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City Room

Blogging From the Five Boroughs

How the South Bronx's Ruins Became Fertile Ground

By **Michael Powell** July 27, 2011 3:36 pm

This week in my **Gotham** column I wrote of the resurrection of the South Bronx, a brilliant coming back to life that owes much to the multidecade efforts of government.

Michael R. Bloomberg alone has created enough low and middle-income housing to house a population the size of Minneapolis.

Michael Powell on government and politics.

Much credit goes to mayors — from Edward I. Koch to David N. Dinkins, Rudolph W. Giuliani and now Mr. Bloomberg. But their co-stars in this too-often-unremarked-upon drama are a multitude of community groups, many of which scratched and clawed to save their neighborhoods in the 1970s, and grew into remarkably sophisticated operations, capable of leveraging hundreds of millions of dollars in bank investment.

These groups range from the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, to the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes to UHAB (the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board) and Los Sures and St. Nick's Alliance and Bridge Street Development in Brooklyn, and so on and so on across the city.

As Michael Gecan, an organizer with New York Industrial Areas Foundation, whose Manhattan and Bronx affiliates spearheaded the fight to create the gleaming

Mott Haven campus with four new schools, noted recently, the city's human expertise in the business of rebuilding neighborhoods is without peer nationally.

Meanwhile, many readers have pointed out that while we ran a haunting photograph of the broken Bronx to illustrate the column, we offered no shot of the borough's handsome reincarnation. To that end, I contacted the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and its spokeswoman, Catie Marshall, forwarded a few photographs of a neighborhoods where seedlings of change have turned to oaks.

There is also an architectural rendering by Jonathan Rose Companies of the Via Verde, an environmentally friendly and architecturally distinguished new apartment building that will serve as home for more than 200 working-class and poor families.

Finally, several readers and a conservative blog critic or two leveled three indictments against my argument, which run like this; The revival of the South Bronx is old news; second, the Bronx remains dirt poor (so where is the revival, they ask); and third, government played a key role in destroying the South Bronx in the first place.

Let's take it from the top. Mine was not a new discovery, although the borough's revival gains speed by the day — sprouts are turning to oak trees.

It's also true that the South Bronx remains a sea of working-class and poor people, and, it should be noted, real working-class wages have fallen steadily for decades across the nation. Arguably, that renders the rebuilding more impressive. Not so very long ago conservative theorists assayed a cultural theory of decline, arguing that the poor could not take care of their lives and their buildings.

The present success tends to put the lie to that argument.

As to government's role in the decline of the Bronx, as the saying goes, terrible mistakes were made. Robert Moses, the original power broker, laid down a highway through its heart, city officials built Co-Op City, a vast middle-class bulwark, far off in the northeastern reaches of the Bronx, thereby encouraging flight. And social policy dumped too dense numbers of poor into already declining neighborhoods.

But this only scratches at the surface of terrible decline. De-industrialization, the beginning of the end of manufacturing, and white flight to the post-war suburbs: The South Bronx died a death of many formidable causes.

More to the point, this argument leads to a broader question. Let's concede that leaders in the 1950s and 1960s made mistakes. Should a later generation, beginning with Mayor Koch and extending to Mayors Dinkins, Giuliani and Bloomberg simply have tossed up their hands and said: "Ah well, government made mistakes decades ago and so we should do nothing now"?

That would have been defeatism of the worst sort, and deprived the city and hundreds of thousands of families of a splendid rebirth.

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