



SOUTH BRONX RESURRECTION

The Bronx (Borough of the City of New York)	
Population	1,330,000
Land Area (Square Miles)	42
Population per Square Mile	31,700
Land Area (Square Kilometers)	110
Population per Square Kilometer	12,100

27 May 2004

About a quarter of a century ago, Presidents Carter and Reagan stood on Charlotte Street and promised to rebuild the South Bronx. What had occurred there was an urban catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. What had been a strong, middle-income residential area of the Bronx (a borough of the city of New York) had become a virtual wasteland in barely 10 years. From Charlotte Street and Boston Road the view was, and not at all exaggerated, similar to that of Berlin the morning after Hitler’s demise. But there had been no war here. There had not even been the urban disorders that had destroyed so much of south-central Los Angeles, the Woodward corridor in Detroit or portions of Washington and Kansas City.

In 1975, the South Bronx was the most devastated urban landscape in the United States. The three community districts that comprise the core of the South Bronx had fallen 57 percent in population from 383,000 in 1970 to 166,000 in 1980, which has to rival the greatest short term population loss in any urban setting with the possible exception of war's devastation.

I stood at the same place and made the same promise on June 7, 1981. There were no television cameras and the audience was small --- my brother Arthur and a friend. Well, the amazing thing is that the South Bronx *has* been rebuilt. I’m not sure whether President Carter, President Reagan or I can take much credit for it. If any can, it would be President Carter, on the assumption that he may have spent a morning (or more) at some point with a hammer at a Habitat for Humanity house construction site. That day I took a brick from the leveled block that had been home to families not many years before. We also drove over to Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn and retrieved a brick for my Crocker United Factors colleague Florence Scheinbloom, from the leveled site of the building she had grown up in. Regrettably the pictures I took that day have not survived the decades. The brick from Charlotte Street did.

Arthur and I returned to the South Bronx in 2001, months before the attack on the World Trade Center, just subway stops away. I had been there briefly before in connection with an assignment, but had not been able to take the time to look closely. The resurrection that has occurred in the South Bronx is unprecedented. The rest of the article outlines what went wrong and what later went right.

What Went Wrong: A number of factors contributed to the decline of the South Bronx. For example:

- By the late 1960s, the courts were beginning to require mandatory busing of school children for racial balance. The prospect of having their children attend schools outside their neighborhoods led many households to seek the security of suburban areas that would be exempt from such orders. This increased vacancy rates.
- The city's decades old policy of rent control left building owners virtually no incentive to upgrade or even maintain their properties. As housing became less desirable, vacancies rose.
- In what former Bronx borough president and Congressman Herman Badillo called "the worst mistake of all," local and state authorities built Co-op City, the nation's largest multi-family housing development in the extreme northeast corner of the Bronx. Co-op City is comprised of approximately 35 high rise (24 to 33 story) buildings with 15,000 units. At a time when households were concerned about security, Co-op City provided a much safer environment. The attraction of Co-op City further added to the apartment vacancy crisis.
- For years, the city had been increasing both business and personal taxes. Among other things, this led to a substantial reduction in manufacturing in the South Bronx.
- In the late 1960s, the city adopted a policy of concentrating welfare households in the South Bronx, where vacancies had become the highest in the city.
- Lump sum payments of from \$1,000 to \$3,500 (\$4,500 to \$15,500 in 2000\$) were available from the city for relocation to low-income residents. This provided some residents an incentive to burn their own buildings. In 1970, the national per capita income was \$3,900.



Further, some apartment owners, facing financial ruin, arranged for their buildings to be burned (arson) so that they could recover some of their investment through insurance. As Robert Worth note in a Washington Monthly article:

... the Bronx began to burn in about 1970. Some of the fires were accidents, the inevitable result of decaying electrical systems. Many were set by landlords who would then collect the insurance money. Often they would sell the building--whether it was still inhabited or not--to "finishers" who would strip out the electrical wiring, plumbing fixtures, and anything else that could be sold for a profit before torching it. "Sometimes there'd be a note delivered telling you the place would burn that night," one man who lived through the period told me. "Sometimes not." People got used to sleeping with their shoes on, so that they could escape if the building began to burn.

Some have blamed Robert Moses and his expressway building, which cut swaths across the community. While elevated and depressed expressways do not improve a neighborhood, they do not necessarily inflict distress of the nature experienced in the South Bronx. For example, Moses' expressways also cut swaths through other New York City neighborhoods, without similar results. Nor did freeways devastate the north side of Chicago or Seattle. The list goes on and on. Virtually every major city in the United States has experienced the same dynamic.

At the same time, during the late 1960s, many American cities experienced civil disorders, which included rioting and arson. Further, the nation was experiencing an explosion in the crime rate, with the greatest increases occurring in the inner cities. These factors combined with the government policies noted above to produce a landscape in the South Bronx that could be accurately described as similar to that of German cities after Allied bombing at the end of World War II or London after the Blitz. But there had been no war --- this Blitz had been the unwitting result of government policies that had all been justified by what were perceived as high ideals --- aid to the poor, affordable housing and improved education for minority students.

Some of the same factors and government policies contributed to urban decline in other communities around the nation. Central city population losses during the 1970s were the greatest of any decade since World War II, both in terms of real numbers and percentages.

What Went Right: During the early 1980s, a reversal began. In the late 1970s, there had been considerable amounts of conventional federal funding. When the Reagan Administration took office, these funding sources



were largely eliminated. In 1985 Mayor Koch initiated a program that spent \$5 billion on affordable housing throughout the city over the next decade, only \$1.5 billion of it being spent in the South Bronx.

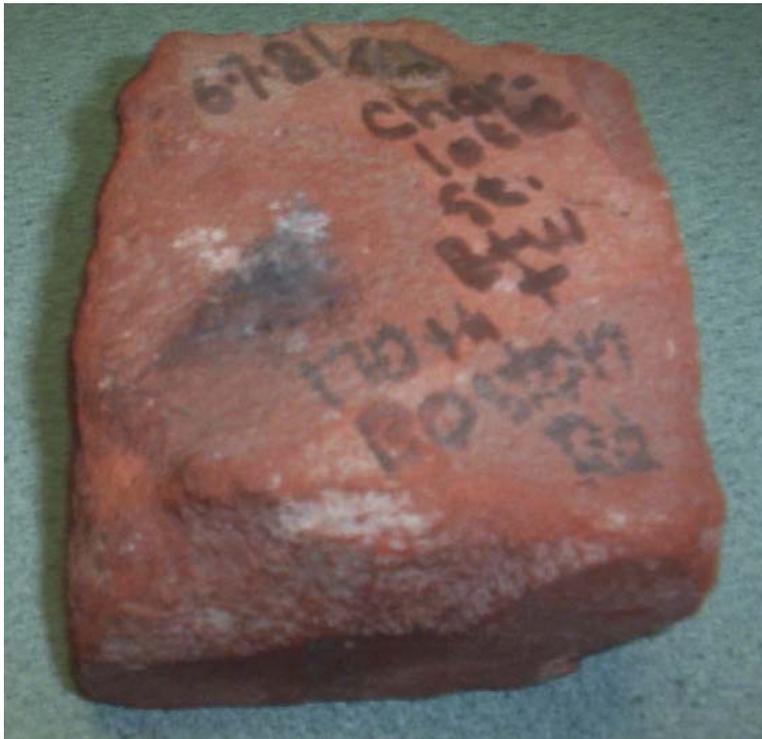
A the critical factor was mobilization by community development corporations (community, volunteer and religious groups), such as "Banana Kelly" and Aquinas Homes working with private foundations. These groups set about rebuilding, reclaiming and re-civilizing major portions of the South Bronx with limited amounts of private funding, government funding and volunteer activity. The community development corporations (CDCs) would purchase properties and disused buildings, combine their own funds with limited amounts of city funding and obtain commercial loans to develop the properties. The CDCs thus had a commercial risk. While the amount of public funding was substantial, there were not the traditional large amounts of outright grant money that so counterproductively draw the attention of special interests, groups and operators who emerge as recipients and leave little, if any, trail of accomplishment. This has been a particular problem in cities like New York, with their unfortunate tradition of political corruption. Robert Worth, in "Guess Who Saved the South Bronx?" notes that the Bronx political leadership was unusually honest and focused on the goal of revitalization, in contrast to leadership at the same time in other parts of the city.

The result is that the South Bronx today has returned as a vibrant community. It is different from the old South Bronx, with considerably lower population densities. Most new buildings are single-family houses or two and three story multi-family units. Vacant land has been built upon and disused buildings have been refurbished.

At the same time, the South Bronx does not represent a classic "gentrification," whereby higher income people repopulate an area, driving out the lower income residents. Thus, unlike the master planned urban renewal projects that displaced thousands of inner city residents in previous decades, the South Bronx is an unplanned phenomenon --- the result of market forces with incentives from government and community organizations. Moreover, the emerging situation involves much higher levels of home ownership. The South Bronx is increasingly a community of homeowners rather than renters.

The resurrection of the South Bronx represents by far the most significant renewal of a derelict tract of urban land in the United States. That it has occurred in what was the most derelict such tract makes it all the more impressive.





PICTURES

Charlotte Street & Boston Road, 2001
New Row Houses
New Row House Construction
New Apartment Building
Brick from Charlotte St. & Boston Road, 1981

By Wendell Cox

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