
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Getting community organizing right

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | Civil rights, Housing, NYC

Dec. 11, 2013 — As Bill de Blasio gets ready to tackle the enormous problems faced by New York City, belated attention is being paid (appropriately) to some of the key external forces that have held and continue to hold the city back. Most notably, these include federal disinvestment in cities for more than 30 years; the state's persistent failure to allocate New York City its fair share of funding (including the failure to meet a court mandate to fund education more equitably); and the dismantling of rent regulation that was [set in motion by former Governor George Pataki in 1997](#), a dismantling that has been left to work its mischief by his successors

But the most fundamental internal driver of a "tale of two cities" is seldom talked about. It's the [deep residential segregation that characterizes both New York and the surrounding metropolitan area](#). That segregation underlies every major social inequity we have: disparities in education, health, and employment are just three of the big ones.

The de Blasio administration promises a new era of activism and community participation, but will the energy generated ultimately reduce or perpetuate segregation? A great deal hinges on the nature of the community organizing that is encouraged.

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And it doesn't operate from the premise that the best that can be done is to take "separate and unequal" and do no more than move things closer to "separate but equal."

Progressive organizing is something we desperately need, but it is extraordinarily difficult to bring off for reasons both ideological and practical. As to ideology, some who work on the local level (regardless of the dominant race or ethnicity in the neighborhood in question) like their separation just the way it is. Hard to imagine them as "change agents."

But there is, I think, a larger group who adopt the let's-work-to-get-separate-to-be-more-equal approach because they believe that a more ambitious approach is impractical. The experience of the last 20 years — throughout the Bloomberg and Giuliani years — has been that gentrification has operated as a one-way, expulsive force, pushing outward from the wealthiest precincts of Manhattan into more and more previously less expensive neighborhoods. (It's one way because, if someone in a currently gentrifying neighborhood were to look for a new affordable apartment in an already gentrified neighborhood — like the Upper West Side — he certainly wouldn't find one.)

Given that experience, it's no surprise that there has been a tendency among some organizers to urge people to hunker down and try to preserve a vanishing status quo within their existing neighborhood. Almost invariably, residential mobility (in or out of a neighborhood) is perceived as a threat to that status quo.

There's a better way. The trick isn't to prevent mobility but to insure that the doors to mobility are open in all directions so that mobility can operate to everyone's benefit. That has to mean a strategy that simultaneously creates opportunities for mobility and ensures security for people who wish to remain in their current apartments.

The approach offers numerous advantages. They may all seem obvious, but they deserve to be set out explicitly. First, the approach is consonant with the historical reality that, in the absence of artificial barriers, neighborhood composition is typically dynamic, not static.

We need a two-prong strategy that simultaneously creates opportunities for mobility and ensures security for people who wish to remain in their current apartments.

Second, the approach doesn't rely on maintaining the deep concentrations of poverty and race that have long been demonstrated to be associated with limited opportunity for residents.

Third, the approach is respectful of the people who are actually living their lives on the ground. Genuine choice means a real opportunity to stay and a real opportunity to move (what we might describe as internal migration). The "opportunity to stay" element means concrete measures to fight displacement like better enforcement of building codes, stronger anti-harassment legislation, and commercial rent and zoning controls (so that every store doesn't become a pricy boutique). Opportunity to stay does not involve keeping people out.

A genuine opportunity to move means that new affordable housing is needed in every neighborhood throughout the city and throughout the region (New York's suburbs, like parts of New York City itself, have perennially been deficient in generating their fair share of affordable housing). It also means that the relevant governmental authorities must be vigilant in insuring that internal immigrants to new neighborhoods are not met with hostility.

The idea that residential mobility can be multi-dimensional and not expulsive is startling. It is contrary to recent experience in New York and thus requires imagining and desiring that which hasn't been. It requires rejecting large helpings of conventional wisdom (like affordable housing should just be dumped in the neighborhoods where it is cheapest to build or that affordable housing is only needed where poor and working-class people currently reside, not a mile or two or five away). It requires turning away from a defensive posture and beginning a citywide and region-wide anti-segregation, pro-security offensive.

It requires us to trust families to make the decisions they themselves want to make. My own view is that large numbers of New Yorkers would jump at the opportunity to live in affordable housing — even if getting that housing requires moving to a new neighborhood. Others, I'm sure, are somehow convinced that every family wants to remain where it currently is. But that dispute needn't be resolved: let's create the choices and see what happens. We're not, in any event, going to be stuck with too much affordable housing.

Ultimately, there can't be a more consequential decision than the direction of housing policy, in part because those decisions live on for decades (we are still living with the pernicious consequences of decisions made in the 1940s and 1950s to concentrate public housing in some neighborhoods in order to exempt others altogether). Organizing against segregation and for security would represent bold, progressive change at its best.

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