

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Hostos Community College

2011

Not So Fun City

William A. Casari

CUNY Hostos Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ho_pubs/95

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

NOT SO FUN CITY

William Casari

When the handsome and charismatic John Lindsay is elected mayor of New York in 1966, he inherits a city whose residents still see hope for positive change despite the tumult of a notorious decade and gnawing fiscal problems. On his first day as mayor, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) goes on strike against New York City Transit and shuts down bus and subway service. In response the mayor walks from his hotel room to City Hall and remarks “it’s still a fun city.” The “fun city” line becomes the catch phrase of his term (The Fun City). Up in the Bronx, which Lindsay had visited during his campaign, things are changing. Many white-ethnic Irish and Jewish families are leaving the borough; their Puerto Rican and African-American replacements tend to have a lower educational and socioeconomic level than their recently departed neighbors. The Bronx continues to grow as a broad multi-racial working class area and the Grand Concourse, a higher income area until about 1963, sees its first black resident move into a Concourse apartment in the mid-1960s. At the same time, specific blocks in the South Bronx are showing signs of strain, though the picture isn’t yet crystal clear. Race and ethnicity aren’t too far from anyone’s mind in New York City at the time, in the two years before Martin Luther King is assassinated.

The social fabric of certain neighborhoods is fraying with a rise in street crime and drug use coupled with population and economic shifts that result in vacated apartments and eventually, abandoned buildings. However, as late as 1971 most of the Bronx is physically intact. The worst is yet to come and will be a result of strategies the city implements based on faulty data supplied by the fire department to unquestioning consultants; a massive out-migration of Bronxites; and other factors resulting from the early 1970s urban swirl. By 1977, during Mayor Abe Beame’s administration, the South Bronx is known worldwide as a desolate, burned-out wasteland, site of the worst non-war-related urban carnage any inner-city neighborhood has ever known.

Sound like a fictional TV drama or a fantasy version of the computer game Sim City? Sadly, it's exactly what happened, as detailed in two books that go in depth "sounding the alarm" about why so many buildings and lives were destroyed in the Bronx as a result of fires. How did this happen to an area that had been a secure and stable neighborhood just a few years earlier? What really caused the fires in the South Bronx and what role did the city and its consultants play in the devastation?

In 2007, I was finishing my master's thesis, *Concourse Dreams: A Bronx Neighborhood and Its Future*, and my friend J.J. Brennan—an amateur Bronx historian—asked if I was including anything from a book called *A Plague on Your Houses* about the housing abandonment and subsequent fires that had consumed large swaths of the South Bronx. I had never heard of the book and immediately began reading about the connection between new fire alarm call boxes that actually resulted in less manpower responding to fires; a consulting firm called RAND that recommended closing/combining fire companies where they were needed most; and the connection between fires and contagious disease. My interest was piqued about the origin and spread of these destructive fires, of which only seven percent were attributed to arson. It was a missing chapter from my thesis.

I also read Joe Flood's *The Fires*, which details the rise of citywide Fire Commissioner John O'Hagan, who presided over the worst of the 1970s fires, a period known as "the wars" in FDNY lore. When Lindsay was elected mayor, O'Hagan, "who strongly believed in the use of statistics and systems analysis to organize the department, became one of his leading allies" (*The Fires*). Lindsay also sought the advice of the RAND Corporation (a contraction of the words research and development) and "on the surface it was a perfect alliance as RAND needed new clients, Lindsay needed a blueprint for rational government and O'Hagan needed support for his ideas for making firefighting a scientific discipline" (*The Fires*). It turned out to be a disastrous combination for poor and minority neighborhoods in New York, especially the South Bronx, already redlined by banks and left to fend for itself by the City of New York. Reading both books gives the reader a new understanding that many of the fires that consumed the Bronx south of Fordham Road could have been contained better, and—even more shockingly—that in some ways the city was a silent partner in the area's destruction, wanting to clear land for more appropriate uses. In presenting these two books along with other related sources I intend to explain the role of Housing Commissioner Roger Starr, an advocate for planned shrinkage in declining neighborhoods, and show how media portrayals often created, then perpetuated, stereotypes about the residents and the area. The authors of the following book, no strangers to numbers as trained epidemiological researchers, add up the data to create a social analysis of what happened.

A PLAGUE ON YOUR HOUSES

A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled, by Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, "is a scorching indictment of the decision to close fire companies in New York in the 1970's and a frightening study of the way misguided and malevolent social policy can spark a chain reaction of enormous and unforeseen urban collapse." (Wallace). The authors outline how the destruction of neighborhoods through abandonment and fires

eventually led to the spread of crime and disease not only in those neighborhoods but in the entire greater New York metropolitan area. The authors and reviewers also cite the social policy of “planned shrinkage” advocated by Housing Commissioner Roger Starr. While Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan advocated for “benign neglect” of neighborhoods that were suffering, Starr went even farther pushing for policies that would accelerate the demise of built environments so the land could be cleared for other light-industrial uses like the Hunts Point Food Market (which today brings 60,000 truck trips a week through the area). In *Plagues*, the Wallace’s devote an entire chapter to “benign neglect” and “planned shrinkage,” linking those policies to the destruction of neighborhoods like the South Bronx where waves of conventional and arson fires followed.

In reviewing the book for the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, David Rosner writes that this thoughtful book integrates both a technical quantitative analysis with a profound social analysis of the “ways that the urban market for land, the capitalist use of space, and the social relations of class all conspire to undermine the health of the rich and poor alike.” (114). Taking a look at the South Bronx during the time period of 1974-1977 shows there was an “epidemic” of fires clustered in place and time. Thus there was a slow destruction of the community that resulted in out-migration (116). Loss of housing and homelessness were the most obvious manifestations, along with a swelling of welfare clients burned out of their homes and then re-housed in places like the Concourse Plaza Hotel near Yankee Stadium, which since 1923 had been a social gathering place for weddings, bar mitzvahs, Rotary meetings and an “apartment hotel” for Yankee ballplayers during the season. The eight-building Noonan Plaza Apartments in Highbridge, considered an Art Deco showplace by architectural historians and an address of distinction, was also used to house displaced people. As the City of New York began to move the newly homeless in, both of these properties began deteriorating causing longtime tenants and residents to move out as the quickly changing demographics reinforced racial and social fears during the Lindsay administration in the late 1960s. Disintegration of the social fabric in many neighborhoods was accompanied by the physical destruction of apartment buildings, a process that had begun in the mid-1950s as the Bronx began to change racially and post-war demographics shifted as children who had grown up in the area rejected the world of their parents and began to move to Westchester, Long Island and the newly opened Co-op City, a massive housing development near Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx.

The Wallace’s first published their findings in academic journals and were written off by RAND as “leftist ideologues with an axe to grind” (Flood 208). The Wallace team was accusing RAND and the Lindsay administration of a malicious attempt to burn down poor neighborhoods. While some felt the Wallace’s political claims were baseless, their technical criticisms of the models, which RAND largely ignored, were correct (209).

THE FIRES

Brown University Urban Studies Professor Samuel Zipp wrote a book review in *The Nation* about Joe Flood’s 2010 book. In *The Fires: How a Computer Formula, Big Ideas, and the Best of Intentions Burned Down New York City*, Flood explains how New York City Mayor John Lindsay hired consultants from the RAND Corporation

to help modernize municipal service delivery. Applying their formulas and number crunching to the fire department—and relying heavily on faulty, self-serving, inaccurate information supplied by the Fire Department—the RAND “whiz kids” recommended an overhaul of fire station locations and the number of engines responding to fires, based on flawed firefighter response time data (Zipp 39). These decisions would have tragic consequences. The city instituted service cuts and reallocations that created dangerously unprotected spots in the South Bronx like Charlotte Street, East New York in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side in Manhattan—all poor, minority neighborhoods ravaged by housing abandonment. “Mayor Lindsay’s experiment in systems analysis, Flood says, ‘burned down New York City.’” (39).

When interviewed about his book, Flood tells Marc Ambinder the following about “what happens when politicians paint by the numbers:”

According to the models, they [New York City] could close busy fire companies in fire-prone areas without much impact on overall service. For the city, that meant saving money, focusing budget cuts in politically weak areas and supposedly not losing much fire protection. That was exactly what everyone wanted to hear, and they ran with it. It just happened to be wrong.

Flood details John O’Hagan’s rise to Chief of the Fire Department and how his philosophy fit in perfectly with Mayor Lindsay’s desire to try and bring control to the city using models and numbers.

Both *Fires* and *Plagues* prominently cite Roger Starr, Mayor Beame’s Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development and former RAND employee, as a central character in this drama. In an article Starr authored for the *New York Times* titled “Making New York Smaller” he argues for reducing the footprint of city services in grim economic and fiscal times. Granted the fiscal crisis during this time was severe and the city needed new sources of revenue that didn’t involve new taxes or help from Washington, but what he writes near the beginning of the article is telling: “we could simply accept the fact that the city’s population is going to shrink, and we could cut back on city services accordingly, realizing considerable savings in the process” (Starr). Of course this begs the question of what neighborhoods were targeted for a reduction in city services and how were they chosen. Were these the areas that were already seen to be in decline or had quickly-changing demographics? Many people were leaving the Bronx because of unsafe conditions brought on by housing abandonment and fires that were themselves a result of reduction in fire services and the social breakdown of neighborhoods. Yet, there was actually a need for new housing at the time apartments in the Bronx were burning down.

In another startling sentence Starr gives up on the American Dream altogether: “essentially planned shrinkage is a recognition that the golden door to full participation in American life and the American economy is no longer to be found in New York” (Starr). The reader is left to wonder if Starr and his generation were the “last pioneers” to participate in the dream of urban America and now the huddled masses will have to look elsewhere. Readers may also question why Starr invests no intellectual capital answering the very questions he poses; the final solution is

accelerated shrinkage of the South Bronx in order to clear the land. The solution is presented by Starr with no alternative discussion or questions.

The article authored by Starr is just one example of how media portrayals were used to stereotype neighborhoods and advocate for their demise from downtown city planners and consultants. The media are often mentioned as another culprit in the demise of the South Bronx because local newspapers and national magazines like *Newsweek* highlighted housing abandonment and incited racial fear, well before the major fires consumed neighborhoods. Was the media simply reporting what was happening, or was it fanning the flames, so to speak? Did the conversation move to a more serious level after people read major articles in the *New York Times* and other leading periodicals? Bronx history buffs and others would argue that the media was complicit. This also begs the question of which came first—the fires or the abandonment? Or was it a combination of the two?

Steven V. Roberts, writing in the *New York Times* in the summer of 1966 after John Lindsay was elected, reports the following:

In the last decade Negroes and Puerto Ricans have gradually moved north and west from the ghettos of the South Bronx and Morrisania, looking for better housing in the narrow, well-kept avenues parallel to the Concourse. A recent study by a social service agency predicted that the area, 98% white in 1950, would be less than 50% white in 1975. The flight of the white middle class, almost imperceptible for years, has started to pick up. The slow exodus that opened good apartments to minority families has been accelerated by their presence. In certain spots a familiar pattern has begun to recur. Buildings managers have grown careless about maintenance. City services—police protection, sanitation, and recreational facilities—have grown less reliable (28).

Another excellent example is “City Disease,” an editorial written by Stewart Alsop for *Newsweek* magazine in February 1972, six years after the Roberts story. The date is important, as much of the South Bronx was still standing; however, many apartment buildings were abandoned which caused the fall, like dominoes, of other buildings in the same neighborhoods. Roger Starr served as Alsop’s Bronx tour guide and one building in particular on Washington Avenue made Alsop’s point succinctly: “there is no mystery about what happened to 1176 Washington Avenue. The black people who lived there were terrorized by heroin addicts in need of a fix. When life became unlivable, they escaped, and there were none to replace them. The owner of the building abandoned it”(96). The thread of racism is barely hidden: a building so bad even black people can’t live there and implying that building abandonment came before the fires.

Alsop expands on junkies who moved in and stripped the building of anything valuable, and then set fire to the structure. Later he compares the Bronx to an unlivable desert where city and federal “slumlords” own the buildings abandoned by private owners as the neighborhood deteriorates further into an urban cesspool. Alsop claims this process is killing our great cities. “The disease spreads

out inexorably from the black slums to the downtown areas, and even threatens the close-in suburbs. Can the disease be halted”(96)?

This echoes the Wallace’s point about contagious diseases spreading out from inner city areas to white suburbs. The dramatic tone of the article also plays on any *Newsweek* readers’ fears of “dark” inner city neighborhoods populated by drug addicts and black and brown people. These and many other media portrayals set the tone for the “new” public image of Bronx neighborhoods juxtaposed against the Grand Concourse itself, once a sought-after address considered the Park Avenue of the Bronx.

I was so surprised to read Alsop’s editorial written well before the wave of fires reduced many South Bronx streets to rubble and the destruction became known worldwide that I asked lifelong Bronxite and scholar Sam Goodman, who grew up in the Mt. Eden area of the Concourse, to read the Alsop piece and give me his reaction. Goodman is currently an urban planner with the Bronx Borough President’s Office and lives on the lower Grand Concourse:

This article reminds me of the hundreds of similar writings. The material impresses me on two counts. First it appears to blame drug addicts for much of the problem, failing to note that these people were placed into the Bronx by the city itself and then abandoned, allowing them to shoot anyone with any resources in order to shoot up. Second, Roger Starr is the person who actually advocated for policies that today we consider the prime cause for the very conditions outlined by the author. Hindsight is always 20-20, still it’s interesting to note that much of the Bronx was still intact in 1972. It would be at least another five years before things really worsened and another ten years for the borough’s population to drop by 303,000 residents. You might say that like so many previously printed articles, the intent of the writer was to encourage the destruction by often referring to the Grand Concourse as being threatened, without suggesting that anything was being tried to stem the process. Of course, we know nothing was. (Goodman).

Based on the writings of Roger Starr, Stewart Alsop and other journalists as well as evidence presented in *A Plague on Your Houses* and *The Fires* readers can infer—but not guarantee—that this thinking, planning and media reporting led to the municipally approved destruction of the South Bronx; the many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle came together to create urban chaos. While this information must be considered in the context of what was happening in the entire city and nation at the time, no other urban area was as devastated as the South Bronx. While many external factors were also at work during this urban swirl, John Lindsay was the man in charge. With that in mind, the role of the RAND Corporation and the manner in which its data were interpreted and used by Fire Commissioner John O’Hagan with the mayor’s approval cannot be underestimated. John Lindsay had hoped crunching the numbers and computer modeling would help him get a stronghold over the City of New York but those hopes were lost on the streets of the South Bronx.

REFERENCES

- Alsop, Stewart. "The City Disease." *Newsweek*. 28 February 1972. Print.
- Ambinder, Marc. "The Fires This Time: Joe Flood on Managing New York City." *theatlantic.com*. 28 Jan. 2011. Web.
- "Burning Down the House." *Nation* 291.24 (2010): 39-44. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 11 Jan. 2011
- Flood, Joe. *The Fires: How A Computer Formula, Big Ideas, and The Best of Intentions Burned Down New York City—and Determined the Future of Cities*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2010. Print.
- Goodman, Sam. E-mail interview. 12 November 2010.
- Roberts, Steven V. "Grand Concourse: Hub of Bronx Is Undergoing Ethnic Changes." *New York Times*. 21 July 1966, 28. Print.
- Rosner, David. Reviewed work(s): *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned down and National Public Health Crumbled* by Deborah Wallace; Rodrick Wallace. *Journal of Public Health Policy*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (2002), pp. 114-117 Published by: Palgrave Macmillan Journals
- Rushton, Gerard. "A Plague on Your Houses (Book Review)." *Journal of Regional Science* 40.3 (2000): 614. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 11 Jan. 2011
- Starr, Roger. "Making New York Smaller." *The New York Times Magazine*. 14 Nov. 1976,33. Print.
- "The Fires: How a Computer Formula Burned Down New York City—and Determined the Future of American Cities." *Kirkus Reviews* 78.4 (2010): 117-118. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 11 Jan. 2011
- "The Fun City." *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 January 1966, 13. Print.
- Wallace, Deborah and Rodrick Wallace. *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled*. New York: Verso, 1998. Print.