid off their mortgages and owned their buildings free and clear could withstand higher vacancies, and their properties mostly continued to be well-managed and maintained. However, the strain was greater on newer owners and lessees, since lenders and owners demanded substantial interest rates or lease payments to compensate for the risk that the buildings would fail.⁸⁰

To make a profit, these operators pursued a strategy of cutting back on services and maintenance and relaxing their standards for accepting tenants. What kept them in business was the growing demand from the city's Department of Social Services (DSS). As New York City suffered from mass job loss, its welfare rolls more than tripled between 1961 and 1971, increasing from 127,000 to 487,000.⁸¹ The DSS was desperate to find places for the welfare clients that the housing market considered least desirable—particularly single, unattached people with criminal backgrounds, substance addictions, or mental disorders. Private landlords typically

⁷⁹ For more on the decline in popularity of residential hotel living in the United States, see Groth, *Living Downtown*, 264–73.

⁸⁰ Carl Glassman, "The S.R.O. Blight: What's to Blame?," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1977.

⁸¹ Ira S. Lowry, Judith Gueron, and Karen Eisenstadt, "Welfare Housing in New York City" (New York City Rand Institute, November 1972), Box 367, Folder "Welfare Hotels and Single Room Occupancy: Reports and Studies," Bella Abzug papers, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

refused to rent to these clients, while public housing—designed primarily for families—had no place for them either. Even if there were units available for single people, the New York City Housing Authority maintained a list of twenty-one personal characteristics that would flag a household as a “potential problem” and prevent them from getting into housing, including irregular work history and “poor housekeeping.”⁸² For struggling SRO owners, however, taking in these clients could be a godsend. “We don't make a lot of money, but it's sure,” explained one man who was part-owner of five Manhattan SRO hotels and the manager of a sixth. “I have working people in one of my hotels and some are three or four weeks behind in their rent. But with welfare, the check comes in every two weeks. If you can handle it, it pays to take in welfare.”⁸³

Many of the welfare recipients moving into SRO hotels had recently been discharged from state mental hospitals. As New York State attempted to transition its mentally ill population from custodial institutions back into communities, the failure of government to develop an adequate community-based alternative to the hospital system made SROs the de facto receiving grounds for deinstitutionalized patients.

The downsizing of the state mental hospital population began in the mid-1950s, with the advent of antipsychotic drugs that enabled some psychiatric patients to manage their conditions while living outside of institutions.⁸⁴ Across the United States, the paradigm of psychiatric care was shifting as mental hospitals increasingly came to be seen as ineffective and inhumane. A

⁸² Steven V. Roberts, “Ginsberg Assails Welfare Housing,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1967.

⁸³ United States Senate Special Committee on Aging, *Single Room Occupancy: A Need for National Concern* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 44.

⁸⁴ “Tranquilizing Drugs Credited With Rise In Releases From State Mental Hospitals,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1956.

growing wave of media criticism exposed mental institutions as sites of abuse and neglect, holding people trapped against their will without providing for their rehabilitation. In response, national mental health policy shifted to emphasize services and treatment within communities.⁸⁵

The high point of this shift was the Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act, signed into law by President John F. Kennedy in 1963. The bill granted federal funding to states for the creation of a total of 1,500 community-based facilities meant to take over the role of mental hospitals, allowing people to receive care while living independently. However, the program fell far short of its ambitions—only about half of the planned centers were ever built, and there was no coordinated plan to transfer responsibilities from the hospitals to the new facilities.⁸⁶

Despite the underdevelopment of the community-based psychiatric care infrastructure, New York State went ahead with its plans for deinstitutionalization, rapidly reducing its hospital population after 1965. With the expansion of federal welfare programs under the Johnson administration, the state had an incentive to move patients from hospitals where the state bore all of the costs of care to communities where the federal government would contribute.⁸⁷ Between 1967 and 1973, the hospital population dropped from 80,000 to 53,000, a 38 percent decline.⁸⁸

In the new decentralized system, formerly institutionalized patients were caught in a limbo between federal, state, and local authorities, with no one fully responsible for their care. After a patient's discharge was approved by medical authorities at the institution, local

⁸⁵ Gerald N. Grob, *From Asylum to Community: Mental Health Policy in Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 281–92.

⁸⁶ Grob, 239–51.

⁸⁷ David Mechanic and David Rochefort, “Deinstitutionalization: An Appraisal of Reform,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990): 305.

⁸⁸ Pranay Gupte, “The Derelict Population Is Declining, But the Whole City Is Its ‘Flophouse,’” *The New York Times*, October 23, 1973.

government became responsible for placing them into housing. Of the 35,960 patients discharged in 1973, 14,580 went to New York City, and nearly all went on welfare.⁸⁹ Having lived in mental institutions for decades in many cases, they had no family, jobs, or place in the community to return to.⁹⁰ With few after-care facilities in operation, the DSS had little choice but to refer many of the discharged patients to SROs—the only housing they could get into and afford.

Living in facilities run by real estate businessmen rather than psychiatric health professionals, the discharged patients struggled to keep up with their medications and manage their disorders. Often their conditions deteriorated to the point that they were readmitted to the state hospitals. There they resumed drug treatment and, seeing their symptoms alleviated, they soon requested to be discharged. But then they returned to same environment that had prompted their problems to reemerge, entering into a seemingly endless cycle of readmission and discharge that psychiatrists called the “revolving door syndrome.”⁹¹

As for who was to blame for the growing crisis, New York City and State governments pointed at each other. Dr. Robert Reich, the director of psychiatry for the city’s Department of Social Services, charged that the state’s policy was “immoral and inhumane” and demanded a moratorium on “administrative” discharges from mental hospitals, protesting that patients should not be released to communities unable to provide an “appropriate and safe place to live.” The state responded that its deinstitutionalization policy was justified on humanitarian grounds, and it was the city’s responsibility to place discharged patients in proper housing. “We are caught in a

⁸⁹ Murray Schumach, “Halfway Houses for Former Mental Patients Create Serious Problems for City’s Residential Communities,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 1974.

⁹⁰ David A. Andelman, “Law Gives Mental Patients Rights, but Worries Others,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1973.

⁹¹ Peter Koenig, “The Problem That Can’t Be Tranquilized,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1978; Andelman, “Law Gives Mental Patients Rights, but Worries Others.”

squeeze,” said Harold Wolfe, associate commissioner of the State Department of Mental Hygiene. “We are accused of dumping patients into neighborhoods. And we are accused of imprisoning patients in violation of their civil rights.”⁹²

With neither the funding nor the political will to support the infrastructure needed to treat deinstitutionalized patients suffering from chronic mental illness, the crisis was never resolved. Although the city’s SRO hotels were ill-equipped to take care of the mentally ill, the availability of relatively cheap rooms in such facilities was the only thing preventing former patients from becoming homeless.

Former mental hospital patients made up perhaps the most visible and disconcerting segment of the SRO population, but they were not the only category of high-needs individuals residing in the SRO buildings.

“Chambers of Horror”

In 1971, a member of the West 73rd Street Block Association wrote a letter to Jule Sugarman, head of the city’s Human Resources Administration.⁹³ She was outraged by the situation at the Hamilton Hotel on her block, and she blamed the city’s use of the hotel to house public assistance clients:

[This] used to be a very pleasant block indeed, and the Hamilton was a decent residential hotel. Do you have any idea at all what the influx of welfare recipients did to our block — let alone the hotel? What about the fires they set, the muggings they accomplished, the drugs, the pushers, the prostitution, the garbage they threw out the windows, etc., etc.? Many 73rd Street apartment dwellers moved out when all this began. Others of us have grimly held our ground...I could go on ad infinitum about the outrage of living near these people.⁹⁴

⁹² Schumach, “Halfway Houses for Former Mental Patients Create Serious Problems for City’s Residential Communities.”

⁹³ The Department of Social Services was housed under the Human Resources Administration.

⁹⁴ Winifred A. Preston to Jule Sugarman, January 7, 1971, box 117, folder 223, John V. Lindsay Papers, Municipal Archives.

Many middle-class West Siders who lived or worked near “problem” SRO buildings felt similarly to this denizen of 73rd Street. The most outspoken voices against SRO hotels tended to be brownstone homeowners organized in block associations, long-time middle-class neighborhood residents, and local business owners. For them, the buildings were synonymous with crime and disorder. These community members felt that the growing concentration of welfare recipients was making the neighborhood unlivable, threatening to reverse the trend of neighborhood growth. While many supported the idea of an economically mixed neighborhood, they worried that the area was approaching a “tipping point” at which the proportion of low-income residents would exceed a sustainable limit, straining neighborhood resources and driving investors and middle- and upper-income residents away.⁹⁵ Those who held this point of view lobbied for more and better policing and demanded that the city remove drug addicts, formerly incarcerated people, and the mentally ill from their community.⁹⁶ Some block associations collected crime statistics on individual buildings and even undertook their own inspection campaigns to make the case to city officials that the SROs needed to be eliminated.⁹⁷

The sentiments of anti-SRO activists on the Upper West Side must be understood in the context of New York’s urban crisis in the late 1960s and 1970s. The city as a whole appeared to be headed on a downward path, with the mass exodus of employers and taxpaying residents, widespread abandonment of buildings in many neighborhoods, deteriorating infrastructure and

⁹⁵ The idea of the “tipping point” figured prominently in the discourse of the Committee of Neighbors to Ensure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), a group of brownstoners who formed to protest what they saw as the overbuilding of low-income housing in the WSURA. Michael T. Kaufman, “West Side Debate Echoes Forest Hills,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 1971.

⁹⁶ Max H. Seigel, “West Side Split on How to Stem Evils Of Single-Room-Occupancy Dwellings,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 1973.

⁹⁷ Murray Schumach, “New Crime Drive Focuses on Hotels,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 1967.

public spaces, mushrooming municipal debt, and rising crime. The Upper West Side was one of New York City's few bright spots, among the only areas where investment and affluent residents were flowing in rather than out. Yet nowhere in the city seemed completely safe from the mounting crisis. Despite the significant gentrification of the neighborhood in the 1960s, the future of the Upper West Side still seemed uncertain, with no guarantee that it would not end up following the direction of the rest of the city. The confidence of investors and owners had yet to be fully restored, and institutional lenders still refused to grant loans in many areas—particularly outside of the urban renewal zones. The neighborhood remained rough around the edges. Like many city residents at the time, West Siders were particularly concerned about crime, which remained disturbingly high in their neighborhood—the Upper West Side's 1968 crime figures were in the top third of New York's 76 precinct-house totals.⁹⁸ As the neighborhood's most visible manifestations of the urban crisis, SRO hotels became the focal point of residents' anxieties about the future of the community.

As historian Eric Schneider has documented, the citywide crime wave “was neither a reporting artifact nor a media driven panic.”⁹⁹ To be sure, some of the SRO buildings did undoubtably harbor prostitutes, drug dealers, and muggers. Still, the media stoked residents' fears to a new level. “Wide Community Crime Traced to ‘Singles’ in Welfare Hotels,” ran the headline of the first of a series of sensational articles published in the *New York Times* on the subject in late 1972. A list of descriptors of West Side SRO hotels offered by local business owners and law enforcement officials gives a picture of the general view presented in these articles: “horror houses that rip off the community,” “high-rise muggers’ parks,” “chambers of

⁹⁸ Nicholas Pileggi, “Renaissance of the Upper West Side,” *New York*, June 30, 1969.

⁹⁹ Eric C. Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the American City*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 117.

horror,” “elevated paradises for criminal activity,” “hell holes,” “dens of thieves,” “worse than Vietnam.”¹⁰⁰ The newspaper coverage suggested that welfare recipients living in SRO hotels were inextricably linked to criminal behavior.

Soon after the *Times* spotlighted the issue, Deputy Mayor Edward K. Hamilton and Jule Sugarman announced that the city was going to take action. A new task force, composed of members of the Police, Fire, Health, Buildings, Rent and Housing Maintenance, and Social Services Departments, would carry out an inspection campaign to fight crime in SRO buildings.¹⁰¹ “No effort will be spared to restore to the law-abiding residents of these buildings and these neighborhoods the security and support to which they are entitled,” declared Hamilton.¹⁰²

Over the course of several months, the inter-agency inspection team surveyed 101 buildings across the city that had been identified by the police as “centers of crime and addiction,” reporting code violations and making recommendations for court action and emergency repairs if necessary. If a hotel was found to be in especially bad condition, the Department of Social Services blacklisted it, removing it from its referral list for public assistance clients and refusing to pay rents in order to pressure the owner to improve facilities

¹⁰⁰ Max Seigel, “Wide Community Crime Traced To ‘Singles’ in Welfare Hotels,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1972; Paul L. Montgomery, “A Welfare Hotel Where Gaiety Is Just a Memory,” *The New York Times*, November 27, 1972; Max H. Seigel, “State Moves to Clean Up Single-Room ‘Chamber of Horrors’ on West Side,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 1972; Max H. Seigel, “‘Muggers Hotels’ Scored at Hearing; Lefkowitz Cites Peril to Neighborhoods,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1973.

¹⁰¹ Max H. Seigel, “City Plans Drive on Hotel Crime,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1972.

¹⁰² Max H. Seigel, “City Is Inspecting ‘Crime’ Buildings,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 1972.

and security. The police also ramped up enforcement with additional surveillance, undercover officers, and anti-narcotics agents.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, Attorney General Louis J. Lefkowitz was undertaking his own campaign against “problem” buildings. “The SRO problem has reached critical dimensions and is threatening to destroy entire neighborhoods of our city,” decried Lefkowitz.¹⁰⁴ At the request of the police and residents, Lefkowitz petitioned the State Supreme Court to issue orders to the owners of notorious SRO buildings directing them to evict tenants who were allegedly engaged in prostitution, drug-dealing, and other criminal activity.¹⁰⁵

Virtually everyone in the community agreed that something needed to be done about SRO conditions. However, a large contingent of West Siders felt that the crackdowns of the Lindsay administration and Attorney General were taking the wrong approach.

The Case for Single-Room Occupancy

On a Monday evening in December 1972, several hundred community members packed into the West End Collegiate Church on 77th Street and West End Avenue to discuss how to improve the conditions of single-room occupancy housing. Representatives of more than two dozen local civic and community organizations were there, including many block associations, the West Side Tenants’ Union, the West Side Chamber of Commerce, Community Planning Board #7, and the Hotel Residents Coalition. The neighborhood’s representatives in City

¹⁰³ Seigel; Charles Raymond and Sheila Uniti, “Project Report III: Mayor’s SRO Task Force” (September 14, 1973), Box 367, Folder “Welfare Hotels and Single Room Occupancy: Reports and Studies,” Bella Abzug papers, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹⁰⁴ Seigel, “‘Muggers Hotels’ Scored at Hearing; Lefkowitz Cites Peril to Neighborhoods.”

¹⁰⁵ Max H. Seigel, “State Expanding Evictions At Single-Room Buildings,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 1972.

Council, State Assembly, and U.S. Congress were also in attendance.¹⁰⁶ The speakers at the meeting concurred that the SRO buildings were a major detriment to the quality of life in the neighborhood, and that their presence threatened to push middle-income residents to move to the suburbs. However, many in attendance felt that police action and evictions were not the right answer, as they only shifted the problem elsewhere. Congresswoman Bella Abzug pointed out: "If these landlords, in response to the city's punitive actions, simply throw the troublemakers ... out into the streets, they will simply relocate themselves to another section of our city and bring with them the same violence and crime in the ongoing process of neighborhood destruction."¹⁰⁷

Moreover, speakers argued, while the city administration was right to go after neglectful landlords, it was ignoring its own complicity in creating the SRO crisis, its failure to provide adequate housing and services to the single welfare population. "They use the SROs as dumping grounds for junkies, alcoholics, and the ill, and then say 'Look at those terrible conditions,'" said City Councilmember Theodore Weiss. "This community has begged for a chance to help those in the SROs." Instead of police action, the meeting's attendees demanded that the city address the root causes of SRO residents' problems. They unanimously adopted a resolution calling on Mayor Lindsay to "appoint a task force of top-level officials responsible for the provision of housing, health, social services, hospitals, and other services needed by SRO occupants."¹⁰⁸

The meeting had been orchestrated by the Planetarium Neighborhood Council, whose members were among the most committed and outspoken advocates of preserving SRO housing

¹⁰⁶ Max H. Seigel, "Single-Room-Hotel Meeting Set Monday," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1972.

¹⁰⁷ "Statement by Congresswoman Abzug on the SRO Crisis" (December 18, 1972), Box 367, Folder "Welfare Hotels and Single Room Occupancy: General," Bella Abzug papers, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹⁰⁸ Max H. Seigel, "'Top-Level' Action Asked On Single-Room Menace," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1972.

on the Upper West Side. The group was led by social worker Carroll Kowal and her husband John. Representing several block associations from 79th to 86th streets, the Planetarium Neighborhood Council was initially organized in 1961 as a local planning council for the Riverside Amsterdam urban renewal project designated for their area. Having already witnessed an increase in the density and concentration of SRO tenants on their blocks as a result of the elimination of SRO units in the West Side Urban Renewal Area just to the north, the Council members were determined not to continue the pattern of pushing low-income residents from one area to the next. “From the beginning,” John Kowal explained, “the policy of our Council in planning for urban renewal was to provide for the SRO tenants as a permanent part of the community and to develop the kind of social service programs and improved housing to enable them to live better lives in the midst of a community which is predominantly middle-income families.” When the city terminated the Riverside Amsterdam project in 1966 because of cutbacks in federal funds, they decided to continue their efforts towards improving the neighborhood and their commitment to the SRO population in particular.¹⁰⁹ For years, they had been petitioning the city to establish a task force to address the needs of SRO tenants. After their packed December meeting, the Lindsay administration finally responded to their call.

In February 1973, Mayor Lindsay established the Mayor’s Single-Room Occupancy Task Force (which later became the Mayor’s Office of SRO Housing). Coordinating efforts between various municipal services and private agencies, the SRO Task Force’s staff of four worked to

¹⁰⁹ John Kowal to Senator John J. Sparkman, July 19, 1973, Box 367, Folder “Welfare Hotels and Single Room Occupancy: General,” Bella Abzug papers, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Gwen E. Mead, “A Survey of the Public Welfare Recipients in Six Single Room Occupancy Buildings” (Master’s thesis, Columbia University School of Social Work, 1968), 4.

develop and implement new programs to assist the city's SRO population. It was the first initiative of its kind to be established anywhere in the nation.¹¹⁰

The Beginning of the End

Despite the shift in city policy towards investment in preserving and rehabilitating single-room occupancy units in 1973, the city's SRO housing supply was declining at an accelerating rate. National policy and economic trends counteracted local efforts to maintain SROs. The United States economy was experiencing "stagflation"—inflation coupled with high unemployment and slow growth. As operating expenses went up, many SRO hotel managers were struggling to stay afloat. What made the situation worse was that in spite of inflation, welfare payments were actually cut back. After January 1, 1974, aged, blind, or disabled people received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments of \$206.85 a month for all expenses, including rent, replacing the old local welfare program which issued a \$150 check for rent and a separate \$100 check for food, clothing, and other living expenses. "The new setup is a disaster," said Carrol Kowal. "The going rate for SROs is about \$150 a month and those receiving SSI payments simply cannot afford it."¹¹¹

Public assistance clients who could no longer afford their rooms doubled up or moved to illegal rooming houses in South Brooklyn or Queens where monthly rentals were half as expensive. Kowal reported that "the Brighton Beach area of Brooklyn is starting to get the regular SRO population instead of just the little old ladies it used to get." Others became

¹¹⁰ Raymond and Uniti, "Project Report III: Mayor's SRO Task Force"; Carrol Kowal, "Suggested Statement for Inclusion in HDA's Testimony at Congressional Hearings on Housing" (July 12, 1973), Box 367, Folder "Welfare Hotels and Single Room Occupancy: Reports and Studies," Bella Abzug papers, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹¹¹ Max H. Seigel, "Relief Cuts Evict Old and Disabled," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1974.

homeless, sleeping on the streets or subways. Meanwhile, many SRO hotel operators decided to throw in the towel. “We have 350 rooms and only 40 tenants,” explained the manager of a midtown SRO that was about to close. “Our oil bill is four times as high as it used to be, and repairs cost more. We’re just tired of fighting.” As of September 1974, more than 25 hotels in Manhattan had either boarded up entrances or started converting to other uses since the beginning of the year.¹¹² The trend towards the elimination of SRO housing would only intensify in the second half of the decade.

¹¹² Seigel.

Chapter IV: SRO Housing in Crisis, 1975-1990

In the summer of 1981, on the border of the Great Lawn in Central Park, outreach workers from the Goddard-Riverside Community Center's Project Reach-Out came across H. and E., an elderly couple who had been living in the park since early spring.

At first, the pair was suspicious of the outreach workers. But after months of consistent contact, the workers began to gain their trust and gradually pieced together the story of how they ended up living there.

The couple had always struggled to make ends meet: H. had worked as head housekeeper in a Brooklyn hospital for about twenty years, while E. was unable to work due to a war disability. In the early 1970s, they moved from Brooklyn to the Endicott Hotel on Columbus Avenue between 81st and 82nd Streets.

In 1978, developers took over the Endicott to convert it to co-op apartments. H. and E. were evicted and moved to the Whitehall Hotel. A couple years later, the Whitehall was slated for renovation too, and the couple was evicted again. They moved to the Cambridge Hotel on West 110th Street.

The instability of their living situation disoriented the aging couple. They were not used to being so far uptown, and a week after moving into the Cambridge, H. went out by herself and could not find her way back. Trying to get home, she wandered down to the Endicott. She found it completely transformed. Bewildered, H. started living in Theodore Roosevelt Park across the street.

E. found her a month later. By then, he had lost the room at the Cambridge too. Together, they settled in Central Park.

H. and E. initially refused Project Reach-Out's assistance, preferring to remain independent until finally it got so cold that they knew they could not manage outside. Project Reach Out placed them in a Times Square hotel until they could secure a placement for them in an assisted living facility in south Brooklyn in February 1982.¹¹³

H. and E. were two of many individuals whose lives were uprooted in the wave of real estate development that swept the Upper West Side and other neighborhoods in the late 1970s and early 1980s and decimated the supply of low-cost furnished rooms. Their story illustrates the trajectory of thousands of poor New Yorkers who were pushed from SROs into the city's streets and burgeoning shelter system during this period. Between 1975 and 1983, the number of SRO units in New York City decreased by more than 70%, dropping from 51,000 to 14,000.¹¹⁴ The rapid decline of SRO housing overlapped with the hollowing out of the social safety net by the federal government, as the Reagan administration cut off almost all federal aid for low-income housing and slashed food stamps, job training, and other social programs meant to keep people afloat.¹¹⁵ As developers profited from the conversions of SRO buildings into housing for the affluent, low-income city residents struggled for survival. Displaced SRO dwellers contributed to a massive increase in the city's homeless population, which by 1980 had reached numbers unseen since the Great Depression.¹¹⁶

Attracting Developers

The near destruction of SRO housing would likely not have been so swift were it not for a city tax policy that provided incentives for developers to convert SRO properties into standard

¹¹³ Coalition for the Homeless and SRO Tenants Rights Coalition, "Single Room Occupancy Hotels: Standing in the Way of the Gentry" (New York, March 1985), 38, Municipal Library.

¹¹⁴ Coalition for the Homeless and SRO Tenants Rights Coalition, 5.

¹¹⁵ Sydney H. Schanberg, "Reagan's Homeless (Cont'd)," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1984.

¹¹⁶ Holtzman, *The Long Crisis*, 202.

apartments. To understand why the city created this policy, some context is instructive. In the mid-1970s, New York's urban crisis reached a low point. Nationwide economic stagnation exacerbated the downward trends that had beset the city since the 1960s: job loss, a dwindling tax base, and a decaying housing supply in spite of decades of urban renewal efforts. The city seemed trapped in a downward spiral as its economic resources shriveled while the costs of providing services expanded.

In 1975, under Mayor Abraham Beame, New York City entered a fiscal crisis when financial institutions refused to buy its bonds, cutting off access to the private capital which the city had become increasingly reliant upon to fill gaps in its budget. The city narrowly avoided bankruptcy when the state established an agency to oversee the city's finances and implement austerity measures, including drastic budget cuts and layoffs.

Historians have identified the fiscal crisis as a turning point in the history of New York City's governance, marking a shift in the balance of public and private authority. The social democratic liberalism that traced back to the New Deal gave way to a new mode in which the private sector and market played a more dominant role in providing municipal services. The emphasis of civic policy shifted away from direct assistance to residents via government-run programs towards stimulating private actors to meet the city's needs within the confines of the marketplace.

As historian Benjamin Holtzman has shown, one area in which this transformation could be seen was in New York City's development policy, which increasingly centered around providing tax incentives to private developers. The focus on tax benefits emerged out of the scarcity of budget resources to subsidize development. Even before the fiscal crisis, city officials were unable to stem the tide of disinvestment as abandonment and deterioration outpaced new

housing construction and rehabilitation. A study published in *Real Estate Weekly* estimated that 35,000 to 50,000 units were abandoned in 1974, equal to the amount of new housing built in the previous five years; even worse, an estimated fifteen to twenty-five percent of the city's rental housing stock was in danger of actual collapse.¹¹⁷ When the municipal budget was slashed to eliminate all but the most essential services, New York lost the main resource it had left to address its housing problems: its program of providing mortgage loans to finance the construction and rehabilitation of low- and middle-income housing. Federal and state assistance were unavailable at that point. In this context, the Beame administration turned to policies that did not require any direct expenditures: tax exemptions and abatements for owners who rehabilitated their properties.

By making development more lucrative, city leaders hoped to attract capital investment to improve New York's housing stock and reverse the course of neighborhood decline. Although tax incentives meant that the city was giving up property tax revenue in the short term, municipal officials anticipated that revenue would increase when the benefits for upgraded properties eventually expired. More immediately, the boost to the real estate and construction industries would create jobs and multiply revenues from permit fees, sales taxes, mortgage taxes, personal income taxes, and other means.¹¹⁸

Among the most impactful tax incentive policies New York City developed in the late 1970s was J-51. The program had been in place since 1955 when it was adopted to encourage the upgrading of cold-water flats, providing tax exemptions and abatements to tenement owners who

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Janice C. Griffith, "Revitalization of Inner City Housing through Property Tax Exemption and Abatement: New York City's J-51 to the Rescue," *Urban Law Annual* 18 (1980): 154–55.

¹¹⁸ Holtzman, *The Long Crisis*, 167–68.

installed heat and hot water systems. In 1976, however, the Beame administration dramatically expanded and restructured J-51, shifting its objective from improving conditions in buildings housing low-income tenants to increasing the supply of middle- and upper-income housing via gut rehabilitation of underutilized commercial and industrial properties. The new J-51 program was aimed at promoting the conversion of three main types of properties into self-contained apartments: 1) warehouses and factories; 2) office buildings; and 3) hotels and single-room occupancy buildings (categorized as Class B “transient” housing.) All three building types had increasingly fallen under distress in the city’s shifting economy, but they contained a high potential for creating attractive dwellings for middle-class taxpayers at a much lower cost than new construction.¹¹⁹

Under J-51, the owners of rehabilitated buildings received a twelve-year exemption from any increase in the assessed valuation of the property, although the property value had increased as a result of the improvements. On top of this, they were eligible for a real estate tax abatement of up to 90 percent of the costs of rehabilitation.¹²⁰

The conversion of a former SRO hotel into condominiums at 250 West 85th Street provides an example of how J-51 benefits worked. As an SRO, the building was assessed at \$700,000 in 1980-81 and paid \$62,500 in taxes. Based on an estimated post-conversion assessment of \$1.95 million and the tax rate at that time (\$8.95 per \$100 of assessed value), the Central Condominium would have had to pay \$174,500 in taxes if no J-51 benefits had been available. With the exemption and abatement applied, however, its taxes were projected at

¹¹⁹ Carter B. Horsley, “City to Seek Extension Of Tax Aid For Housing,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1975.

¹²⁰ Horsley.

\$13,700. Over the property's benefit period, its owners received a subsidy of \$1.93 million dollars.¹²¹

As Holtzman points out, using tax benefits to stimulate the production of middle-income housing was nothing new in the city's playbook. In the 1950s and 60s, tax abatements and exemptions for private developers were essential to programs like Title I and Mitchell-Lama. Under those programs, however, the city and state governments were in charge. They supervised and regulated rent levels, construction and management costs, sponsor profits, and other aspects. In contrast, for projects using J-51, there was no government oversight. Demonstrating the changed relationship between public authority and the private sector, J-51 was granted "as-of-right," meaning that any property owner or developer could claim benefits as long as they met its basic qualifications. Significantly, the program did not set any standards for rent levels or the relocation of existing tenants.¹²²

Even before SRO hotels became eligible for J-51 benefits, they were increasingly targets for redevelopment on the Upper West Side. The profit margins for housing welfare clients were thinning just as lending institutions were gaining confidence in the neighborhood's future growth. The J-51 program cleared any lingering doubts about whether it was worthwhile to invest in renovation projects, sharply escalating the pace of development.

¹²¹ Assuming its taxes were \$13,700 for twelve years. Alan S. Oser, "West Side Draws Middle-Income Buyers," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1983.

¹²² Holtzman, *The Long Crisis*, 169–70.

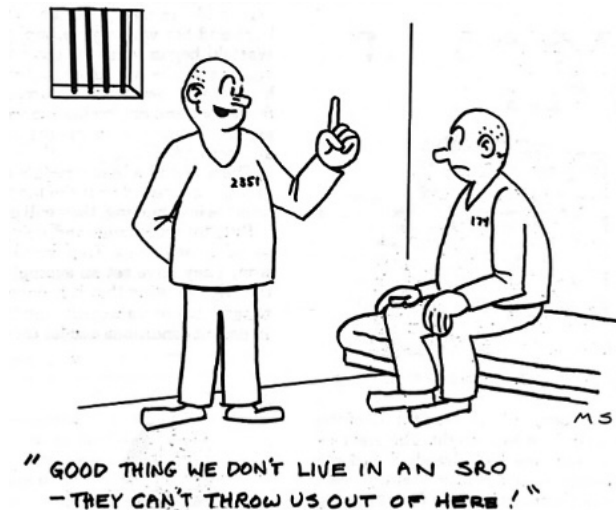
Tenants Under Fire

Figure 1: Cartoon from *SRO Rap Sheet*, a publication of the West Side SRO Law Project of the Goddard-Riverside Community Center.¹²³

As financing became available and return on investment virtually guaranteed, the only impediment to rehabilitating an SRO building were the tenants. Empty building shells sold for around 25 percent more than occupied properties, as developers were wary of the possibility of “holdout” tenants who would delay projects by refusing to move and seek substantial payouts from the owners.¹²⁴ The time it took to vacate a building before renovation could begin had a significant influence on the cost of a project, and owners were eager to clear out their buildings as quickly and cheaply as possible.

How tenants were relocated was almost entirely up to the developer. There were no standards for how the process should be carried out or what benefits displaced residents should

¹²³ *West Side SRO Rapsheet*, May 19, 1983, box 91, folder 1, Goddard-Riverside Community Center records, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

¹²⁴ Alan S. Oser, “Apartment Demand Expands Upper West Side Borders,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1978.

receive, nor any incentives for using humane practices. And no agency had the responsibility or the authority to supervise relocation.¹²⁵

Few developers followed legal eviction procedures, preferring instead to encourage or negotiate residents to leave. In the best-case scenario, the developer would pay for moving expenses and hire a relocation agency to help people find new places to live. This was the case at the Endicott Hotel, which developer Robert Quinlan contracted to purchase in 1977 on the condition that it would be delivered vacant. Quinlan hired a small team to oversee the relocation process, headed by lawyer Irwin Kissin. At the time, Quinlan recalled, different welfare cases were grouped on five separate floors, each assigned to a specialized social worker: alcoholics on one floor, parolees on another, psychiatric patients on a third floor, and so on. Figuring that it was in the social workers' best interest to keep their caseloads together in one place, Kissin enlisted them to help move their clients out. He rented pick-up trucks for each worker and supplied them with black garbage bags for their clients' belongings. Each moved their floors to different SROs on the West Side. After five months, Quinlan took title to the vacant building and began the process of converting the 450-room hotel into 145 co-op apartments¹²⁶. The \$8.2 million development project was the largest hotel rehabilitation project yet undertaken on the Upper West Side.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ "Problems and Policies Connected with the Displacement and Relocation of Residents of Single-Room Occupancy Hotels." (New York State Department of Social Services, November 1980), 11, New York City Municipal Library.

¹²⁶ Robert Quinlan, Session 2 of 2, interview by Leyla Vural, March 6, 2019, Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project, NYHS, <https://digitalcollections.nyhistory.org/islandora/object/nyhs%3A169060>.

¹²⁷ Alan S. Oser, "Endicott Conversion Leads Columbus Avenue Revival," *The New York Times*, April 27, 1979.

A “proper” relocation job took longer than most developers were willing to wait, however, and it was expensive too. For another hotel whose clearance was described as a model relocation, the developer claimed it cost a quarter of a million dollars. Many owners turned to more cost-effective but less scrupulous means. Some sent out preemptory letters demanding that tenants move out within a short period of time, knowing that many would not realize they had a right to remain. Others reduced services to make living unbearable, eliminating switchboards and even cutting off heat and hot water.¹²⁸

In the worst instances, owners resorted to violent harassment and intimidation. A particularly egregious case occurred at an SRO hotel on West 85th Street after it was purchased by landlord Anthony Postiglione in 1981. According to his tenants, Postiglione and his employees assaulted them, threatened to beat and kill them, burglarized and vandalized their rooms, cut off heat and hot water in the winter, and locked them out. One elderly and disabled tenant, who was unable to walk unassisted, said that Postiglione forcibly took him to a different hotel and left him there. After he was stranded without food or friends for two days, a tenant organizer found him and brought him to the hospital. When the man returned to his room on West 85th Street, he found it had been vandalized. Not long afterwards, Postiglione and his employees carried him back to the hotel they were trying to dump him in, stealing his shoes so that he would be unable to return home.¹²⁹ It later came to light that since 1977, Postiglione had received more than \$2.1 million in property tax exemptions and abatements for the seven

¹²⁸ “Problems and Policies Connected with the Displacement and Relocation of Residents of Single-Room Occupancy Hotels.”

¹²⁹ “SRO Landlord Jailed,” *West Side SRO Rap Sheet*, October 1983, box 10, folder 1643, Community Board #7 General Files, MACNY.

buildings he owned.¹³⁰ Postiglione was sentenced to a year in jail and fined \$15,000 for his crimes.

Although he was probably the only West Side landlord who was convicted for tenant harassment in this period, Postiglione was far from the only one using violent and illegitimate methods to clear buildings for rehabilitation under the J-51 program. A study conducted by the city's Arson Task Force showed that J-51 was encouraging landlords to set fire to their properties to drive out tenants. The task force's researchers arrived at this conclusion after compiling detailed fire histories on 15 SRO hotels on the Upper West Side that stopped functioning as SROs in the late 1970s. Seven buildings simply shut down or raised their rents and had no suspicious fires. But of the eight buildings that were converted to apartments using J-51 benefits, two had one suspicious fire each and four had multiple suspicious fires.¹³¹

Well before the Arson Task Force's report was released in 1982, however, developers had discovered a much more efficient and discreet method of vacating buildings. According to one firefighter who started working on the Upper West Side in 1979, SRO owners stopped setting their buildings on fire when they figured out that they could simply destroy the secondary means of egress to make their buildings uninhabitable by law. Claiming that the building's elevator was faulty, the developer or manager would remove the elevator motor under the pretense of taking it down for repair. Then they would drop the two-hundred-pound electric motor from the half-landing at the top of the interior marble staircase down to the ground floor, smashing the stairs and leaving the fire escape as the only working exit. As the building was now

¹³⁰ Joyce Purnick, "Jailed Landlord Said to Have Got Big Tax Break," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1982.

¹³¹ Michael Goodwin, "City Housing Programs Tied to Arson in Report," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1982; Sydney H. Schanberg, "Arson and J-51," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1982.

unsafe for human habitation according to the building code, the fire department would have to come and issue vacate orders to all of the tenants. Because managers could plausibly claim that the incident was accidental, there was no way to prosecute them. “It seemed like everything accelerated when they switched to that means of getting rid of people,” the firefighter recalled. “They could do it so much more readily, without making the newspaper — you know, ‘80 people left homeless in a fire on the West Side.’ It worked like clockwork for them.”¹³²

When the decline of SRO housing began to intensify in the mid-1970s, it was not so difficult for displaced tenants to find rooms in other hotels. In 1975, New York City had 13,000 vacant rooms renting for less than \$50 a week, a vacancy rate of 26%. Four years later, however, there were only 2,485 vacant rooms, a vacancy rate of 9%. Between 1978 and 1979, 28 hotels raised their prices, while another 18 closed, most planning to convert to apartments.¹³³ “The next time the people I move are moved, it may be off the West Side,” predicted the lawyer in charge of relocating the Endicott’s tenants in 1978.¹³⁴

As vacancy rates plummeted, the conditions in the remaining SRO hotels rapidly deteriorated. Rooms were so scarce that the Department of Social Services could no longer afford to blacklist hotels, losing its leverage to force SRO owners to improve conditions. Many building managers became resistant to on-site social service programs, which had once appealed

¹³² James Gormley, interview by Jack Hietpas, telephone, January 17, 2023.

¹³³ Edward Kopp and Kenneth Murphy, “The Diminishing Resource: Lower-Priced Hotels in New York City: A Detailed Study of Their Use by Poor People as a Housing Source” (New York: Office of Crisis Intervention Services, Human Resources Administration, 1979), 6.

¹³⁴ Koenig, “The Problem That Can’t Be Tranquilized.”

to them because they drew more referrals of welfare clients. Now that demand was so high, they were no longer willing to give up rentable space to house service programs.¹³⁵

Mounting Criticism of J-51

A number of people within city government recognized the detrimental effects of J-51 and criticized the Koch administration's embrace of the policy. One voice of dissent was Laurence Klein, Director of the Mayor's Office of SRO Housing from 1978 to 1980. In a 1979 memo, Klein urged Mayor Koch to issue a moratorium on the J-51 program. "Without exaggeration, we are creating a class of homeless people, who should rival the Vietnamese boat people for our attention and sympathy," wrote Klein. "We are all too familiar with the justifiable rage of communities like the Upper West Side to the saturation of SROs and their unsightly pathologies—but are we sufficiently tuned into this new phenomenon of individuals without even an SRO to live in, who are growing as a class as we deprive them of the only homes their meager subsidized rents will buy them?"¹³⁶

Another outspoken critic was City Councilmember Ruth Messinger, who represented the Upper West Side from 1978 to 1990. Messinger was outraged that the city was sacrificing hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues to finance luxury apartment buildings that likely would have made a profit without public assistance, at a time when municipal capital was scarce. For instance, according to one study, up to 60 percent of privately financed J-51 projects would have been carried out regardless of the subsidy.¹³⁷ Messinger and other critics worked to draw

¹³⁵ Frank. Padavan, "Single Room Occupancy Hotels: A Dead End in the Human Services Delivery System" (Albany: New York State Senate Mental Hygiene and Addiction Control Committee, 1980), 41, Municipal Library; Laurence Klein to Mayor Edward Koch, "Bi-Weekly Summary: June 15-July 1, 1979," July 3, 1979, box 63, folder 11, Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, Departmental Correspondences, MACNY.

¹³⁶ Klein to Koch, "Bi-Weekly Summary: June 15-July 1, 1979," July 3, 1979.

¹³⁷ Holtzman, *The Long Crisis*, 177.

public attention to the program's use. At a protest in front of a luxury cooperative converted from offices that received a 95 percent tax abatement, she displayed a list of seventy-six newly rehabilitated Manhattan apartment buildings that paid no property taxes in 1980 thanks to J-51. "The City cannot afford to grant large tax breaks to luxury apartments such as these," Messinger declared.¹³⁸

Initially, officials in the Koch administration were unsympathetic to criticisms of J-51. They believed that the program was achieving its goal of promoting economic development, attracting investment and ultimately expanding the city's tax base. However, with growing media attention and a worsening homelessness crisis, the Koch administration eventually instituted some reforms to provide greater protections for vulnerable low-income tenants. In 1981, the city reduced (but did not eliminate) benefits for SRO conversion, and increased benefits for upgrading an SRO. At the request of the Mayor's Office of SRO Housing, it also provided funding for the establishment of an SRO law project, contracting with the Goddard-Riverside Community Center to hire a staff of lawyers and organizers to work with tenants in SRO hotels and represent them in legal actions.¹³⁹ In 1982, the state legislature banned benefits for SRO conversions altogether. In 1983, the City Council passed a law requiring the city to certify that there has been no harassment of tenants in an SRO building in the previous three years before issuing a demolition or alteration permit.¹⁴⁰ Finally, in 1985, the Koch administration issued a moratorium on "the conversion, alteration, or demolition of single-room occupancy multiple dwellings," citing the existence of "a serious public emergency" resulting from former SRO

¹³⁸ Holtzman, 180–81.

¹³⁹ Mayor Edward Koch to Irwin Fruchtman, September 3, 1981, box 24, folder 01, Mayor Edward I. Koch Collection, Departmental Correspondences, MACNY.

¹⁴⁰ Coalition for the Homeless and SRO Tenants Rights Coalition, "Single Room Occupancy Hotels: Standing in the Way of the Gentry," 87.

residents becoming homeless. This lasted until 1989, when it was overturned by the New York State Court of Appeals.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Anthony J. Blackburn, “Single Room Living in New York City” (New York: Department of Housing Preservation and Development, September 1996), Municipal Library.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of single-room occupancy housing in New York City, city and state governments treated this dwelling form with a peculiar combination of dependency and denigration. From the Depression to the wartime housing crisis to the mass displacement from urban renewal projects to the deinstitutionalization of state mental hospitals, the government tacitly relied on SROs to fill in for its shortcomings in providing housing affordable to low-income people. At the same time, authorities regarded SROs as a form of blight that needed to be eliminated for neighborhoods to improve. As a result of this characterization, SRO facilities never received the kind of investment in social service provision and building improvement that many argued would have allowed them to flourish as housing for single, unattached low-income individuals. The contradictory approach of government policy meant that poor people were pushed from one substandard housing unit to the next, and eventually into the streets and shelter system.

In prioritizing the redevelopment of neighborhoods to attract middle- and upper-income residents over the maintenance of affordable housing options, city officials eliminated a vital housing resource. Even at their worst, the single-room occupancy hotels of the Upper West Side offered numerous advantages over the housing forms that have taken their place in housing poor New York City residents over the last few decades: giant tents in isolated and inaccessible locations, crowded congregate shelters over which many homeless people prefer to live on the street, illegal basement apartments in the outer boroughs in which dozens have drowned in floods. SROs offered people with little resources a space of their own in one of New York's greatest neighborhoods.

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