**Twin Parks (1968-1975, 2250 units)**
**By Yonah Freemark and Susanne Schindler**
**In *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies that Transformed a City*, edited by Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner. 226-230. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2015.**

**Sponsors: NYS Urban Development Corporation, NYCHA, NYC Education Construction Fund**

**Program: Rental low- and moderate-income housing (Mitchell-Lama/Section 236, NYCHA) with integrated retail, educational, and community facilities.**

**Planner: Urban Design Group, NYC Department of City Planning**

**Architects: Richard Meier; James Polshek; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen; Giovanni Pasanella**

Conceived of in the mid-1960s and completed in the early 1970s, the Twin Parks portfolio of subsidized housing in the mid-Bronx was part of a broad revision in the city's approach to large-scale housing production. Rethinking housing policies to address a shortfall in affordably priced housing, Mayor John Lindsay's administration (1966–1973) prioritized the construction of mixed-income, mixed-race housing on vacant or underutilized infill sites. In particular, the mayor's team turned its attention to a section of the Bronx situated between Crotona and Bronx Parks. Designated an urban renewal area in 1963, "Twin Parks" suffered from disinvestment and was undergoing a rapid demographic transformation from a largely white Italian community into the home of Puerto Rican and black residents. The administration hoped that government aid for new housing could help prevent white flight to the suburbs and the resulting ghettoization affecting other sections of the city.

In 1966, a group of five recent architecture and planning graduates initiated a "Twin Parks Study" that identified underused sites for new construction as well as existing buildings for rehabilitation in two focus areas. Co-financed by the J.M. Kaplan Fund and Lindsay's administration, the plan was developed in close collaboration with the Twin Parks Association, a group of almost fifty local religious organizations whose original goal was to create a total of 3,000 units of new or rehabilitated high-quality low-, moderate-, and middle-income apartments.[1]

---

[1] See Myles Weintraub and Marco Zicarelli, "The Tale of Twin Parks," *Architectural Forum* (June 1973): 52-55. The authors of study were Jonathan Barnett, Giovanni Pasanella, Jaquelin T. Robertson, Myles Weintraub, and

The late 1960s, however, presented fiscal challenges that delayed housing construction at Twin Parks; the city faced a $500 million deficit in Lindsay's first year and federal housing aid did not account for New York's high construction costs.[2] In May 1969, Lindsay agreed to allow the state's newly founded Urban Development Corporation (UDC) to finance and develop eight areas in New York City. One of them was Twin Parks, where UDC proceeded to build 2,250 low- and moderate-income units dispersed among four developments (Twin Parks Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast). In addition, NYCHA constructed 600 low-income units, and the NYC Education Construction Fund was responsible for another 600. As planner Myles Weintraub and Father Marco Ziccarelli, head of the Twin Parks Association, wrote in 1973, the neighborhood group, which had intended to act as the non-profit developer, could not secure funding, and thus agreed to relinquish community control in exchange for rapid implementation of the proposed housing.

Construction by UDC began in 1970 and was completed in 1973. The agency placed a high priority on design and hired emerging architects to experiment with urban-design configurations and new unit types for a range of studio to five-bedroom apartments. Richard Meier was commissioned with Twin Parks Northeast; its three mid- to highrise buildings were designed around existing structures on three adjacent blocks, articulated existing street walls with arcades, and created a new, publicly accessible plaza by closing off a block of Grote Street. James Polshek designed part of Twin Parks Southeast as a gateway formed of a point tower and mid-rise block comprising duplex apartments accessed from open-air galleries across private porches. Three nearby buildings originally assigned to Polshek were realized by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill as modular concrete structures with distinctive, repetitive balconies cofinanced through the short-lived Operation Breakthrough, a federal initiative to promote industrialized construction methods.

Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen, in collaboration with landscape architect Terry Schnadelbach, dealt with two heavily-sloped sites at Twin Parks Northwest, one resolved as a sleek 19-floor tower with intricately interlocking one- and two-story units, the other as a 5- to

---

Robert Weinstein. This issue of *Architectural Forum* includes two further essays on Twin Parks: Kenneth Frampton, "Twin Parks as Typology," 56–61; and Suzanne Stephens, "Learning from Twin Parks," 62–67.

[2] Clayton Knowles, "Lindsay Will Face Crisis on Budget," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1965, 49; Charles Morris, *The Cost of Good Intentions: New York City and the Liberal Experiment, 1960-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 18, 119.

10-story building framing a large, sunken courtyard. Giovanni Pasanella was responsible for three UDC buildings as well as NYCHA's Twin Parks West complex;[3] all comprised split-level floor-through apartments the architect heralded as an urban alternative to the suburban house.[4] At Twin Parks East, Pasanella designed two sets of high-rise towers atop new public schools.

While the large number of dwellings made the Twin Parks effort a quantitative accomplishment, the variety of sites, programs, and architectural expressions ensured that it is not perceived as a single project. Only at Twin Parks West do the buildings, related through their 8-by-8-inch brick facades but distinct in terms of massing and orientation, read as an ensemble; historian Vincent Scully aptly described it as a "flotilla."[5]

The Twin Parks effort was motivated by the desire to link the Puerto Rican, black, and Italian residents who lived nearby but who were often at odds. In part, it attempted to do so through quality urban design and the provision of a variety of dwelling types. But the integration program was also formalized through UDC-led leasing that aimed to attract a wide variety of ethnic groups and income levels. Twin Parks plans were predicated on serving a mix of low- and moderate-class families to "help prevent one income group from overwhelming another," according to a 1967 city report.[6] From the commencement of leasing, however, the UDC failed to achieve the envisioned ethnic integration. In theory, the projects were meant to be inhabited by one-third white, black, and Puerto Rican residents, respectively. But initial targeted outreach to white residents yielded limited results. The UDC reserved 69 apartments for "non-minorities" in two of its four developments, but those were difficult to fill; by 1972, even those whites who had agreed to move in were leaving. In mid-1973, Edward Logue, the UDC's chief executive officer, agreed in a staff memo that the goal of integrating Twin Parks was largely "hopeless."[7] The Census tracts that contained the complexes were in the midst of a transition

---

[3] A NYCHA building for elderly residents only at 180th and Clinton was the last of the Twin Parks sites, designed by Herbert Mandel and completed only in 1981.

[4] In an undated document (ca. 1968), Pasanella writes "Floor-through 2-level apartments are provided above and below the corridor, with through ventilation and a level separation between bedrooms and living areas (just as in a house, perhaps even the ur-typical split-level itself)." PKSB Archive.

[5] Vincent Scully, "Preface," in *Pasanella + Klein: Public and private interventions in the residential field*, ed. Alessandra Latour (Rome: Kappa, 1987).

[6] "Twin Parks: Vest Pocket Housing," City of New York, Housing and Development Administration (New York, December 7, 1967).

[7] Notes by Edward Logue written on memos. Marion Scott, Memo to Edward Logue, May 16, 1972; Ronald Clare, Letter to Reverend Paul Matson, April 24, 1973; Ronald Clare, Memo to File, June 20, 1973; all from Yale University Archives, Logue Records (Accession 1983-M-005, MS 959, Box 291, Folder Twin Parks: 1972).

from mostly white areas in 1960 to areas largely populated by non-whites in 1980. The trend has continued to the present: according to the 2010 Census, there were virtually no white residents in the area. Most were black or Latino, about a third of whom were foreign-born. Our observations suggest that a substantial number today are of West-African or Middle-Eastern origin.

On the other hand, the economic integration planned for the buildings, if not the larger neighborhoods, proved more successful. UDC dictated that its projects should incorporate 30 percent low-income housing units (below 50 percent of area median income (AMI)), and 70 percent moderate-income units (between 50 and 80 percent of AMI).[8] These levels were set in stone by federal rent supplement (later Section 8), Section 236, and state Mitchell-Lama regulations, attached semi-permanently to the units' financing. Accordingly, the developments still reflect this make up. In 2010, roughly a third of residents in the relevant Census block groups had annual incomes below $20,000 (low income) and two-thirds had between $20,000 and $60,000 (moderate income). Furthermore, economic integration has not come at the cost of lower-middle class demand. Leasing records released by the state in 2013 indicate that the wait time for moderate-income family apartments ranged from 1 to 2 years for units at Twin Parks Northeast and Southeast. Admittedly, there is less interest in the Northwest and Southwest complexes.

At another level, the urban design strategy aimed to integrate a variety of public amenities throughout the neighborhood. The Northeast (Meier) and Southeast (Polshek) buildings incorporated retail from the beginning, distinguishing them from most other previous New York City public housing and most other government-subsidized housing—thereby weaving Twin Parks into the life of the surrounding areas. Commenting on Twin Parks in 1973, New York Times architecture critic Paul Goldberger noted that the complexes' "massing carefully relates to existing buildings and street patterns… set down with immense care in this old neighborhood." The plaza between two of the Meier buildings, in particular, seemed to Goldberger like "a meeting place for neighbors with friendly intentions."[9] At several of the steeply sloping Twin Parks West sites, the architects created pedestrian connections across the

[8] Clayton Knowles, "Governor Speaks on Bronx Housing," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1970.
[9] Paul Goldberger, "Twin Parks, an Effort to Alter the Pattern of Public Housing," *The New York Times*, December 27, 1973.

escarpment using dramatic stairs and porticos allowing passers-by to slip underneath the buildings.

Private ownership of UDC buildings exposed them to fiscal uncertainty.[10] By the early 1980s, projects supported by New York State's Mitchell-Lama financing, including many of Twin Parks' units, faced considerable financial difficulties. For instance, the Dic-Underhill Investment Group, which then managed several of the UDC complexes, fell into arrears and had to be rescued by the state in exchange for building upgrades. The state could have foreclosed the properties but decided to maintain the buildings' private management because of concerns about losing income-restricted housing and the lack of an alternative government manager. From the management's point of view, the restrictions on rent levels made it impossible to cover rising maintenance and energy costs.[11]

Poor management led tenants to grow increasingly unsatisfied with building maintenance in UDC buildings. A review of building violations shows that private ownership at the Southeast and Northwest complexes produced a significant number of violations in 2010, the most recent year available (11 and 27, respectively). On the other hand, the buildings then temporarily owned by the state, Twin Parks Southwest, only had one violation that year. The Northeast buildings—which suffered 245 violations in 2010—were abandoned by Ocelot Capital after the 2008 recession. With state aid, new owners Omni New York undertook $30 million in improvements financed through low-income housing tax credits as well as public bond measures, in the form of renovated elevators, floors, windows, bathrooms, kitchens, and entrance security, as well as a switch to more economical gas heat from electric.[12]

At the same time, renters feared that the buildings' private ownership could result in the eventual loss of affordability. Mitchell-Lama financing only requires the maintenance of

---

[10] Though the buildings were planned and developed by the UDC, a public agency, they were managed and owned by private organizations. The UDC continued to have an active role throughout the lease-up and financing process, but after the UDC's bond rating was repeatedly downgraded because of a federal moratorium on new subsidies for housing production and a lack of interest from investors in bond purchasing, that role was diminished. The state bailed out the loans supporting agency projects (including Twin Parks), but it mostly ceased building new projects in 1975. The UDC's public name was changed to Empire State Development Corporation in 1995. See Yonah Freemark, *The Entrepreneurial State: New York's Urban Development Corporation, an Experiment to Take Charge of Affordable Housing Production, 1968-1975* (Master's thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013).
[11] "7 Housing Units and State Agree on Arrears Plan," *The New York Times*, March 12, 1982.
[12] "Data Search Tool," Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University (2010), accessed September 28, 2013, http://datasearch.furmancenter.org/; Daniel Beekman, "Ex-Met Vaughn hits it out of park with deal to fix up to two Bronx apartment buildings," *New York Daily News*, December 17, 2010; "Twin Parks," Omni New York LLC (2013), accessed August 20, 2013, http://www.onyllc.com/property/twin-parks.

affordability over 15- to 30-year periods; landlords may pull their units out of the program at those points and convert units to market rates. Tenants at Twin Parks campaigned aggressively in the 2000s to preserve unit affordability through the renewal of the Mitchell-Lama contract.[13] Had these units been located in Manhattan, a conversion would have been very likely, but the weaker market forces in the Bronx opened up the possibility of extended affordable limits. In August 2013, Governor Andrew Cuomo approved state funding for thousands of Mitchell-Lama units, including those in Twin Parks Southeast, Southwest, and Northwest. This financing transferred the UDC portfolio to another state agency, the New York State Department of Homes and Community Renewal, and provided tax-exempt bonds and tax credits to upgrade buildings.[14] This change guarantees another 40 years of affordability at current levels, at which point tenants will likely have to campaign for affordability yet again.

Though affordability has been temporarily addressed, private management has systematically diminished many of the innovative design characteristics of the Twin Parks complexes. At one of the Meier buildings, six floors of windows once lighting and ventilating single-loaded corridors have been replaced with metal panels; in the community room at roof level, added cinderblock walls prevent any views, and access to the roofs, where patios were laid out, is prohibited. Similarly, at the Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen courtyard building, the ground-floor community room's original large windows have been replaced by brick, and the gently terraced sitting and playground areas, formerly a stimulating pattern of concrete pavers set in grass, were covered in concrete. While recent changes in ownership and the ongoing influx of capital have resulted in upgrades on the interiors, there has been a consistent disregard for the exterior spaces and common amenities.[15]

Twin Parks succeeded in creating mixed-income communities, though not racially integrated ones. It added inviting urban spaces, storefronts, and architecturally innovative buildings to the neighborhood, but these design features have been underappreciated and often

---

[13] "Saving Mitchell-Lama: Working Together to Save Our Homes" (2013), accessed September 2, 2013, http://www.save-ml.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=12.

[14] "Governor Cuomo announces preservation of 8,600 Mitchell Lama Units" (press release), State of New York, May 15, 2013; "Governor Cuomo announces approval of $163 million of funding to restore and preserve Mitchell-Lama housing in the Bronx" (press release), State of New York, August 14, 2013.

[15] For a reflection on the designers' original intent and the buildings' current condition see Susanne Schindler and Juliette Spertus, "The Landscape of Housing: Twin Parks Northwest 40 Years On," *Urban Omnibus*, November 6, 2013.

undercut. Private ownership did not guarantee reliable management, nor did it offer tenants long-term confidence in housing affordability.