Winter 1-31-2008

Concourse Dreams: A Bronx Neighborhood And Its Future

William A. Casari
CUNY Hostos Community College

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CONCOURSE DREAMS: A BRONX NEIGHBORHOOD AND ITS FUTURE

BY

WILLIAM A. CASARI

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York.

2008
This thesis has been read and accepted for the Graduate Center Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

Approved:

William Kornblum, Thesis Advisor

Date

Approved:

Joseph W. Dauben, Executive Officer

Date

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Preface

In September 2003, after I was hired as a substitute library instructor and archivist at Hostos Community College, I began writing a grant to obtain funding for our start-up archival collection. For background information on the Bronx I read Jill Jonnes’s book *South Bronx Rising* and subsequently took my first stroll up the Grand Concourse to 161st Street, watching and wondering as all the places I had read about came to life before me: The Bronx County Courthouse flanked by moderne sculptures; the Lorelei Fountain in Joyce Kilmer Park and just across the street, the Concourse Plaza Hotel, topped by decorative urns. The built environment of “decades past” looked so good it caught me by surprise. After all the negative things I’d heard and images I’d seen about the Bronx, maybe I thought the buildings would look worse or not even be standing. Perhaps I was just glad they were still there and didn't look so bad after all. No doubt my opinion, like many others, was formed around the reputation of one of the most notoriously stereotyped areas in the world, the South Bronx.

Throughout the turbulent period from 1968-1988, the fine apartments around Joyce Kilmer Park, in the heart of the area, sheltered people as they had since they were built in the 1920's and 1930's. Through all the negativity and hardship the Bronx endured, working people came home every single night to well-designed apartment houses like 910, 930, 888 and, of course, Executive Towers at 1020 Grand Concourse, a 23-story curving white brick tower that would not look out of place on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach.
Concourse apartment houses represented the best spaces in the borough; as other nearby neighborhoods became unstable many people moved to the area around Kilmer Park in search of a better home and possibly something even more important: safety. Not one building on the Bronx's famed Grand Concourse ever burned during the 1970s, which speaks to the strength of architecture and the important symbolic role the street plays in the identity of the borough. However, many Concourse buildings came close to falling down from lack of maintenance and many were abandoned. Years and many stories later there they were, right in front of me, standing tall and strong. If only the walls could talk.

This is the story of one of America’s great streets and several of the buildings, parks and “under construction” spaces that are near to the Grand Concourse neighborhood between 149th and 167th streets in the Bronx. This study will showcase great buildings and a neighborhood that weathered the storm while immense change took place on the streets below, and in the rest of the United States. While the buildings didn’t change so much, the people inside them did, and the stores, offices and public spaces I focus on look quite different today than they did mid-20th century. However, the neighborhood is a lovely, convenient place to call home. Little did I know but I passed my future home on my walk that day. Architect Charles Kreymborg's 860 Grand Concourse, a seven-story art deco building, stands directly across the Concourse from the Bronx County Building (popularly referred to as “the courthouse”) at 159th street. I began looking at apartments in the building in fall 2004 and moved into a 900 square foot
top-floor one bedroom on April 22, 2005. My apartment features a sunken living room, original colored tile in the bathroom, a separate shower and corner right-angle windows that turn my bedroom into a solarium on sunny days. I paid $75,000.

Since then my obsession with all things Bronx has only grown. It's the “back-from-the-ashes” story of the South Bronx that appeals to me most and also raises the biggest question: How could our public officials and other faceless bureaucrats sit back and watch the Bronx burn knowing they had a hand in it? This paper is a sociological walking tour of a West Bronx neighborhood bisected by a famous main street called the Grand Concourse. While walking, I’ll visit some storied spaces of the Bronx to see how these buildings are being used and who’s living and working in them today.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Street is Born</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concourse of Dreams</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Bronx Past</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking Tour and Bronx Transitions</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Metamorphosis</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yankee Stadium</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx Urban Futures</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Concourse as Icon</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Images

1. 1166 Grand Concourse lobby detail (c) 9
2. Joyce Kilmer Park and Lorelei Fountain (bw) 11
3. Weinman art moderne sculpture at Bronx County Building (c) 15
4. Youths fly kite on abandoned South Bronx street (bw) 23
5. Gertrude Clark at Mildred Apartments South Bronx (bw) 26
6. Lorelei Fountain at Joyce Kilmer Park (bw) 29
7. Street map of West and South Bronx areas (bw) 32
8. 161st Street underpass under construction (bw) 36
9. Fleetwood Theater on Morris Avenue (bw) 39
10. Art deco apartment house East 167th Street (bw) 41
11. Half-timbered Tudor apartment house Gerard Avenue (bw) 43
12. Concourse Plaza Hotel postcard (c) 56
13. Concourse Plaza Hotel *Bronxboro* advertisement (bw) 58
14. William J. Skowron, New York Yankees player (bw) 59
15. Young Israel of the Concourse Synagogue (c) 64
16. Bronx Museum of the Arts (c) 66
17. New Yankee Stadium under construction Nov. 2006 (bw) 72
18. New Yankee Stadium under construction Dec. 2007 (c) 72
19. New Yankee Stadium superstructure (c) 80
20. Lou Gehrig Plaza looking toward New Yankee Stadium (c) 83
21. Bronx House of Detention for Men (Bronx County Jail) (bw) 86
22. Bronx Terminal Market building at 149th Street (c) 90
23. Roumel Smith at his parent’s 99 cent store (c) 94
24. Couple leaving Franz Sigel Park (c) 102

(c) = color
(bw) = black-and-white
Introduction

This thesis will focus on the West Bronx recent past and illustrate what upward mobility meant for this Grand Concourse neighborhood populated with second-generation immigrant groups at the beginning of the 20th century, especially Jewish, Italian and Irish people. Later, mid-century and beyond, the same area nearly became a third-world slum at the hands of city planners, New York City administration, and negative media portrayals. During this turbulent time the Grand Concourse area suffered an identity crisis while continuing to provide shelter for thousands of new and first-generation immigrants like West Africans and Dominicans who now call it home and who helped stabilize the boulevard’s marginal, at-risk neighborhoods. Race and ethnicity, which helped define the Bronx at the beginning of the last century, became even more talked about when non-white immigrants and migrants began moving to its streets in huge numbers after World War II. Authors Jill Jonnes and Evelyn Gonzalez have each written an informative book on the history of the Bronx and I have cited them both while documenting changes in the borough.

Through a celebrated Bronx past before 1950 and eventually the sensational media portrayals of the 1970s, the best residential and civic architecture in America stood sentry over its streets. It is this very same built environment that has led many newcomers to the Bronx. I will explore who lives in the apartments and walks the streets in one of New York City’s best neighborhoods today. Also, how do these same buildings and public spaces reflect demographic changes in populations over time? What happens to an abandoned hotel, a popular public park and a synagogue deserted by its congregation?
This thesis will also illustrate the remarkable changes and investment being made in the Bronx during the current decade as exemplified by the new Yankee Stadium and Gateway Mall, both scheduled for completion in early 2009, the total reconstruction of the Grand Concourse from 161st to 171st Streets, and the new Lou Gehrig plaza opposite the Bronx County Courthouse on 161st Street. All these changes are just in time to welcome a continuing flow of middle-class professionals who are moving to the Concourse to take advantage of the splendid housing stock featuring art deco and mid-century modern apartments built to last. In taking a walking tour through a commercial strip and the area around Yankee Stadium, the neighborhood character will come alive for the reader.

Finally, I will ask questions about what the future holds for this neighborhood. Several well-informed and involved neighborhood residents speak out on the impact of the New Yankee Stadium, the West Bronx retail experience and their daily, lived reality in and around the 161st Street Grand Concourse axis.

Please come and take a walk with me.
A Street is Born

Louis Aloys Risse, a French immigrant, discovered what would become the Grand Concourse while he walked through the Bronx wilderness in 1870. Risse, employed as chief topographical engineer of New York City, was commissioned to map the Bronx town of Morrisania and later, in 1900, he completed a map of the consolidated City of New York, with its recently annexed boroughs.

Frederick Gutheim quoted the following about Risse in the *Herald Tribune*:

Every Saturday afternoon around 1870 some young men in the office and myself used to go to an old French inn in the vicinity and stay all night and spend Sunday morning hunting. I got to know the woods very thoroughly and that helped me later in building the Concourse (Gutheim 1948:1).

In *The True History of the Conception and Planning of the Grand Boulevard and Concourse in the Bronx*, Risse wrote “this entire stretch of territory at the time was a vast wilderness, with rocky cliffs descending abruptly in many places and steep inclines of rugged land sloping down to the valleys on either side” (Risse 1902:3). On these walks Risse conceived the idea of a broad boulevard with cross streets passing underneath. He emphasized this concept in a conversation held with Louis J. Heintz, the first commissioner of street improvements, in 1892:

Do you really intend to lay out a Grand Boulevard along the tops of those slopes with the necessary cross streets so designed as to pass under it?

Exactly so, Commissioner, I replied. The project is well within the range of engineering possibilities and the great enhancement in real estate values which the construction of this Concourse must necessarily produce, will repay the City many times over the original cost of the undertaking (Risse 1902:7).
Risse designed the Concourse as a “speedway” so city dwellers had a fast and direct route to the newly created parks in the northern Bronx and “it includes separate roadways for horseback riding, bicycle paths, pedestrians, and vehicles” (Gutheim 1948:4). Risse clearly defined the street’s purpose: “A boulevard is a promenade, a drive, an avenue of pleasure everything in fact except a commercial thoroughfare” (Risse 1902:10).

No doubt Louis Risse knew the wide street, with its prominent elevation, would draw real estate speculators and further commercial development. However, he clearly wanted the street free of retail establishments: “A boulevard once established must be secure forever against the intrusion of trade. The result is obtained by running important cross-town streets under the Boulevard, which is made accessible by approaches on either side from the parallel avenues.” (Risse 1902:11). These cross streets would provide all the retail and commercial services residents would need. Heintz went along with the plan and the Grand Boulevard and Concourse opened in 1909. At its inception the street began at 161st Street in the West Bronx and continued north to Mosholu Parkway, just over four miles. Later the Concourse would extend from 138th Street in the Bronx when Mott Avenue, as the street south of 161st Street was then known, was renamed. The street cost $14 million when completed, which is $310 million in 2007 dollars. The promise of this spectacular location resulted in a wonderful boulevard modeled after the Champs-Élysées in Paris. In 1934, the new Bronx County Building opened at the intersection of 161st Street and Grand Concourse.
The American Dream and Urban Identity: The Bronx as a New Frontier

Somewhere between the American Dream and reality lies The Grand Boulevard and Concourse in the Bronx, New York. For generations of middle-class strivers this 182-foot-wide boulevard of dreams with tree-lined center islands meant success, and it existed as the best main street in America. For other Bronx residents the 4.5 mile Concourse formed a white ribbon of racial and financial exclusion. Until the mid-1960s people of color could not rent an apartment on the Grand Concourse. When the Concourse is mentioned today it’s often the glory years that are spoken about, juxtaposed against 1970s deterioration. Out of this discussion questions emerge: how does the built environment reflect what happened to the Bronx during these transitional decades and what new population groups have changed the demographic character? When it was new the Grand Concourse and its parallel side streets represented the best housing and city neighborhoods America had to offer. For more than a generation it housed the middle class in style.

What happened? By the late 1960s media portrayals indicated the Bronx had changed demographically and eventually headlines compared it to a third world jungle. It was written off by New York City and the people in power. On the heels of “slum clearance” and misguided urban planning decisions of the 1950s, devastating fires and building abandonment came to define the 1970s. Race and ethnicity has also played a strong role in the Bronx and continues to do so today. I will talk about some of the issues that led the Bronx from being one of the most civilized urbane places on earth to one of the most notorious, an international symbol of blight and urban destruction. Somewhere
along the way the word “urban” became a code word for black and Latino inner city areas and it is widely used today when describing central city neighborhoods. What’s the state of this urban neighborhood today, so many years and news headlines later? The Grand Concourse, one of New York City’s legendary streets, came to represent the best and eventually the worst the Bronx had to offer, depending on where one stood, and where one was hoping to go in life. Integral to this Bronx tale is the history of immigration in America and what it meant to be a white-ethnic or a person of color in the Bronx, mid-century and today.

Certain second-generation immigrant groups, namely the Jews, Italians, Irish and earlier the Germans, played a huge role in populating and defining the Bronx during the 20th century. In many ways the Bronx was a place for these immigrants to increase upward mobility and move on after a defined time. After a generation those who could move did so and in their wake a neighborhood—it’s buildings and people—was left “aging in place.” A large proportion of elderly people held onto rent-controlled apartments and stayed behind, while young families moved to Queens, Westchester and new developments near Pelham Bay Park like Co-op City, the largest cooperative housing development in the world. The Grand Concourse neighborhood racial and ethnic demographics play a huge role in its history and continue to define it today. With an eye toward the recent past in Bronx history the reader must look back to understand how these concepts played out.
The Concourse of Dreams

From the Bronx Institute Oral History Project:

(My) teachers always liked me…. (Mrs. Cohen would) let me visit her in the summer and she lived on the Grand Concourse… I was so proud that she would let me visit her… I remember the apartment, with the sunken living room and parquet floors. It was something I had never seen. I knew then that she had to be rich because it was so different from what I was used to… – Elba Cabrera (Cabrera 1986).

For many Eastern European immigrants fleeing the tenement slums of the Lower East Side in Manhattan the Grand Concourse represented the American dream come true. Keep in mind many of the Lower East Side immigrants who eventually moved to the Concourse area were children of Jews, Germans and Italians who immigrated to America in the 1880s and 1890s. It was these children who were escaping the poor housing conditions downtown. The Concourse was modern and represented the best America had to offer in terms of urban living. Looking at the larger picture of housing and development, the Bronx was somewhere between the city and the country, almost pastoral with its large parks, many trees and elegant Grand Concourse. In the 17th century most of the Bronx was originally the estate of Swedish immigrant Jonas Bronck, and eventually evolved into separate, smaller towns like Morrisania, West Farms and Kingsbridge, while still retaining a bucolic and pastoral charm.

*The New York Times* explained in a 1964 “golden jubilee” article about the Bronx: “Jonas Bronck was the first recorded white settler (in 1641) of the wilderness to the north of what is now the Harlem River” (Phillips 1964:82).
The remaining rural area held great appeal for later settlers around the 1900s-1910s, before population densities rapidly increased through privately financed building and development programs.

Authors Harpman and Supcoff reflect on 20th century American settlement patterns:

In the early part of this century, when issues of hygiene fueled the debates about slum clearance, the “country” came to be identified with domesticity and cleanliness, while the “city” became synonymous with work, ill health and poverty. For the middle classes, streetcar suburbs provided at once a link and a separation between the country and the city, and tapped into an American preoccupation with both migration and fixity (Harpman 1999:6).

It is ironic that while the Bronx of 1900 could be considered semi-rural, many of these same wilderness areas, soon dense with apartments and retail development, later became notorious urban ghettos in the minds of many New Yorkers and the rest of the world. Eventually, through media portrayals and word-of-mouth, the Bronx transformed into an uncontrollable “urban wilderness” contrasted against the natural rolling woodlands seen by Jonas Bronck and Louis A. Risse in earlier centuries.

The article *Grand Concourse* explains the following about rapid development of the Concourse and West Bronx neighborhoods nearly 100 years ago:

The IRT Jerome Avenue Line (today’s “4” train) of the New York City Subway opened a few blocks west of the Grand Concourse in 1917, initiating a housing boom amongst upwardly mobile, predominantly Jewish and Italian families who were fleeing the crowded tenements of Manhattan. Development of the Concourse was further encouraged by the opening of the IND Concourse Line (today’s “D” train) in 1933. By the mid-1930s, almost three hundred apartment buildings had been built along the Concourse. Customarily five or six stories high with wide entrance courtyards bordered with grass and shrubs, among these apartments are many of the finest examples of *art deco* and *art moderne* architecture in the United States (Wikipedia 2008).
Lobby entrance detail features terrazzo marble floors and chrome handrails at 1166 Grand Concourse, an art deco building. Lobby includes a black ceramic electric fireplace flanked by a tile mosaic of antelopes, seahorses and birds. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 14, 2007.

The Concourse and its parallel avenues were designed with plenty of space between buildings for cross ventilation and sunlight. As noted earlier, Risse designed the street as a scenic path for the wealthy to escape from Manhattan to the large parks in the Bronx, like Van Cortlandt, a family estate left to the city as a park. While the Bronx wasn’t necessarily the country it offered green space to city dwellers and could be called a streetcar suburb. “Moving on up” to a new and better neighborhood is part of the American Dream, and the Concourse in the 1910s—1930s represented a stepping-stone in that journey.
Gary Hermalyn and Lloyd Ulan (current Bronx Borough Historian), write about this period in *One Hundred Years of the Bronx*:

Between 1900 and 1930, the number of Bronx residents increased from 201,000 to 1,265,000. Along with this growth grocery stores, restaurants, vegetable and fruit markets, tailors and hardware stores became common characteristics of neighborhood shopping districts. By 1934 the housing in the borough had many more amenities than that of the other boroughs: almost 99% of the residences had private bathrooms, about 95% central heating, more than 97% hot water, and more than 48% mechanical refrigeration. (Hermalyn 2000:2).

New Bronx buildings offered space and amenities at a time when neighborhoods like the Lower East Side in Manhattan were dense with people. These large and modern Bronx apartments situated in beautifully kept buildings were normal in the 1920’s. Sam Goodman, a lifelong Bronx resident currently living on the Concourse, has fond memories of spending time—including the first three weeks of his life—in his grandparent’s apartment at Rockwood Hall on the Concourse:

My maternal grandparents had a seven-room apartment at 1555 Grand Concourse located on the west side of the Grand Concourse, between Hawkstone Street and Rockwood Place, one block south of Mount Eden Avenue. They lived there from 1927 until 1976 when my grandfather, by then a widower, was told he had to relocate by his landlord, who by the way, still owns the building. The place had four bedrooms, two full bathrooms, a formal dining room, living room, foyer, and a kitchen large enough to seat six around a table. This apartment remains the only one of its kind in the building because during the depression the remaining units were divided into two smaller apartments. My grandparents kept their apartment as a single unit (Goodman 2008).

This apartment “house” stands as just one example of the spacious and luxurious living spaces located along the Grand Concourse. With the opening of the Concourse Line D express train subway, one could be in midtown in 25 minutes from similar homes along this stretch of the Concourse.
In a very real way this intense Bronx development represents a sense of the new frontier in American history and certainly urban design. It might be called westward expansion “writ small.” The same hopes and dreams of building a better life, like pioneers out west in Nebraska and Kansas, were embodied in the new streets, art deco buildings and vast parklands. With Louis Risse’s great street laid out, the Bronx was open for business.

Passersby cross Joyce Kilmer Park in May 1948. 1001 Grand Concourse, a red-brick art deco building, is in the background. The Lorelei fountain, then located at the northern end of the park, now stands at the southern border at 161st Street. Collection of Michael T. Bongiovi, photographer unknown.

Immigrants and Changing Racial Boundaries

Along with development and growth, the story of the Bronx cannot be told without focusing on the race and ethnicity of the early newcomers, many with parents originally from foreign countries. Later settlers included migrants from the American
South or rural Puerto Rico, who lived a racially and physically separate existence in most Bronx areas.

While white Anglo Saxon Protestants certainly saw themselves as separate from other “white ethnics” like Jews and Italians, everyone else was completely separate from black folks based on skin color and the “one drop rule” (a person was considered “black” if he had one drop of black blood). Immigrants learned quickly about racial division in the United States and that reality simply reinforced existing race separateness.

Roediger writes: The earliest dictionary reference to usage of “white ethnic,” citing Irving Louis Horowitz’s *New Sociology* (1964), included the Irish, Jews, and Italians under that heading, which it interestingly linked to their achievement of power in the United States. This neatly encapsulated the way in which loss of a racial classification represented a gain in social status. By 1980, William Peterson wrote that “many American writers now distinguish ‘racial’ from ‘ethnic’ minorities, the former being Negroes, Asians and other ‘nonwhites,’ the latter of European nationalities (Roediger 2005: 27).”

Thus immigrants learned the power of being white and grabbed at it. While immigrants may have been considered “white on arrival” because of their skin color, it took decades for Jews or Italians, for example, to become “white.” Social workers like Jane Addams noted the hatred between Northern Italians and the Sicilians, who had darker features. Jews were considered a separate race and certainly weren’t thought of as white. The Catholic religion helped the Irish and Italians in that it provided a common bond with people already in the United States. Even though they weren’t considered white, “white ethnics” still had a strong advantage over blacks. After all, they still appeared mostly white, or could pass as white.
Over time Eastern European immigrants overcame their “racial” status and eventually became pretty much assimilated into the American mainstream. Jews on the Grand Concourse used this to their advantage as the loss of racial classification coupled with success in the professions (with employment as public school teachers, to cite one example) led to increased mobility. For Jewish people this street may have subconsciously been a place to become “white” and successful and therefore upwardly mobile. By mid-century Jews were certainly more accepted, however they weren’t necessarily thought of as white by the “mainstream.” As the century progressed the Jewish and Italian peoples came to be seen as less racial though. Of course both groups were still considered religiously separate from Anglo-Saxon Protestants. It could be said that the boundaries of race were changing for white ethnics, along the Concourse and across America. For anyone who says these people were simply living the American dream, it could be argued there was a lot more going on in terms of mainstream assimilation. These folks were assimilating and the Bronx was a stepping-stone in their American journey.

Segregation in housing patterns related to income level and assimilation was nothing new, but “on the Concourse” the situation was stark. Mr. Davidson, a black man living in the Bronx during the late 1930s early 1940s, recounts the following in an oral history interview with Fordham University professor Dr. Mark Naison:

**Naison:** So in other words you would have these islands of racial harmony surrounded by highly segregated neighborhoods where African-Americans couldn’t move.

**Davidson:** Absolutely, yes.
Naison: Okay late 1930s early 1940s, if there was more than one African-American walking on the Concourse a police car was gonna stop them?

Davidson: Absolutely, absolutely.

Naison: And what would they say to you?

Davidson: Well, different approaches, you would be called a corporate example. You would be called a corporate example by the time you got over to the car the door would slam open and bang you right in your stomach. These were the tactics and the terms nigger would come out of a policeman in a minute. Uh, callously and deliberately. And with two policemen with guns ha, pullin’ their guns out when you haven’t said anything yet. (Fordham University Oral History Project).

Historically, most white people have never wanted to live near black people, and this segregation in housing patterns repeats itself across America. When the first black or Puerto Rican families moved into neighborhoods in the 1960s, a combination of real estate blockbusting, bank redlining and white flight almost always took place. That fact along with white fear and “othering” of people of color marginalized them in more ways than one.

Longtime Bronx resident Sam Goodman argues that some Bronx residents “became American” on the Concourse of Dreams, while racism kept others out:

New York City has been one of the first stops on the road to Americanization. The Grand Concourse became that kind of place for the second generation—the children who settled there. There was a history of bias against people of color during second half of the 20th Century. Racism was exploited on the Grand Concourse. Starting in the 1960s blacks and Puerto Ricans were moving in and things “were going to get bad.” Long time residents thought the community was not what it used to be—in other words it was becoming a community of color. Goodman says that this growing racial division enabled the political and financial communities to use the issue to maximize profit and minimize political risk-taking. Skin color of the newcomer was used by everyone to exploit the situation. In the 1960s especially the city used the Bronx to accommodate the destitute
population. The city made deals to maximize profits while actual value property value was declining. (Goodman 2006).

Goodman argues that “if by becoming ‘white’ you mean becoming American,” then the Concourse was a place for that. He claims it was a similar process to what happened to immigrants all across America, not just New York City. However, the city has always been home to a larger proportion of immigrants, then and now. With this in mind the racial politics that played out on and off the Concourse were happening all across America as well. The population density in the borough made the situation even more pressing locally.

Sleek art moderne sculpture is located at the four entrances of the Bronx County Courthouse at 161st Street. Adolph A. Weinman created the sculptures for the building that opened in 1934. Concourse Plaza in background. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 4, 2007.
The Recent Bronx Past

In *Modern Fiction Studies* Liam Kennedy analyzes portrayals of urban decline using one of author Tom Wolfe’s most popular books, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. In Wolfe’s book, the characters Sherman and Maria take a wrong turn driving in the Bronx and get lost:

This nightmare culminates in a scene of confused violence as Sherman and Maria, trying to reach the safety of the expressway, find the ramp blocked by a tire and encounter “two young black men” (101). In the melee which ensues, Sherman and Maria drive off but knock over and fatally injure one of the men. In their excitement following this ordeal, desperate to escape the Bronx” (105), they congratulate each other: “We were in the goddamned jungle,” Sherman tells Maria, “and we were attacked… and we fought our way out” (111).

Kennedy continues: When Wolfe turns to the opposite pole of his dual city it is clear that he has little or no knowledge of either the social or interior worlds of the people occupying the blighted spaces of urban poverty. Rather than document their lives he constructs scenes of contrast and juxtaposition in which the urban poor—invariably “blacks and Latins” (51)—function as symbolic projections of the fears and prejudices of his white protagonists (Kennedy 1997:5).

Much has been written about post-war population change and migration and how these issues impacted the Bronx locally. To get a fresh take on this, I interviewed four dedicated community members who are uniquely qualified to offer opinions on what federal and local policies may have had an impact on the urban past. All four interviewees live on the Grand Concourse and two respondents also work in the area, one at All Hallows High School and the other in the office of the Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión. All have been involved with local institutions and concerns, be it parks, the controversy surrounding the New Yankee Stadium, or urban development issues.
They are qualified and informed to speak on neighborhood issues. Other scholars often mention that city and urban centers declined across the United States, not just in the Bronx and Brooklyn, New York. St. Louis, Detroit, and Newark are just a few examples of downtown areas that were destroyed. Why was the urban deterioration that plagued the Bronx so notorious? The movie *Fort Apache the Bronx* comes to mind as just one film example of Bronx lawlessness and destruction. It was filmed a few blocks from my study area. A stereotypical view blames the new residents—mainly people of color—for the ills that befell the borough. However, it’s surprising to learn that much of the destruction was thanks to poor public policy (local and federal), racial fear, massive post-war migration, rent control and really bad urban planning.

**The Cohort**

**J.J. Brennan** lives at 800 Grand Concourse, a large post-war co-op building, and owns and operates his own gardening business based on the Upper East Side. He has a B.A. in history from the University of Georgia and has lived in New York City since 1992. J.J. is the founder of Save Our Parks!, the organization that sued to prevent the taking of Macombs Dam Park for the New Yankee Stadium. Brennan is an insightful critic of local parks management and urban planning issues.

**Sam Goodman** was born in the Bronx in 1952 and lived on the Grand Concourse from that time until 1966 when his family moved to Westport, Connecticut. In 1987 Sam bought a one-bedroom cooperative apartment at 800 Grand Concourse and began living there full-time in 1994. Sam has a B.A. in political science from Kenyon College and a
M.A in municipal management from the University of Bridgeport. His master’s thesis, *The Golden Ghetto*, outlines Bronx development and transitions throughout the decades of the 20th century. He has worked for the Bronx Borough President’s office as an urban planner since 1995. Sam was footnoted by author Jill Jonnes in her book *South Bronx Rising*, and has written articles about the Grand Concourse for the Bronx Historical Society and Bronx Museum of the Arts, where he has also led Bronx history tours. Sam is featured in the PBS Channel 13 production of *A Walk Through The Bronx* with David Hartman and historian Barry Lewis.

**Lukas Herbert** has worked as an Associate Planner at the Westchester County Department of Planning and has held that position since June 2001. Previously he completed internships for MTA NYC Transit and the Louis Berger Group. During graduate school he was a Research Assistant at the Vorhees Transportation Center. Lukas holds a Master of City and Regional Planning from Rutgers University (2001) and a Bachelor of Science in Geography from Arizona State University (1998).

Some of Lukas’ local activities include the following:

- Member of Community Board 4, Bronx (2005 to 2007)
- District Leader (a/k/a State Committee Member for the 77th AD) for the Bronx County Green Party 2007-
- Involvement with activist groups – Save Our Parks! (2006)

**Joyce Hogi**, a 64-year-old widow, lives at 1020 Grand Concourse at 165th Street (Executive Towers). She has been at that address for 30 years. Joyce and her husband, Edward, raised three children, Jana deHavilland, Marc Edward and Francesca Alexandra in the Bronx. All three attended and graduated from public schools. Each has graduated
from college, two with advanced degrees. Joyce currently works in the neighborhood at All Hallows High School, located across the Concourse from her residence and adjacent to Joyce Kilmer Park. This location gives Joyce the opportunity to see the daily neighborhood activity and be involved with it on a very personal level. Some of Joyce’s activities include:

- Member, Board of Directors, Hope Of Israel Senior Center
- Volunteer, 161st Street Merchants Association
- Member, parks committee of Community Board #4
- Member, Parks Council of New York City Council Member Helen Diane Foster
- Board member and second vice-president of Bronx Council for Environmental Quality, a borough-wide organization
- Board Member, Save Our Parks! (organization disbanded 2007)

All four were asked to respond to questions regarding the recent Bronx past, addressed below, and Bronx urban futures, which will be answered later in this thesis. The reader will recognize these names as they are quoted in other areas of the paper.
What post World War II issues might have contributed to the disinvestment in central cities and urban core areas like the South Bronx? Did federal or local policies, politicians, or planners have a role in what happened to cities across America, and specifically the South Bronx? Please mention anything you would like or specific New York related policies or people.

J.J. Brennan

This is really an interesting question to me. I was born in 1963, and I remember as a child watching perfectly nice neighborhoods dissolve before my very eyes. We lived in a “nice” suburban neighborhood (Hillsborough County, Tampa, Florida), but on school trips to the center of town, I remember staring out the bus window and wondering why such nice places were falling in on themselves. In many cases, they weren't even especially old, but they looked like they had been built by a different culture than that which built our split-level. I saw “poor” people, a lot of black people (there weren't any where I lived), but even at that young age I recognized that the black people hadn't been there long and that the white people had been there pretty recently.

Then I was bused to a black neighborhood in sixth grade. This was an old school, but it was really nice. The previous schools were all brand new and 100% enclosed and air-conditioned but this one was different. It was built in the shape of a rectangle with only three sides, with a garden in the middle. It had two floors and the halls on both floors ran along the garden. It didn't have air-conditioning, but the cross ventilation was fantastic and I don't remember ever being hot, and this was in Florida!

The bus ride home was a different story. We would drive through the neighborhood and you could see that the buildings were not built for poor people. The houses all had gardens and porches and sidewalks and there were corner stores where the people could buy whatever they needed (kind of like 161st Street). Of course everyone was black. After that we would get on the highway and get caught in stop and go rush-hour traffic. And boy was it hot.

So I have always been curious as to how we, as a society or as a culture I guess, went from building one way to building another. When I moved to Washington Heights and then to the Bronx, this curiosity increased and I became very interested in how this happened.

How is it possible that all over the United States there was a shift right after the Second World War in how we lived and built our towns and cities?

When I started college I took a course on the history of landscape architecture and that was the first time I realized that the old area I had noticed in Florida around my school had been a “streetcar suburb.” We learned about town
planning but we were not taught anything about the Greenbelt movement. After I moved to the Bronx I started studying a lot about what happened in the US after World War II and I learned about two things that my professors in college never talked about.

The first one was the Greenbelt movement. We learned about town planning in my landscape architecture course, but we were not taught anything about this. As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, towns were designed as cooperative garden suburbs that would be a model of modern town planning in America. The towns were designed to be surrounded by tracts of natural parks and included bike paths that would go under streets so children could travel as they wished without danger of cars. Only three towns were built in the late 1930s (in Maryland, Ohio, and Wisconsin), but they are radically different from the Levittown’s of the 1950s. This was no accident. If you look closely at these towns you realize that the major difference is that the Greenbelt towns did not necessarily require automobiles. Suburban tract communities built after the war certainly required cars. That is the major difference.

So why didn't we build Greenbelt towns after the war? Why was every suburban development built on the Levittown model after the Second World War?

The second thing I discovered was that the author of Title 1 of the 1949 Housing Act, which created the Urban Renewal or Slum Clearance Program, was Senator Robert Taft (who gave Robert Moses advance notice of the act in 1948). Senator Taft was a Republican and as a prominent conservative spokesman was the leading opponent of the New Deal in the Senate from 1939 to 1953. You thought Title 1 was a liberal program? Everybody does. Not only was Taft a conservative, he was known as “Mr. Republican.” He condemned the Nuremberg Trials (!) and made his name as a union buster.

So why on earth would he sponsor what is considered a liberal program to provide affordable housing for the poor? I think it is because the bill had other, covert intentions. Its provisions stated that the federal government would pay the city to use its legal power to confiscate little pieces of land from slum owners in rundown areas. The city would then clear the land and give swaths of it to private developers to build housing on. Title 1 slum clearance funds were made available only if every building in a designated area could be slotted for destruction.

To what effect? Thousands of teeming city blocks were turned into rubble, and the poor became displaced and many people wound up leaving the city entirely. This, together with the GI Bill, which gave ultra low cost loans to returning veterans—but only for single family homes in the suburbs—caused the mass exodus of the middle class to the suburbs. White flight, as it was popularly called, happened in every city in the country.
Governor Smith could say at the inauguration of the Concourse Plaza hotel that the Bronx was the model of cutting edge urban living, and he was not exaggerating. Apartments were spacious and airy, flooded with sunlight, had modern plumbing and were usually well connected to the subway. The Bronx, together with the Greenbelt towns, was the model for post war development. But it wasn't meant to be.

Why not?

In a country where “what is good for General Motors (GM) is good for America” the decision was made by our leaders on the federal level to decant the cities and in the process privatize transportation (the first of many privatization schemes to come). When I moved uptown I started nosing around and I am now convinced that the burning of the Bronx was no accident, but was as premeditated as a Mafia hit and just as successful. Sam Goodman's mother was told by her congressman that she should leave the Bronx, because they were going to bulldoze it within years. He knew what he was talking about.1

But it didn't ultimately happen, although it came close. Now we have turned the corner. What should have been obvious at the opening of the Triborough Bridge and the traffic jams that immediately followed is now plain to us all. It is physically impossible for us to continue building and living a suburban, auto-based model. This meme2 is spreading everywhere; The New Yorker, in a book review recently, said "the best car may be no car."

If the burning of the Bronx was caused by the decision to abandon the city for the suburbs and the automobile, I feel that the present revitalization of the Bronx is an indication that we have already begun a new chapter. So a new stadium or a mall won't change our neighborhood, and the new renovation of Lou Gehrig Plaza and the Grand Concourse hints a minor way that the pressure to destroy urban America, and the Bronx, has been lifted (Brennan Nov. 2007).

1  Goodman’s mother visited her local congressional representative James Scheuer after she read an article in the summer of 1966 about ethnic changes along the Concourse written by Steven V. Roberts. Scheuer, who lived at Executive Towers, advised her to move and the family bought a house in Westport, Conn.

2  A meme is a theoretical unit of cultural information which spreads through diffusion from one person to another.
Answering this question could take a book. Rent control, the G.I. Bill, the interstate highway system, planned shrinkage (check Roger Starr-planned shrinkage for more details) racial and ethnic tensions; combining these factors all served to undermine life in the Bronx. Likewise, the homogeneity of the Bronx, meaning most people were of similar backgrounds, sharing the same ethnic and religious beliefs, belonging to the same political party (Democrat) being of similar age and living in buildings all constructed within a definable time period, made places like the Grand Concourse especially vulnerable to change, facts politicians and policy makers all sought to exploit for their short-term benefit (Goodman Nov. 2007).

Youths fly a kite in a street bordered with fire-gutted buildings in the South Bronx section of New York City in June, 1977. The Carter Administration had agreed to revive urban renewal projects in an effort to revive the neighborhood. AP Images Database Photo.
What actions or programs might have saved the South Bronx from burning and becoming an international symbol of urban blight? Would any efforts or policies have slowed it down at least, or helped? Please be specific.

J.J. Brennan

I really don't think anything could have kept the Bronx from burning. They wanted it to burn!

First, the city actively recruited impoverished African Americans and people from the Caribbean to move to New York just when the city knew it was about to lose the types of jobs these people would be qualified for.

Then the city offered landlords more money to house homeless and low income families than the landlord could get on the open market. Not only would the landlord get more rent from these tenants, at the same time he would be let known (wink, wink) not to worry about those violations he had been/would be accumulating.

Neighborhoods were then redlined in communities like ours all over the country. The North End in Boston survived only because the Italian Americans who lived there created support to lend each other money to keep up their buildings; they couldn't get loans from the banks either. Buildings which had suffered deferred maintenance because of the Depression and the Second World War were in bad shape and needed work. Many landlords couldn't pay for this work without loans, and the banks weren't lending.

After that, landlords were losing insurance policies on properties that were worth more on paper than they could sell them for. Tenants could jump the line for subsidized housing if they were “burnt out.” Both tenant and landlord stood to benefit if the building burned down.

So would any efforts or policies have slowed down the degeneration of the Bronx at least, or helped? Well, that's like saying the tide would come in if it would stop going out. Obviously, without the policies put in place at the end of the 1940s the Bronx would have had a different story (Brennan Nov. 2007).
Sam Goodman

Following World War II, incentives provided by the G.I. Bill to buy homes should have been matched with policies that also benefited renters by assisting them with the conversions from rental properties to cooperatives or condominiums. Highway construction within places like the Bronx should have been constructed underground to preserve the quality of life surrounding these highways. To construct the Cross Bronx Expressway more than 600 apartment buildings were taken down, and where a quiet residential community once prospered, the presence of this highway created a trench filled with 24-hour noise and the endless stench of gas and diesel smoke. (Robert Moses is quoted as saying that the “animals in the Bronx don’t understand the importance of the Cross Bronx Expressway.”)

Rent control that was intended to be temporary should have been permitted to expire. This would have eliminated a cash incentive for older residents to remain in their apartments while the profit margin of their aging buildings continued to diminish prompting landlords not to invest in their buildings. In short, during the second half of the 20th century the function of cities was to produce wealth for corporate interests, provide a workers pool of low wage earners serving those interests living in places like the Bronx, and offer corporate professionals an appealing life in suburbia with quick vehicular access to the city’s central business district. Cities like New York would in fact be void of a middle class. As the Grand Concourse was such a place, it would either vanish entirely or become extremely poor (Goodman Nov. 2007).

Joyce Hogi

I believe that the city could have put a program in place that could have helped residents become owners of their apartments when the landlords/owners were neglecting the buildings. An educational program and outreach to residents could have created a pride of ownership in them. We now have Mayor Bloomberg proposing to pay parents for taking their kids to the doctors or the kids for getting passing grades on tests. This is a little late as the downward spiral is snowballing. Paying kids to do well in school does not improve the schools. It just encourages kids to pass tests at all costs. New York City’s Department of Education has a tremendous budget; why aren’t the schools doing a better job? (Hogi Nov. 2007).
Gertrude Clarke looks from the window of her crumbling building in the Mildred, a six-story apartment house at 1776 Washington Ave., in South Bronx, New York, on June 20, 1975. The vacant apartment below has a broken window. "We all want a decent place to live," says Clark of the few tenants in the city-owned building. "We are human. We're not animals." AP Images Database Photo.

As members of the cohort point out, due to rent control slowing profit margins, bank redlining, ethnic shifts and the high cost of oil among other reasons, landlords stopped investing in buildings. Also, as neighborhoods changed and long-time tenants left, less stable and poorer populations moved in, changing the social structure and

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3 Author Ray Bromley posits that the high cost of oil in the 1970s is often overlooked when outlining reasons landlords abandoned buildings. However, rent control had been in place for decades before spiking oil prices.
economic class of apartment houses. Once “welfare families” learned they could be placed on top of waiting lists for newer and better maintained public housing if they had been “burned out” of their apartments, many set fires to their homes or the landlord would let them know when the building “might” burn. Landlords could then collect federal fire insurance money based on previously assessed value of the building, rather than present market value. In short, the properties were worth more burned, rather than as a home for tenants. Once burned, many structures were then abandoned or stripped of anything valuable. These issues and the confluence of factors mentioned by the interviewees combined to create an atmosphere ripe for destruction. With reduced city police and fire protection, eventually entire Bronx blocks were reduced to rubble. Abandoned structures left standing were usually either boarded up or had their window and door entrances sealed with concrete blocks. The Hebrew Institute synagogue on University Avenue in the Bronx sits today with its roof caved in and its intricate doorway cemented shut with blocks. Pigeons fly into the building through holes in the façade. Neighbors often set up a card table on warm afternoons and play dominoes in front of the vacant structure.
Walking Tour and Bronx Transitions

I stand facing the Lorelei Fountain. The Bronx County building is behind me and Joyce Kilmer Park stretches in front of me to 164th Street where I can easily see the white brick Executive Towers co-ops and the Bronx Museum just beyond. To my right stands the Concourse Plaza Hotel with 161st Street sloping downward, to my left the New Yankee Stadium is under construction next to the original Yankee Stadium, and the elevated IRT #4 train passes overhead. Just out of sight behind the old stadium and hard by the Major Deegan Expressway looms the steel superstructure of the new Gateway Center Shopping Mall. Between all these buildings and the park rise many apartment buildings. Welcome to the Grand Concourse and 161st Street.

People often ask about the Concourse neighborhoods and mention race, immigration and demographics. Or they may quietly ask about the “diversity” of the area. Like many New York City neighborhoods with massive population changes, a second wave of immigrants has sustained streets since the 1965 Hart-Celler act\textsuperscript{4} allowed new immigrant populations into the United States. Along with fresh faces, the Grand Concourse itself is currently being reconstructed as new middle-class residents like me are buying apartments along the lower, southern section, including the area being discussed in this document.

\textsuperscript{4} The Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 established today’s immigration law and abolished the national origins quota system that favored European immigrants. Family reunification was allowed and many immigrants from previously under-represented Latin American and Caribbean countries were allowed to emigrate and then bring their families.
The fountain in Joyce Kilmer Park honors the author of “Die Lorelei,” Heinrich Heine, whose bas-relief portrait appears on the base. Heine’s ethnic background—he was both German and a Jew—made placement of the statue controversial. It was rejected in his native Germany and turned down for placement in Manhattan’s Grand Army Plaza. Sculpted by Ernst Herter, the statue dates from 1899 (Willensky, White 1988:510). Like so many other immigrants, the statue itself found a home in the Bronx at the beginning of the 20th century.

The park (facing north in photo) is located at 161st Street between Walton Avenue and the Grand Concourse, across from the Concourse Plaza and opposite the Bronx County Courthouse. Executive Towers co-op apartments are visible in the right background of image. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 2006.

I researched my Bronx neighborhoods using various study methods including neighborhood walks, interviews with residents and reviews of the many books, scholarly journals and articles that exist on the Bronx. I took particular note of the composition of buildings, the commercial establishments, the people on the street, and the high number of schools and public court facilities in the neighborhood. I walked at different times of day and night and on the weekends. During one walk I snapped 35mm pictures and on
another afternoon I videotaped the main streets and buildings. I live nearby at 860 Grand
Concourse across from the Bronx County Building; it was easy for me to walk and
interact with neighborhood residents on many occasions. My new digital camera made
taking images of the streets, stadiums, apartment houses and parks even easier.

Once you descend into the Concourse Morris neighborhood you leave the stately
apartment buildings of the Grand Concourse and most of the white non-Hispanic people
behind pretty quickly. The 4.5 mile Grand Concourse was built on bedrock (Manhattan
Schist glacial rock formations) at the highest point in the area per Risse’s vision, so
streets on both sides slope down and away from the higher “social geography” and
handsome buildings of the boulevard itself. The side streets leading away from the
Concourse are dense with five-and six-story walk-up apartment houses; some have
elevators but most don’t.

Description of the Concourse Morris area

My neighborhood of study is an area of the Bronx near Yankee Stadium and just
off the Grand Concourse to the east. Various maps (including Hagstrom) list it as
“Concourse” including parts of Concourse Village and Upper Melrose, although it’s not
clear how many residents (if any) call this neighborhood by any of those names. Some
refer to it by street names and others simply by “The Concourse.” It is bounded on the
south by 161st Street, on the west by the Grand Concourse; on the east by Morris Avenue
and on the north side by 167th Street. 165th Street and 167th Streets are major commercial
strips near the top of my neighborhood study area and another main thoroughfare, Morris
Avenue, runs north-south through this area. For the purposes of this paper the neighborhood will be referred to as “Concourse.” It’s important to remember that the Grand Concourse forms just the western boundary of my separate “Concourse” neighborhood study; it is not to be confused with the entire length of the street itself. (see map next page).
Map of the South Bronx area including the Concourse neighborhood to right (east) of the Grand Concourse between Morris Avenue, 161st and 167th Streets. The new Yankee Stadium is under construction where the words “Macombs Dam Park” are indicated next to the D and B subway markers.

The cross streets like 161st, 165th and 167th were designed to house the retail and food shopping needs of area tenants; commercial establishments were not located on the
Concourse with the exception of medical and dental offices. This changed when Puerto Rican bodegas moved into vacated doctor’s offices when no other tenants could be found in the 1970s. Building owners couldn’t be too selective then and reasoned it was better to have a bodega paying rent and providing a service, rather than a vacancy. Also, as residents felt less safe on the streets of the Bronx, having a deli nearby was convenient. The Grand Concourse is not zoned for commercial activity (except areas like the Fordham Road retail area) so these businesses remain “technically illegal,” to this day but they still operate up and down the street.

The Bronx County urban planner Sam Goodman refers to this part (Concourse neighborhoods) of the West Bronx as the “Golden Ghetto” during the 1920s and 1930s because so many children of Jewish parents were living there. Goodman writes in the Bronx County Historical Society Journal:

One’s address defined social stature. Residing on a cross street, chances are your building is a five story walkup. Apartments are clean, spacious and bright. Living on an avenue gets you respect. Living on the Grand Boulevard and Concourse you are envied. More importantly, you are admired because to live here means you are probably a professional—a lawyer, accountant, or best of all a doctor (Goodman 2004:8).

Obviously a bit of snobbery existed in telling one’s address, as the best housing was located along the Concourse, or on the parallel avenues very close to it. During this period the Grand Concourse itself and the side streets of the neighborhood were almost completely white or white-ethnic. Many articles refer to the Grand Concourse as the
“Park Avenue” of the Bronx. It was that spectacular and contained many apartment buildings built at the same quality level as those along Park Avenue in Manhattan.

Evelyn Gonzalez, author of *The Bronx*, underscores the point even further:

> By 1934, when the Bronx County Building opened, up the hill from Yankee Stadium and across from the Concourse Plaza Hotel, the lower Concourse became where most of the political, civic, business and sporting events of the Bronx took place. With this at its southern end, quality apartments along its entire length, and a rising upscale shopping center at its northern tip, the Grand Concourse became the urban Bronx’s highest status area. By 1940, the shift from the southern Bronx to the newer “West Bronx” was complete (Gonzalez 2004:96).

Thus the stage is set for this wonderful area to prosper at least until successive waves of even newer immigrants—with their own traditions and religions—come looking for a home. When these newer immigrants begin to arrive looking for shelter with varied socio-economic levels, city planners and real estate interests change the picture, leading to several tumultuous decades of deterioration and middle-class flight during the 1960s—1970s. First the Puerto Ricans came in massive numbers after World War II coupled with a migration of poor blacks from the American South. Later poor Dominicans, Ecuadorians and recently a new population of West Africans and Mexicans have moved into the Concourse neighborhood. While income levels have changed, the streets and buildings represent the same thing: a foothold in the United States. When Jewish residents first moved to the Grand Concourse neighborhoods the area represented some of the best housing available in America; for today’s residents it represents an affordable place to live, probably on the way someplace else.
Neighborhood Landmarks and Transportation

When focusing on this neighborhood I must mention nearby landmarks and attractions Concourse residents pass by on their way home. The area is served predominantly by the IND “Concourse Line” D Train subway and also the IRT “Jerome Avenue” Line 4 train that stops at 161st Yankee Stadium. It’s a short walk up 161st Street to reach the intersection at the Grand Concourse where the former Concourse Plaza Hotel stands across the street from Joyce Kilmer Park. When the afternoon sun catches the hotel’s red bricks and the beige bricks of adjoining art deco apartments, it’s still a breathtaking sight after all that the Bronx has endured. Continuing east along 161st Street I encounter the new Bronx County Hall of Justice, which sits across the street from the massive suburban style shopping mall called named Concourse Plaza. This shopping area contains a large Food Bazaar supermarket, a CVS pharmacy, several clothing and shoe stores, as well as a multiplex theater and food court. Some police officers refer to it as “perp plaza” since there’s a parole office located in one of the many court and civic buildings. Parole and police officers, paralegals, and assistant district attorneys are a common sight here during business hours.

The D train stops at 161st Street and River Avenue below ground. At this station the 4 train becomes elevated until its terminal at Woodlawn. It’s interesting to note that many trains become elevated in the Bronx and Brooklyn, even though all elevated trains were dismantled in Manhattan because it was thought they were noisy and depressed property values. But the “El’s” rumble on up Jerome Avenue in the Bronx and along Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens, traveling along the same tracks since
being built. The D train continues underground and includes one additional stop in my study neighborhood, 167th Street and Grand Concourse. Many bus lines serve the area including the Bx1 and Bx2, as well as service along Morris Avenue. Several buses that crisscross the Concourse neighborhood like the Bx35 provide access for those who do not live near the subway stations. Private car services and livery cabs are also a popular way to get around; they are a common sight as people hail them by raising their hand. Often the drivers simply honk at no one in particular trying to attract a fare, even though it’s obvious the black, gray and tan town cars are for hire. A few yellow taxi cabs make their way into the Bronx but they are few and far between. Many evenings bus tours headed for Atlantic City or other weekend destinations depart from the side of the Bronx County Courthouse.

161st Street underpass under construction below the Concourse Plaza home for seniors. The New York City Department of Transportation manages the construction. The new Lou Gehrig park is now being reconstructed on top of this underpass, across from the Bronx County Courthouse. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 2006.
What’s In a Name?

Even though I’ve only lived in the Bronx two-and-a-half years, I’ve realized people don’t often say what neighborhood they’re from. They simply list a street address like “167th Street near the Concourse” or “over by Morris Avenue and 165th Streets” when asked where they live. This is an interesting observation since in Manhattan and certainly Brooklyn residents eagerly offer up neighborhood names. People will say things like Park Slope; Crown Heights; Brooklyn Heights; Midtown; West Village and Hell’s Kitchen to name a few. It’s only when pressing them that you get avenue and street information or perhaps a landmark. Conversely, with few exceptions, Bronx residents give a street address or possibly names like Yankee Stadium, Botanic Garden and Fordham University.

Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx Borough Historian, reinforced this in a recent New York Times article:

In the Bronx, as Mr. Ultan has long suspected, it’s easy to find an address, but hard to find a neighborhood….Indeed, there are neighborhoods that exist on maps of the borough but not in the minds of their residents, and neighborhoods that exist in the minds of residents but not on their maps…One of the reasons why the boundaries and identities of many Bronx neighborhoods have not taken hold like they have elsewhere in New York is that for decades, many residents have identified more with street names than with neighborhood names (Fernandez 2006:1).

When people ask where I live I usually say “near Yankee Stadium” and across from the courthouse on the Grand Concourse. Many New Yorkers are very familiar with these two landmarks. Local newscasts (like New York 1) and the local cable channel Bronx12 use common Bronx neighborhood names like Morrisania and Mott Haven.
However, they almost always use the word “section” instead of “neighborhood.” For example, “a shooting occurred tonight in the Tremont section of the Bronx; here’s Amanda Faranacci with the story.” Call “Concourse” whatever you want to but taking a walk up Morris Avenue reveals what I’ve been writing about.

**Walking north from 161st Street and Morris Avenue**

The “main drags” of this area are 165th and 167th streets running east and west and Morris Avenue running north and south. Most commercial establishments are on these main business streets. Walking up Morris from the new Bronx Hall of Justice I pass a U.S. Fried Chicken restaurant; Jehovah’s Witness church with St. Angela Merici Parochial School across the street; Bamboo Restaurant serving Dominican food at 164th St.; Morris Food Mart bodega on the corner; The Redeemed Christian Church of God Chapel of Restoration; Bee & Bee 99 cent “department store,” and Domsey’s Express used clothing store in the former Fleetwood theater; Fatima Hair Braiding and another corner food store. Across the street there’s a laundromat and the Morris Avenue Dental Center. As I continue north rows of six-story apartment buildings take over the streetscape, some art deco, others 1920’s type red brick buildings. A few have Tudor-style architecture modeled on European tastes—or American interpretations of sites in Europe. One of the rehabbed deco buildings has a bright green fire escape which adds some color to the structure’s side. On some side streets there are small one-family houses, although most appear to have been split into two or more residences or apartments.
Approaching 167th and Morris, the small businesses near the corner intersections include Diana’s Unisex Salon, Nelly’s Party Shop (with clown service), and a generic “Deli & Grocery” store. Just across the street is the Jordan L. Mott Junior High School named after one of the Bronx’s early settlers who owned the Mott Iron Works in the South Bronx. Mott Haven is named after his family. A pharmacy, medical supply shop and a nail salon hold up the opposite corner. Anchoring 167th and Morris, next to the bus stop, is Mima’s Kitchen Restaurant serving rotisserie chicken, rice and peas. 167th street is filled with small businesses including a bakery and a Met Supermarket, a Sprint cell phone store, Jackson-Hewitt Tax Preparation storefront and yet another nail salon.
“One six seven” (residents often speak the street words individually rather than saying “One Hundred Sixty-Seventh Street”, for example; perhaps it saves time) slopes up and west toward the Grand Concourse passing Grant and Sherman Avenues. Art deco apartment buildings showing their age rise above the street level retail stores. One beautiful art deco building with corner windows and contrasting brick banding has advertisements for apartments plastered down the building’s side. A busy commercial strip with plenty of foot traffic, it’s the main shopping strip for the area. Some discount clothing and sneaker stores are sandwiched in between the other retail stores. Virtually all of the apartment buildings are five-and six-story walkups, some with elevators. The few restaurants appear to have a brisk take-out business with very few customers dining in. With the exception of Bamboo, table service is not available; you must order at the counter.

Perhaps it’s also important to note what I’m not seeing: no national chains like the Gap, no local or national bank branches of any sort (although there are three near Yankee Stadium) and definitely no drugstores like CVS or Duane Reade—the closest one is located at the shopping plaza across from the new courthouse. These businesses provide basic and needed services for the local population and speak to the low socio-economic level of the residents. Stores do provide employment for some locals and basic no-frills necessities, but nothing high-end. The businesses reflect the population which is mostly working class. Lukas Herbert comments later in this thesis about the relationship between customer income levels and their spending habits. The many discount stores are obviously providing a service for residents.
“Coppertone” brick six-story art deco apartment building on East 167th Street. Architectural historian Andrew Dolkart describes these buildings as “enlivened by a use of horizontal and vertical brick banding and spandrel panels that contrast with the buff brick facing.” The ground floor houses mixed retail. Many apartment buildings in the area have large signs announcing vacancies. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 2006

**Current Concourse People**

On other walks through the neighborhood I notice a variety of people going from store to home to subway or bus but not really lingering. A man sells exotic fruits and vegetables near the entrance to the 167th Street subway as some women wait for the bus; Moms with children are out on the street in warm weather. There aren’t any bars or sit-down restaurants or any groups smoking outside like you see in Manhattan. On the warmer days this past fall groups of children and teenagers hang out and play in front of the buildings indicating a comfort level and a feeling of safety. Each block feels different in this neighborhood and some are more conducive to socializing. The block opposite Jordan L. Mott J.H.S. and the playground connected to it seemed much more
populated by recreational activity than other side streets. Based on casual observation the area appears overwhelmingly black and Latino. During my walks I don’t remember seeing one other white person unless I was on the Grand Concourse. Several males “stared hard” at me whether or not I had a camera with me. Once when I walked with two other white males, neighbors on nearby Clay Street stared us down the entire time we walked. Three men on the corner in front of the Sprint store glared at me and said “we know what you are” as I walked by briskly during another late afternoon walk. I am sometimes mistaken for a cop, especially if I’ve just had a short haircut or am wearing sunglasses. People do take notice of me but it’s always the males and usually ones around teenage to early adult years that are the most aggressive in saying something. It’s interesting because the last thing the police would do (I surmise) is assign an undercover white police officer to an area that is overwhelmingly black and Latino. The only time I saw white people who looked like me is when a fire truck drove through but didn’t stop. What a difference a block makes. In this area another world exists that is both “neighborhoody” and secluded from the main thoroughfares. It usually feels safe on my walks but people on the sidewalk appear pretty alert to their surroundings. It doesn’t feel unsafe but you get the feeling that people are always going somewhere like they have a task, not hanging out and catching up.
A half-timbered Tudor six-story apartment house stands at 153rd Street between River and Gerard Avenues near the Gateway Center Mall construction site. The “Elizabethan” half-timbered peaked roofline and the random nubs and fieldstone insets in the brickwork of the wall surfaces are unabashed attempts at the picturesque. Gothic stone doorways contribute to the theatrical feeling (Cheilik 1977). Though not maintained well, one can get an idea of the care and design put into the building’s construction. Photo by William Casari, Nov. 2006.

Concourse/Morris Demographics

In comparing the two census tracts that define the heart of the neighborhood between Grand Concourse/Morris Avenue from 161st to 167th Streets, the approximate figures break down as follows: 51% black or African American; 48% Latino (any Hispanic) and about 14% White (Census 2000). While many of the figures are similar for the two census tracts, the one further north, tract 181, shows 59.5% percent of the household speaking a language other than English at home. Interestingly, tract 183, immediately south and containing the luxury apartment building Executive Towers, that figure drops to 49%, a full 10.5 percent difference (Census 2000). Based on anecdotal
chats with neighbors and passersby one possible reason is the stable tenant base of African-Americans and second generation Hispanics and whites who make up the residents at Executive Towers. The majority of these people speak English as their first language. Towers resident Michael Bongiovi, who has lived in the building, at 1020 Grand Concourse for three years, had this to say via email about the mix of people in the building:

We have 440 apartments in Executive Towers, a co-op that opened in 1963, designed by architect Phillip Birnbaum. I would say by far most residents are black, many Hispanics, and maybe 25 white apartments (old timers, hipsters like me and several other friends, and a few Russian immigrants). I would say 99% of the residents speak English as their first language—I never hear Spanish, etc. in the elevators...sometimes I hear the Russians chit-chat in Russian (Bongiovi 2006).

Executive Towers, with its 23 stories and gleaming white brick façade is most definitely an exception in the neighborhood. The only taller structures in the Bronx are at Co-op City and Tracy Towers near the Jerome Reservoir. Most other apartment houses in the area top out at six stories.

The combined population of these two census tracts is 16,950 people. (Census 2000). More precise ethnicity breakdowns via the American Community Survey were not available for this geographic region. In studying these two areas that comprise Concourse, 5,000 individuals and 1,046 families live below the poverty level. It remains the poorest congressional district in the United States. The median household income in 1999 dollars was $22,514. The median household income for the Bronx in general is $27,611.
As in the past it’s clearly the apartments nearer the Grand Concourse that house the more stable and better-off tenants. Perhaps architecture played a part in this or perhaps these buildings were safe havens during the early 1970s when buildings nearby began to burn frequently. When the first wave of the middle-class tenants fled for Co-op City in 1968, amazing apartments opened up to those who were already in the area, just as the neighborhood deteriorated even further. The numbered side streets and avenues like Grant and Sherman that are a few blocks off the Grand Concourse house tenants with lower incomes. However, these neighborhoods are far from dirt poor and don’t have any traditional New York City housing projects in them. The closest New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Houses are the Morrisania Air Rights Projects over the Metro North railroad tracks several blocks away. Perhaps the simple fact that these densely populated residential areas survived the waves of arson and destruction during the 1970s says something by itself. It other words, the fact that they’re still standing at all speaks volumes and exhibits the hold certain buildings and streets had for people.

Joyce Hogi, the resident who lives in the Concourse neighborhood at Executive Towers, responds to a casual Q&A describing the area she has lived in since 1976:

Bill Casari (BC) When people ask where you live what do you say? Do you give an address or general area, etc?

Joyce Hogi (JH): I usually give a general area; i.e. on the Concourse near 165th Street.

BC: How long have you lived in the area and how has it changed over the years? For better or worse? What's happening currently?

JH: I have lived there for 30 years and the area has gone through a few changes. About 15 yrs ago, many moved out, having retired and relocated. Then immigrants started moving in. We now have a mostly immigrant neighborhood (West Africans predominate, but Dominicans figure prominently also. I'm beginning to see a lot of Mexicans). These people for the most part are low income and do not contribute economically to the area,
being more dependent on city services than contributors. The West Africans are business-oriented and are opening business at a very rapid pace. There are now many whites moving into the area.

BC: Do you shop or visit the stores down 165th and 167th Streets? If so please comment about your experiences there? Do you like that neighborhood?

JH: I visit the stores more on 161st Street than the others, but I do go around because I want to see what is actually happening in the neighborhood. I am highly critical because I know what can be done with a business and feel that these businesses are not giving the best service because they can get away with not doing so. There are some exceptions, of course, but my fear is that there will be entrepreneurs who will come in and put these people out of business. It's going to happen. I don't like the 165th and 167th Streets stores.

BC: If you don't go into that area why not? Do you have any friends who live there? Do they like it or is it "just a place to live?”

JH: I don't like it because it's dirty and the merchants don't seem to have a clue about what makes a good business. They are thriving because people have nowhere else to go. I have no friends who live in the 165th and 167th Street areas. Actually, I do have a friend on Sherman Avenue in a co-op who has lived there as long as I've lived in my building. It's a place to live and he is waiting for property values to rise so he can sell and relocate. The building’s actually a nice one and has been a co-op for years. I believe it was built as one.

BC: What are your observations about the ethnic and religious views of the people in the study area? Would you call them working people? Poor? Doing their best...?

JH: For the most part, there seems to be a very strong religious presence among the blacks in the area (Caribbean, southern, etc). I would not classify many of the residents as “working poor.” Those who have been working steadily seem to have attained a real middle class existence, by virtue of having worked steadily. There are poor and those who are doing their best. It seems to be evenly distributed.

BC: Any "psychological effects" of the neighborhood you'd like to comment on? Noise? Asthma? Safety, could be good effects, too like park and playgrounds, neighbors, etc.

JH: This is a very troubling question(s). I have just gone through the protest of the Yankee Stadium project. I was so amazed at the number of residents who are demoralized and are perfectly willing to accept whatever is thrust upon them. They are afraid to protest (immigrants), accepting of their plight. I'm a chronic complainer because I believe that I deserve good service. These people don't seem to think so for themselves. The noise and the environmental issues are at peak. We have nice parks, but we have to
spend too much time making sure that parks department is taking care of them. I love my neighborhood for the accessibility to transportation and the parks. And yes, I have great neighbors; even the newcomers. This has the potential to be a first class neighborhood. I'm hopeful that we won't lose the small town feel that I've come to enjoy. (Hogi 2006)

Real Estate

A telling thing about the Concourse neighborhood is that there are very few co-op buildings outside of those on the Grand Concourse. There is one new condominium building (rehabilitated) nearby. Cooperative buildings are owned jointly by residents who own “shares” in a corporation. The number of shares is based on the size and configuration of the apartment, and what floor it’s on. Condo owners, on the other hand, own their apartments outright and usually have many less restrictions on sublets and renovations. The bulk of the housing is rental apartments advertised via signage hung on individual buildings. Some owners are trying to sell apartments in co-op buildings that languished during the 1990s, but only units in the best buildings are selling well. This is probably a good place to mention that there’s been no new residential construction in the Bronx in years that hasn’t been funded through government subsidies and housing lotteries. In other words, no private developer has contracted to build new condo units for sale like in the Brooklyn area of Prospect Heights. The demographics are not there yet. Also, the past reputation of the Bronx still looms large in many people’s minds, further depressing property values in all but the best buildings near transportation and parks.

A two bedroom/two bathroom apartment on the Executive Towers 8th floor sold in spring 2006 for $230,000 and another on the 22nd floor sold for $317,000 in April
2007. When Bongiovi and his partner Bill Madden bought a two-bedroom/two bathroom apartment with a large terrace in 2004 they paid $135,000 for the unit on the 23rd floor, facing the Concourse. Prices have nearly tripled since then at the Towers and several other co-op buildings in the neighborhood, not just those on the Concourse.

Michael Bongiovi reflects on the neighborhood, reacting to specific questions and eventually talking spontaneously about the area:

Yes, it’s a good place to live. This is my real home. I don’t feel a sense of community. There’s a general sense of malaise in the neighborhood—can’t fight City Hall, etc., in regard to the building of the new Yankee Stadium. If they had done that on Park Ave people would have been in an uproar. When you say you’re from the Bronx everything changes…when I travel people freak out when they hear where I live. “The history of the neighborhood precedes itself.” There are a lot of misconceptions and untruths. I would rather live in a mixed neighborhood but would rather not be the minority. I am not happy about being the minority in my neighborhood. I just wish it were all different kinds of people—not just a couple of white kids. I don’t feel dreadful about it. I don’t understand where some of the other people are coming from. Especially when I consider what I call the noise issue.

My previous ’hood was the Upper East Side, everyone just acted like…seems to me in this ’hood people make a lot of unnecessary noise. I don’t understand why it’s so noisy, almost childish, not frightening just childish and tacky. One thing that blows me away is that people will set up speakers in their apartment windows with speakers facing outward—what is that all about? “Look at me, I’m here in the world?” Mechanical noises such as car alarms and sirens are stronger than anywhere I’ve ever lived before.

When I walk into the area down to Morris Avenue I don’t feel overly concerned or wigged out but I feel like I do get “the look.” Like who are these people? I feel it’s a little rude like why are you staring at me? I occasionally shop at C-town but I would like to do more shopping on Morris Avenue and 167th street. I basically feel safe where I live. I can’t shake the fear of the dark because I grew up in Bushwick, Brooklyn in the 1970s.

Sometimes I just look at people and I think to myself—why are you making so much noise? Is that really necessary? Shouting down the subway platform…what is up with this noise level? And not just kids, it’s adults as well.
Obviously there’s a cultural difference but where does it come from? Being from a large family? Theory or no theory it just wasn’t how I was raised. I’m not used to adults cackling and screaming all over the place.

This conversation reminds me of growing up in Bushwick when I would sit around and listen to adults bitch and scream about how the neighborhood was changing (Bongiovi 2006).5

The Bronx and People of Color Mid-20th century

While Michael Bongiovi’s parents and friends were playing cards, smoking cigarettes and gabbing about how Brooklyn was changing for the worse, urgent conversations were happening in the Bronx as well, and specifically the West Bronx, including the cherished Concourse neighborhoods. Many of the residents who had moved in as children wanted to move “up and out” to the suburbs and were given plenty of reasons when they became threatened and concerned about new immigrants, massive public housing complexes coupled with Mitchell-Lama towers like Concourse Village, a changed postwar economy and the response of New York City itself to the Bronx’s problems. This conversation is easier if people admit white fear and racism played a part in many of these decisions for residents watching as “their” neighborhood changed.

While many people of color were living in the Bronx mid-century, it was clear they weren’t living on the Concourse. Many neighborhoods were ethnically mixed but these tended to be blocks and worlds away from the Concourse. It could be argued the only reason apartments became available to people of color around 1965 was due to massive white flight. Every weekend during the 1960s moving vans lined the Concourse with

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5 Michael Bongiovi is a life-long New Yorker who grew up in a large single family home at 1701 Hart Street, corner of Cypress Avenue, in Ridgewood, Brooklyn from 1969 until 1988. “It’s still not the greatest neighborhood,” he says of it now. The neighborhood is now popularly known as Bushwick. Bongiovi attended Grover Cleveland High School in Ridgewood, Queens, about eight blocks away.
people leaving for the newly opened Co-op City and the suburbs of Westchester and Connecticut (including Sam Goodman’s family). During this decade, as in cities and on streets across America, race was used as a dividing line: Puerto Ricans and blacks were ruining the neighborhood in the eyes of many long-timers. However, as I’ve shown through interviews and research, city and federal policies like the G.I. Bill encouraged people with means to move away while many elderly stayed in their rent controlled apartments with rents “frozen.” While the stable Concourse neighborhoods remained that way for a time, it was not to last. An average rent for an apartment during the 1960s might be $100/month, even on the Concourse. Thus many people did not vacate their apartments and many seniors had limited choices anyway when it came to new housing options. Later, New York City replaced rent control with a rent stabilization law, whereby rents on all apartments in qualifying buildings increased an average 4-6% each year. Even today, many city apartments covered under the rent stabilization law remain well below market level.

In response to over 200,000 blacks and Puerto Ricans who had moved into the Bronx in the previous 25 years, New York Times reporter Sydney Gruson wrote in 1955:

In many areas of the lower Bronx, they are displacing the Jewish settlers who displaced the Germans, in others the Irish who displaced the Jews. The story of the Bronx in 1955, as it has been for most of its history, is a story of shifting people. Because for most people, it is a way stop on the social and economic ladder…(Gruson 1955:25).

This article illustrates the massive population shifts that had already begun post-World War II and were continuing. Robert Moses began building many “towers-in the-green-projects” in the Bronx: super-blocks of high-rise apartment houses that were deemed
progress in the name of slum clearance. The construction of Moses’ Cross-Bronx Expressway along with all the other changes only served to exacerbate the Bronx’s identity crisis faced during shifting circumstances and massive population changes. Downtown city planners were scheming on how to keep Manhattan white and stable for middle class families. The Bronx was “made available” as a place to deal with the “Puerto Rican problem.”

While the Cross-Bronx expressway’s construction is often brought up by authors like Robert Caro as a main reason the Bronx was ruined, other scholars limit the impact of the highway to being one issue of many that joined a swirling cycle of destruction. Author Ray Bromley writes:

What is painfully obvious, however, is that Robert Moses wasn’t single-handedly responsible for “the fall of New York.” Similarly, the Cross-Bronx Expressway wasn’t the only or even the main cause of the 1960’s and 1970’s crisis in East Tremont, let alone the South Bronx as a whole (Bromley 1998:26).

Bromley brings up many of the same issues discussed in other parts of this thesis but clarifies the role of Moses and the expressway by showing how the neighborhoods destined for the worst destruction were those with the oldest and most deteriorated housing stock such as Morrisania, Melrose, and Charlotte Street, which were not close to the Cross-Bronx Expressway (Bromley 1998:17).

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6 When researching her book The Bronx author Evelyn Gonzalez ran across file folders in archives labeled “The Puerto Rican Problem.” Gonzalez spoke May 12, 2006, at the New Immigrants Seminar at Lehman College in the Bronx. Also, Charles Abrams is cited in Gonzalez’s bibliography as the author of the 1955 Commentary piece “How to Remedy Our ‘Puerto Rican Problem’.”
Life-long Bronx native Georgeen Comerford has a different take. She was 13 in 1962 and growing up on Shakespeare Avenue and 172\textsuperscript{nd} Street in a five-story walk-up and offered the following:

I think that the building of the expressway and Co-op City created a “perfect storm” scenario for destabilizing the Bronx. Changes that would have occurred far more gradually happened quickly and created a glut of empty apartments (many never really well kept up) with only the poorest of people willing to move into them. Co-op City was heavily advertised in the newspapers, radio and flyers—so it attracted a lot of interest. I would say that 80\% of my building moved to Co-op City. So everyone basically left at the same time—creating lots of empty apartments all at once (Comerford 2007).

Based on comments like these I strongly believe that the expressway and the construction of Co-op City siphoned off what was left of viable neighborhoods, leaving shells in its wake. While East Tremont may have been poor before Moses’s highway was built, the Cross-Bronx cut through many areas like the Grand Concourse and Shakespeare Avenue that weren’t. In the wake of the construction and ensuing wholesale moves to Co-op City, only poor people with the fewest options were left to populate these neighborhoods. They were often recent immigrants and welfare families who were then blamed when the streets “turned bad.” While some of the new residents were not the “best citizens”, many of them were victims as well. Let’s take a look at a Manhattan neighborhood for another example.

Robert Moses built Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts during the 1960s, after clearing a massive “slum” nicknamed San Juan Hill, populated mostly by Puerto Ricans. Where were these new migrant and immigrant populations going to go? You guessed it: the Bronx. Author Michael Harrington writes about an issue that comes up when
discussing urban planning and central core cities: the reality of ethnic slums like San Juan Hill that were poor “working” communities contrasted against vast Robert Moses type “project” tower blocks that segregate and isolate lower income people from integrated areas that contain a mix of incomes, housing styles and shops. Not surprisingly, many of the new tower blocks are predominantly black and Latino in areas such as the South Bronx. A neighborhood like San Juan Hill is one that included a vital mix of neighborhood working people—not terribly well off—but an area that worked in terms of people looking out for one another and keeping an eye on things during daily routines. Many people were poor, but they were mixed into the daily fabric of the working folks with mixed incomes. Many of these sections had a predominant ethnicity present be it Jewish, Puerto Rican or Italian. Often there was a vital street culture of aspiration that comes out this type of “ethnic slum” in that people want to do better and hope exists.

It was this very neighborhood that was recently showcased in an exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, in a retrospective chronicling the career of Robert Moses and his impact in New York during the 20th century. The exhibit featured a woman who had recently invested in improvements in her rooming house only to learn that it was slated to be torn down. She had written a detailed letter to Robert Moses and the “slum clearance committee” detailing her plight. Moses could only appreciate the “greater good” in the name of slum clearance and didn’t value these organic, though run down, neighborhoods that functioned. The area didn’t look that “shiny and bright” so it was for the residents own good that they be moved to a large project tower with a square
green lawn where people would eventually feel unsafe and isolated. J.J. Brennan argues that the Moses exhibits during summer 2007 were an attempt to whitewash the most notorious episodes of Moses’s postwar career. Pre-World War II he is remembered more fondly for projects like Jones Beach State Park and incredible Olympic size swimming pools built in poor (yet mostly white) neighborhoods during the Great Depression.

Harrington identifies a problem here in that it’s even more difficult to escape poverty’s grip when your income rises, because you’re now completely surrounded by poverty and that’s all you see. In this way a “culture of poverty” starts to take hold. This changing landscape and concentration of poor people changed the way people felt about and viewed the Bronx.

By 1960 any positive view of the Bronx had completely eroded explains The Bronx author Gonzalez:

Population shifts, racial change, housing deterioration, and residents’ search for better housing were exacerbated by housing shortages, suburbanization, erection of public housing and Mitchell-Lama co-ops, and a changing economy. In addition, federal highway construction and urban renewal programs coincided with an outbreak of drug-related street crime, leading to abandoned and burned buildings and white flight. Most assessments of the devastation of the 1960s and 1970s emphasize race, crime, poverty, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, and Co-op City and ignore a century of urban growth in the Bronx. Yet it is this ongoing urbanization and neighborhood change that helps explain the devastation and consequent revival that occurred (Gonzalez 2004:5).

Gonzalez argues that the same patterns of urbanization that created the Bronx also led to its destruction and eventual revival (Bigham 2006). Immigrants, who often had little choice in housing situations, helped stabilized less-desirable streets and stopped even
more buildings from being destroyed, thus were playing a vital role. That being said, many buildings were abandoned and burned. By 1973 the South Bronx was being characterized as a jungle\(^7\) in the media: “Even for a native New Yorker, the voyage across the Willis Avenue Bridge is a journey to a foreign country where fear is the overriding emotion in a landscape of despair” (Tolchin 1973).

Major structures on the Concourse were spared from collapsing but the faces of the people who lived, worked and slept in the buildings changed dramatically. While the Bronx was well on its way to a “bad reputation” no one imagined what would become of one of its crown jewels, a red brick-and-stone Colonial Revival hotel.

\(^7\) Reporter Martin Tolchin’s headline in The New York Times said it all: “South Bronx: A Jungle Stalked by Fear, Seized by Rage.” The article details packs of wild dogs picking through rubble, open fire hydrants and murdered drug pushers on streets where police and fire services are reduced. Racial conflicts and political rivalries prevail.
Liam Kennedy, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies*, analyzes urban decline using Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Kennedy writes that:

Wolfe’s most concentrated symbol of paranoid spatiality is the Bronx County Building which houses the court where (the character) Sherman’s trial takes place. We are first introduced to the building and its environs through the eyes of Larry Kramer, who prosecutes the trial. Kramer emerges from the subway and reflects on the vista which confronts him:

He looked up—and for an instant he could see the Old Bronx in all its glory…
O golden Jewish hills of long ago [end page 102] Up there at the top of the hill, 161st Street and the Grand Concourse had been the summit of the Jewish dream, of the New Canaan, the new Jewish borough of New York, the Bronx! Did you want an apartment on the Concourse? Today you could have your pick. The Grand Hotel of the Jewish dream was now a welfare hotel, and the Bronx, the Promised Land, was 70 percent black and Puerto Rican (46-47) (Kennedy 1997:6).

One structure in particular reflected the racial and ethnic transition in the neighborhood around Joyce Kilmer Park and that was the Concourse Plaza Hotel. The storied institution hosted countless weddings, bar mitzvahs, New York Yankees and Bronx Rotary luncheons. With its crystal chandeliers, Oriental rugs and grand ballroom it was the highest-class—and only—apartment hotel in the Bronx. New York State Governor Alfred E. Smith spoke at the opening of the Concourse Plaza “apartment hotel” in 1923 in front of nearly a thousand dinner guests assembled at the hotel located on the northeast corner of 161st street and the Grand Concourse, opposite what was then known as Concourse Plaza Park.

In an article in Bronxboro, the “Official Monthly Magazine of The Bronx Board of Trade” a journalist reports the following:

Guests heard the Governor laud the growth of the Bronx as the most striking example of urban development in the United States. The Governor demonstrated that he is intimately acquainted with this borough’s growth, for, he said, when he was a small boy he used to come to West Farms for his vacation. A relative of his parents, in those days, rented a farm on the Southern Boulevard, for fourteen dollars a month. (“Governor Smith Speaker at Opening Dinner of Concourse Plaza” Bronxboro Nov. 1923:5).
CONCOURSE PLAZA
161st Street and the Grand Concourse

HOUSEKEEPING APARTMENTS
The Most Up-To-Date
and Spacious Apartments
in New York City

Only Apartments in The Bronx with Complete
Hotel and Marketing Service

We invite inspection and delight
in showing what we have

HIGH CLASS RESTAURANT
Two Dollar Table d'Hote
Dollar Twenty-Five Luncheon

Dinner and Supper Dances
Saturdays and Sundays

THURSDAY NIGHT SUPPER CLUB
The hotel distinguished itself with its well-appointed rooms and gracious public spaces. Operated by the Federal Hotel Company, the Concourse Plaza was not, in the true sense of the word, a hotel.

On the contrary, it is an extremely fine apartment house, with many new and exclusive hotel features and facilities. For instance, there will be a Grand Ballroom, which will hold two thousand dancers, or seat one thousand diners; there will be a large public restaurant, from which residents of the Concourse Plaza may order at any hour of the day or night, a la carte; there will be a
Commissary Department at which tenants may procure foodstuffs, cooked or uncooked; and there will be high-class stores, as well as a most modernly equipped barber shop and beauty parlor (Bronxboro 1923).

Thus the stage was set for this elegant building to become the social center of the Bronx for decades to come. However, “as the Jews left, the institutions that had been pivotal to their world foundered. The Concourse Plaza was one of the first to feel the impact, as many of its longtime clientele disappeared” (Jonnes 2002:281). As fires ravaged the East Bronx many welfare clients were brought to the hotel and the manager began charging for a week’s stay what permanent residents had paid for a month. It didn’t take long for wedding parties and business meetings to cancel events at the hotel and soon after, the catering manager declared bankruptcy. (Jonnes 2002:282). In July 1971 Mayor Lindsay announced many welfare families had been placed in projects, however the Concourse Plaza still housed 122 families, 46 of whom had lived there more than 30 days. Most of the families still in the hotel at that time were either very large or problem families, or those with members “who have histories of violent crime, drug addiction or other patterns of behavior” (Narvaez 1971:1).

The son of Joseph Caspi, the hotel’s owner, opened a discotheque in the hotel’s old Baroque room. To make money, all black “bring your own liquor” functions had been taking place in the hotel’s ballrooms for several years. A disc jockey was hired and the hotel itself had to do little except provide space and manage the event. However, the “older white ladies” who lived in nearby buildings like 888 Grand Concourse did not like the all-black and Latin crowd or The Tunnel disco, as it was called, and complained to
the judges and attorneys who lived in their buildings, and local representatives, most of whom were white.

_The New York Times_ reported the following about the nightclub operating in the hotel during this time: The Tunnel nightclub, a discotheque located in the Concourse Plaza, was closed by the city in May 1973 after operating for about two years and catering to a mostly black and Latino clientele. Neighbors in nearby buildings, mostly elderly, white and Jewish, complained that that Tunnel customers fought, blocked the sidewalk and intimidated them. The neighbors eventually enlisted Borough President Robert Abrams who said the Tunnel was “unhealthy” and City Councilman Barry Salman, who labeled the club a “blight.” A few days later the Department of Consumer Affairs revoked the license not only of the Tunnel but also of the Grand Ballroom and the Wedgewood and Crystal Rooms in the hotel. Interestingly, the department gave no reason for closing the rooms and heard no testimony about them at the hearing (Corry 1973:45).

An unidentified hotel official offered the following explanation: “The people who live around here, they’re trying to turn the clock back, make the neighborhood the way it was 25 years ago. That’s why they’re complaining.” (Corry 1973:45). In 1948 the area around the hotel was virtually all white and mostly Jewish. When the Tunnel Nightclub was closed the Concourse and neighboring Highbridge and Claremont sections were less than 60 percent white. In 2007 the area around the hotel site was nearly 90% black, Latino, and Latin-American (Census 2000).
In 1974 the city took possession of the hotel, paying $2.6 million for the building and expecting to pay another $3.5 million for the renovation of 350 rooms on the hotel’s nine upper stories. However, the city’s fiscal crisis intervened and the hotel was closed except for a few court offices operating in the ballrooms. Three years passed while funding schemes were arranged for renovation. Security guards patrolled the vacant structure “to make sure vandals didn’t begin “finishing” 8 this building as they had so many others” (Jonnes 2002: 286).

Eventually Concourse Plaza reopened as the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council home for the elderly. The Mid-Bronx Community Development Corporation (CDC) as the larger organization is now called, has its offices in the former hotel at 900 Grand Concourse. The council offers “an array of social services designed to increase the stability and self-sufficiency of senior citizens.” (Mid-Bronx Council). Further information about Mid-Bronx can be found at http://www.midbronx.org/about_us.html

The structure, still beautiful and a workhorse since it opened, houses people and offices while providing an important anchor at a high-profile Bronx corner. At the original entrance lobby, a salmon colored hotel monogram glows in the terrazzo floor for passersby to see. Many generations have walked over the logo on their way to important hotel functions, to work, on their way home or out into the world. At the top of the hotel, just above the roofline, the solid decorative concrete urns anchor more than a building; they help hold the neighborhood together metaphorically.

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8 Finishing a building involves removing everything of value including copper piping, original light fixtures to the building’s oil burner. This was a common practice in other abandoned buildings in the South and West Bronx areas, including the Concourse. The building was heavily damaged in the process.
Building Metamorphosis: Young Israel of the Concourse

A tiny brass shovel measuring about two inches long bears the inscription:
“Ground breaking Young Israel of Concourse 11-15-59.” (Courtesy Bronx Museum of the Arts Archives). On that day ground was broken for a new synagogue located on the northeast corner of 165th street and the Grand Concourse, one of the most prominent addresses in the borough. The following day The New York Times elaborated on the ceremony with the following notice:

A ground breaking ceremony for a $750,000 synagogue and community center of the Young Israel of Concourse in the Bronx was held yesterday. Speaking at the exercises in the ballroom of the Concourse Plaza Hotel, Mayor Wagner observed that it was a “great satisfaction” to participate in an event that signifies “the glorification of God.” “We all know religion plays a vital role in forming the character of a child,” the Mayor said, “and the new building here serves as tangible evidence of your deep concern for the youth of today” (“Synagogue in Bronx is Hailed by Mayor,” New York Times, 1959:24).

Among other things, the new building represented a vote of confidence in the congregation’s strength and of the Bronx itself. Construction of the building took about two years and the new building opened on April 8, 1962 with a dedication by Governor Rockefeller. The president of the synagogue, Jerry Rothman, said that under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Max Hoch the new home had been built for “the outstanding center of traditional Judaism in the Borough of the Bronx” (“Governor Helps Dedicate New Synagogue in Bronx,” New York Times, 1962:32).
Simon B. Zelnick was the architect of the building which was constructed for $1,250,000, which represented $500,000 over the cost announced at the groundbreaking. Just twenty years later in late 1981 the City of New York would acquire the property for $300,000 (letter, Oldham to Wagner) as the new site of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and by then the Bronx would be a very different place from the home many Jews had known in the 1950’s. As the demographics changed in the Bronx, the congregation dwindled and eventually the synagogue went looking for a buyer for its building. Young Israel was just one synagogue in a long line looking to unload property in a location that was now portrayed as blighted and called “rough.” As Jews moved from the Concourse the changes meant one thing for Young Israel: there were simply less people to attend religious services at the synagogue. The Jewish population that supported this institution
moved on, as they had at the Concourse Plaza Hotel. More Hispanic residents who were Catholic moved into this part of the Bronx as the Jews left.

The Bronx Museum of the Arts began in the rotunda of the Bronx County Building ("the courthouse"). The marble-walled room with 23-foot ceilings is also known as Veteran’s Memorial Hall. Four large murals painted by James M. Rewlett line the vast rectangular space and depict four scenes in Bronx history: The arrival of Jonas Bronck; the meeting of the first County Court of Westchester; the Revolutionary War battle of Pell’s Point; and the arrival of George Washington at the Van Cortlandt house (Toscanini). This was the programming space for the Bronx Museum in its early years.

The museum eventually outgrew its exhibit space at the courthouse and undertook a search for a new Bronx home. The former synagogue proved ideal with its Concourse location and sound physical plant less than 20 years old. A deal was struck with the synagogue and with the City of New York, which purchased the site and still controls the museum’s budget. The former synagogue’s space worked well for the museum since many large rooms already existed for exhibits and educational programs. Additional façade renovation took place later in the 1980s leaving the museum with a more sophisticated black granite entrance façade and large windows facing onto the intersection giving a feeling of openness and accessibility. In Fall 2006 the museum opened its new North Wing building, attached to the original structure. A press release details plans for a spring gala benefit to celebrate:
Designed by Arquitectonica, the building has become one of the most dramatic architectural sites on the Grand Concourse and on the New York cityscape. This new architectural landmark in the Bronx will provide an elegant setting for this year’s benefit festivities. The $19 million North Wing building has been described by TimeOut New York as “an icon of change, symbolizing the renaissance taking place within the museum and in the surrounding neighborhood” (Salmon 2006).

With its physical plant expanded and in better shape the museum also refined its mission and undertook new programming and public outreach including “First Fridays” events featuring different themes like movies on the lawn of the Andrew Freedman Home across the street, and musical and literary programs.

The Bronx Museum of the Arts at 165th Street and the Grand Concourse. Façade renovations in 1988 changed the appearance of the former Young Israel Synagogue, but the original rectangular structure is still easy to discern. The new North Wing addition opened in 2006 and is visible on the left side of this image. Concourse roadbed construction continues in this image taken by William Casari on Nov. 25, 2007.
From the Bronx Museum website (www.bronxmuseum.org):

The Bronx Museum of the Arts (BxMA) is re-envisioning the role of museums in contemporary society: it addresses the changing needs of its diverse constituencies, while standing at the forefront of scholarly discourse, museum practices, and innovative public programs. As such, BxMA is recognized as "an important player in shaping New York art of both the present and the future" The New York Times.

In a striking example of the reuse of spaces along the Grand Concourse, the Bronx Museum of the Arts exemplifies a wonderful public amenity. Eventually it will build a cooperative apartment tower on three lots it recently purchased adjacent to the museum; these will generate revenue for programming similar to the Museum of Modern Art’s Museum Tower on 53rd Street in Manhattan. In the meantime its exhibits bring new faces to the neighborhood and its outreach efforts help form a more cohesive community through the work it does with local school groups and its Teen Council. The museum also hopes to capture a unique Bronx moment when it celebrates the centennial of the Grand Concourse in 2009. An exciting exhibit with a mix of history and fine art is in the planning stages.

Holly Block, Executive Director of the Bronx Museum, had the following to say about the future direction of the institution:

The Bronx Museum of the Arts’ dedication to providing world-class contemporary art and special events to the Bronx community and beyond is exemplified through our unique family programming, free First Fridays events, the preservation of works by artists in our permanent collection, and by presenting the best in emerging talent with our annual AIM (Artists in the Marketplace) exhibitions (Block 2008).
Yankee Stadium and the Concourse

All Roads lead to Yankee Stadium! Yankee Stadium opened in 1923, the same year the Concourse Plaza welcomed its first guests and many other new buildings were either under construction or being planned along the Concourse. Like it or not, the stadium and the game day crowds helped define the area for generations. While the New York Yankees haven’t been a good neighbor in the past or invested in the neighborhood, (Goodman thesis 1981: 96, Jonnes 2004:287), emotions ran even higher when baseball fans and Yankee management clashed with Concourse and Highbridge neighborhood residents who opposed the new stadium project. It’s important to keep in mind the stadium is open only on 82 home game days a year. On every other day it sits shuttered, while community life goes on around it, or in spite of it.

The New Yankee Stadium and Local Community Involvement

What impact can a small group of concerned citizens have on a New York Yankees stadium proposal that involves the taking of 22 acres of public parkland in the West Bronx? Do perceived and real community apathy and the socio-economic class of residents make a difference in how residents respond to development and other projects like crime, in their neighborhoods? Does a “can’t fight city hall” type attitude permeate the area? In a neighborhood such as this, where working people have little spare time and even less spare cash, what can be accomplished when residents organize against a huge project like a new stadium? This chapter will attempt to show whether or not a local community group, Save Our Parks!, had any impact on the stadium deal and was able to provide any positive benefit for residents.
When I moved to the Grand Concourse in April 2005 I thought the New Yankee Stadium was not only a done deal, but probably a good thing for the neighborhood. My education began when I joined a local community group rallying against the stadium and its impact on the adjacent neighborhoods of Highbridge and Grand Concourse. Not only did I learn that acres of adjoining public parks were being taken for the new stadium’s construction, but the “replacement parkland” was not contiguous. It should be noted that plenty of land was available for a new stadium just south of the current ballpark.

Demolishing the existing stadium and rebuilding on the same site was not an option, according to published reports, since George Steinbrenner, President of the Yankees, did not want to play ball elsewhere for two seasons.

Local elected officials including Bronx Borough President Carrión, Mayor Bloomberg and Council Speaker Christine Quinn, showed up at the ground breaking on August 16, 2006, where community activists (including police department plants and me) were shouting against the plan from across the street. Ironically the protestors were forced into a holding area near one of the parking garages—only open on game days—located on land leased from the New York City Parks! (There’s a massive appropriation of public parkland in support of the Yankee Organization). No doubt some of this appropriation happened during the 1970’s when the area around the stadium became unstable due to residential change and the city fiscal crisis. And now with the area rebounding with the existing stadium in place, it is fair to ask how the stadium itself impacts and area and how much “better” it will be when the new ballpark opens on “formerly public” parkland. The new stadium is also an example of changing spaces.
along the Concourse as a public park turns into a major sports attraction (the stadium is three blocks from the Concourse). Are the Yankees and construction trade unions so important to the city politically and economically that they are able to influence the taking of a public park in such a high status area? Evidently so, but the residents did have something to say about it. From a sociological standpoint what power do neighborhood residents have over a project like this and what are the forums for communication or feedback? Would this have happened in a higher-income area like Central Park? Indeed, Mayor Bloomberg’s proposed stadium for Manhattan’s West Side was voted down in June 2005.

**Neighborhood Mobilization through Save Our Parks!**

In 2005, a community group named Save Our Parks! was formed by Grand Concourse resident J.J. Brennan to prevent the Yankee Organization from locating its new stadium in Macombs Dam Park, a popular running track and baseball/soccer field. Twenty-two acres of this park would be taken under the plan, which made provisions for several non-contiguous “replacement parks” in other sections of the neighborhood.

Under the Yankee plan—worked out with New York City and the National Park Service—the new track would actually be located on top of an additional two-story parking structure rather than at street level where players and runners could simply walk on. This is but one element of the plan that frustrated area residents in the poorest congressional district in the nation and also one with the highest asthma rates. Many local residents, especially those living at 1001 Jerome Avenue—a ten-story art deco
apartment building that faces the new stadium wall—organized around these issues. Local residents also got involved through the organizing efforts of Save Our Parks! members J.J. Brennan and Joyce Hogi, among others. Hogi explains:

We rallied a lot of people who had never protested anything. They took time off work to attend hearings, rallies & press conferences. They wrote letters to electeds, gave interviews to the press and conducted tours, took pictures and sent them to the media outlets. This from people who felt they couldn't do it.

The continued pressure on the parks department and the constant media exposure has forced the parks department to address our concerns in a more visible manner. They're still not great because they are not accustomed to doing it, but are getting better (Hogi May 2007).

The group did get attention in local media outlets, and the New York Times, among other papers. Through email, community board meetings and word of mouth the group was able to attract members and raise funds. Authors Sampson et al, argue that collective action events have been replacing individual civic participation with regard to the concept of collective efficacy. In other words, rather than focusing on a world of private ties and personal friendships, community residents have been uniting together with an “emphasis on conjoint capability for action to achieve an intended effect, and hence an active sense of collective engagement on the part of residents to solve problems.” (Sampson, et al. 2005:676). I believe this is exactly what happened when Save Our Parks! organized to oppose the taking of public parkland for a private stadium. Residents most definitely organized around this cause and were able to mobilize. This scenario falls under what the authors call blended social action. “This form of collective action blurs traditional boundaries by combining common types of civic participation, such as festivals or neighborhood association meetings, with a stated claim and an organized public event that seeks change” (Sampson 2005:680).
Changing Spaces: the Stadium’s role in the Neighborhood

What is the relationship of a large civic project, like a new stadium in this case, to the neighborhood around it? Does it support the area with jobs, anchoring stores and provide customers for other businesses? Or does it provide minimal support and concern for the surrounding neighborhood and actually present hazards on game days while overwhelming the local transportation system? In the case of Yankee Stadium, it was promoted as an anchor for the neighborhood when the City of New York paid for its renovation in 1976. This expenditure of $200 million from city funds (and tax breaks) was justified in that it would help rejuvenate the area adjacent to the stadium and serve as an anchor for the entire South Bronx. In fact, from then on the neighborhood around the stadium and the South Bronx area below Fordham Road deteriorated markedly for many reasons. (Jonnes 287). Using that justification for spending city money was a mistake as egregious as the promotional statement that the Yankees are “paying” for the new stadium in John Mullaly Park. The city has thrown in so many tax breaks, and has even subsidized the parking garages, with the effect that the Yankees are only paying on paper for the project. Evidently major cities are terrified that sports franchises will go elsewhere. In this case, it’s the most successful sports franchise in the United States.

In my opinion, there are more negatives than positives in this current stadium plan: seized parkland, traffic congestion, increased asthma from traffic on the Major Deegan, and new parking garages for suburban fans.
A new Metro-North Station to be located near the stadium was announced and though this was a positive development, it stirred up emotions still raw from the stadium fight. On May 21st, the day the new station got publicized, a discussion erupted on an email list hosted by Michael Bongiovi, the West Bronx resident. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority and Metro-North Railroad had just announced plans to build a new station near the new Yankee Stadium site. In part the May 21, 2007 announcement from Bloomberg news online reads:

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Metro-North Railroad plans to build a $91 million station at the new Yankee Stadium. The MTA said it will pay $52.2 million of the cost, and New York City will pay $39 million. The train station would open by June 2009 and serve as many as 10,000 people on game days. The authority's Metro-North committee approved the plan today (Ward 2007).

Lukas Herbert, the urban planner who worked on the plan opposing the New Yankee Stadium project, had this to say about the siting of the proposed Metro-North station near Yankee Stadium:

Where they are putting the station is pretty much the only location where it will fit, thanks to the parking garages, and the existing pedestrian bridge, etc. If they had just rehabbed the current stadium or built a new stadium to the south/west of the current stadium (like everyone was asking them to do), the station would have been centrally located. But if you haven't figured it out by now, the Yankees (and the City) don't give a shit about our neighborhood...and they don't give a shit about people taking transit to their games. It appears that they would much rather have fans drive and pay for parking. All of this is in conflict with Mayor Bloomberg's "green" vision for the city...which makes you wonder if he's just full of shit as well. It is my opinion that he is just looking for a way to make himself appear environmentally friendly while he sells off the city piece by piece to politically connected developers to build horrible projects that screw over local residents - and in turn makes life harder for middle class folks to make a go of it here in the city (Herbert May 2007).

It is important to emphasize that many in the community were not against the new stadium, they just didn’t want a popular park “alienated.” That’s exactly what happened though and now the space available for the Metro-North station is not nearly as
convenient to fans and residents. With this news it would be appropriate that several of the proposed parking garages not be built, and the land returned to parkland for all to enjoy. Save Our Parks! can take some of the credit for pushing for the new commuter rail station. Most of the parking garages are going ahead as planned, however.

**Outcomes of Save Our Parks!**

Ultimately Save Our Parks! lost momentum and the group held a vote and disbanded itself. The groups operates a blog at www.saveourparks.blogspot.com. Hopefully additional community members will mobilize to hold the Yankees and New York City accountable for what was promised in the plan besides the new stadium, like replacements parks and the 8,000 new street trees being planted to replace the loss of over 200 mature Pin Oak trees that were cut down and logged from the park site. It is important to note that both the local community board and the elected councilwoman from Highbridge, Helen Diane Foster, voted against the plan. However, the Yankees announced in a February 2007 newsletter mailed to Bronx residents “that the stadium project has earned the support of local community groups and residents” (New Yankee Stadium Project 2). Nothing could be further from the truth.

Unfortunately, after losing the battle to save the parks, Save Our Parks! itself became a victim. Various members and officers bickered over paying lawyer’s fees, the money remaining in the bank account, the future direction of the group, and in holding the Yankees’ accountable for promised replacement parks.
The scenario was similar to what Fung described in “Democracy as a Reform Strategy”: “Internal divisions among participants, for example, between factions of residents or between residents and officials, may paralyze the group or allow some to dominate.” (Fung 2006:7).

Save Our Parks! founder J.J. Brennan said this is exactly what happened when several “Trotsky-ites” tried to take over and dominate the group. Eventually the group split into different factions and disagreements became more personal with several high-profile and dramatic email resignations of board members. Brennan reflected on how the group was best able to influence the stadium plan and outcomes:

Probably the coming together of community residents was one of the best outcomes. For what little good it did us...but actually, the plan changed with the protest. For example, originally the plan called for maintaining the original field and at least part of the stadium itself as a type of museum/tourist attraction. This was clearly illegal as the law states that parkland must be replaced with parkland. With the outcry in the neighborhood the city changed this element. Now the original field will be raised to ground level (it is about 6 feet below) and the original field will be converted to two softball and one baseball field. The entire structure [existing stadium] is slated to be destroyed. This seems to be the most tangible affect we had (Brennan May 2007).

When pressed on whether or not Save Our Parks! had raised awareness around the issue of the “parks for stadium” swap he agreed it had: “Definitely…a lot of people began with the mindset of "Look what they [Yankees] are giving us! After a little bit of discussion they came to realize that the plan actually is more a negative than a positive.”
The Stadium and its Discontents

I was in favor of the new stadium—just not at the expense of taking parkland with mature trees to achieve that goal. The new stadium could have been located where the old one was, or on many of the available parking lots and streets south of the existing stadium. That may have conflicted with the city’s plan for the new Gateway Center Mall, which will house a Target, Marshall’s, BJ’s Warehouse, Bed Bath and Beyond and other stores. This mall will sit on the sites of the recently demolished Bronx Terminal Market and Bronx House of Detention for Men along River Avenue (located near the Harlem River). Both of these sites were part of a deal with The Related Companies real estate development firm. One original market building dating from 1935 will be preserved at the main entrance to the Bronx Terminal Market at 149th Streets, River Avenue and the Major Deegan Highway intersections.

Despite available land in sight for a new stadium and so many plausible land-use alternatives I was disappointed—though not surprised—that the taking of 22 acres of public parkland for the stadium went ahead with the full cooperation of the National Park Service and Bloomberg and Pataki administrations. It sets a frightening precedent when public land is turned over to private developers for a money-making franchise, at the expense of local residents. Council Speaker Christine Quinn was on New York 1 News recently talking about how boilers for the new stadium had been built by a local Bronx minority firm and restating her opinion that the new stadium was good for the Bronx. And so it goes. Christine Quinn does not live in my neighborhood and doesn’t breathe the contaminated air that floats into my bedroom. From discussions I learned how Ms.
Quinn was supported by the Bronx democratic machine (especially in the North Bronx) so it was no surprise when she came out for the stadium plan. To do otherwise would have been political suicide. Save Our Parks! had a tangible impact on the stadium project although the group was not ultimately successful in saving the park, however, the plan was altered and got the attention of local officials.

The Highbridge/Concourse neighborhood has often had an uneasy relationship with the Yankee organization but it’s also brought recognition and fame to the Bronx. And with the new stadium, that mindless consumption will no doubt continue for those who can afford to park in the expensive garages and pay increased ticket prices. A recent Daily News article showed that the cost to park in the new garages will double from existing prices and that “a $70 million state subsidy for parking improvements… for a new 660-car valet parking garage will be reserved for the free, year-round use of the Yankees” (Gonzalez, Juan 6). But for local residents whose few on-street parking spaces are taken up on game days by outside fans who arrive hours early (hoping to avoid paying for garage parking), the unease will continue regardless of the number of new parking garages built. In the end the Bronx still has the Yankees and residents will continue an uneasy co-existence with the stadium. Hopefully the replacement parks will be all that was promised. With that in mind the community now focuses on making sure promises are kept regarding parkland and interim track facilities. There’s a new awareness among some residents in the neighborhood but others keep a safe distance, feeling their opinions or energy will have no impact on what might happen in the area (can’t fight city hall, etc.). At the end of the day real estate has been a hot commodity
since Louis Risse first mapped out the Concourse so perhaps it’s not surprising that the Yankees wanted a new stadium on parkland across the street. It’s fair to ask what will change, if anything, once the stadium opens. With the combination of the new stadium and the Gateway Center Mall, how will the area be impacted? In short, what is the urban future of this popular area?
Bronx Urban Futures

As the superstructure of the New Yankee Stadium rises above Macombs Dam Park and the elevated tracks of the IRT #4 train, one topic in particular keeps being mentioned on street corners and living rooms in the area. Anecdotally and in casual conversations some people think the neighborhood will improve once the stadium is completed and the reconstructed Grand Concourse opens in spring 2009. This topic led me to inquire deeper about the new stadium since there has been a ballpark in the neighborhood since the first opening day at Yankee Stadium.

On the topic of Bronx urban futures in the area around Yankee Stadium I asked the following question:

**What do you think the future holds for this urban neighborhood in the next 5-10 years after the opening of the New Yankee Stadium and Gateway Center Mall in early 2009? What do you think will happen with residential real estate and the value and desirability of this area as a place to live?**

All four interviewees felt the stadium itself would have minimal impact in terms of making the area “better” since the Concourse area has coexisted with the original Yankee Stadium in the neighborhood since 1923. Residents being priced out of Manhattan may then create a “push-pull” of people moving to the West Bronx area because it’s convenient to downtown and they can no longer afford Manhattan or Brooklyn. Of course even poorer residents will then have to find other places to live, further away from the city center. As Sam Goodman writes in his 1981 thesis, there is an advantage for the city in providing substandard housing for the Bronx poor, in that it provides housing for employees who support the city’s infrastructure and downtown corporations (Goodman 6). I considered the responses so important I edited them minimally and took note of the same themes that popped up in every response: schools, real estate, availability of affordable housing, retail and business services, etc. Interestingly no one mentioned crime. Although I did not ask specifically about crime or safety, there was plenty of opportunity to bring it up when I asked about neighborhood concerns. No one did. One of my last respondents to separate interview questions, Rafael Velez (a life-long New Yorker), was asked specifically about crime and indicated
that he didn’t mention it because “it’s a given” that one would be concerned about crime just by the virtue of being in New York. The new stadium, mall development and street reconstruction will allow the neighborhood to be seen as more desirable by outsiders. It may attract newcomers when they see the massive infrastructure investments being made.

**J.J. Brennan**, the founder of Save Our Parks!, the organization hoping to defeat the taking of Macombs Dam Park for the new stadium, offers the following input:

Personally, I don't think that the mall and the new stadium will have as much to do with changes in the neighborhood as simple demographics will. Today (Nov. 21, 2007) it was announced that in spite of recent events on Wall Street, bonuses will be a record $38 million this Christmas. None of the people who receive these bonuses will be moving to the Bronx, but they will continue to price out two-income middle-class families from their traditional environs. The (dwindling) middle class is being pushed into uncharted neighborhoods (for them).

As Donald Trump said a few years ago, soon there will be no more “bad” neighborhoods. I think any neighborhood in the city which was a desirable place to live before the Second World War will be so again within the next ten years. Any place where the housing stock was well built, with amenities for the middle class, will draw those people back.

I think the mall and the stadium are being built for out-of-towners, more than anything. Maybe they will look around while they are visiting the area and realize that this is a great neighborhood, but I doubt it. Of course, there will be subtle effects.

The city is moving forward with a rezoning of the area south of 149th Street and along River Avenue and 161st Street. They want to up-zone the density permitted, and make it a mixed use area. This will have a tremendous affect, and in that sense the new mall will help. But when (Bronx Borough President) Carrion, for example, says that the new stadium will revitalize the area, I don't buy it. I just feel that this will be an increasingly desirable neighborhood *regardless* of the new mall and the stadium (Brennan Nov. 2007).
New Yankee Stadium under construction as seen from Lou Gehrig Plaza on the north side of Bronx County Courthouse at 161st Street and Walton Avenue, Nov. 25, 2007. Lou Gehrig Plaza is being completely renovated into a new park. Photo by William Casari

Sam Goodman, the urban planner who works in Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión’s office and grew up in the Bronx, offered the following predictions on the new developments, housing and schools:

The opening of the new Yankee Stadium will have minimal impact on the neighborhood, but the new full-service Metro North station may encourage development. The Gateway Center Mall will vastly expand retail activity in the area and therefore by creating more competition, improve the quality of what is available beyond the mall’s boundaries. Owner occupied housing, be it cooperative apartments or town houses will continue to increase in value so long as the push to exclude non-millionaires from Manhattan continues. The quality of rental housing however is not likely to change dramatically until the city aggressively enforces zoning and housing code regulations. This is not likely without strong citizen advocacy, given that landlords and the city benefit from the existence of substandard housing for the city’s poorest residents. Please note that
Bronx Community District Four contains the highest number of apartment buildings with serious housing code violations in the borough and one of the worst districts in the city. The desirability of this community will improve so long as crime decreases. If this fact should change, people with a choice to make will look elsewhere. Another critical issue is the quality of public school education. If this area’s schools improved, so too would all aspects of life in the area (Goodman Nov. 2007).

**Lukas Herbert**, the associate planner with the Westchester County Department of Planning, weighed in about what will and probably won’t happen when the new stadium and mall open in a little over a year:

I expect there to be a spike in property values in the spring/summer of 2009 when the hype starts swirling about the new Yankee Stadium, the Gateway Mall and the end of the re-construction of the Grand Concourse. However, my guess is that this price spike will be somewhat of an illusion given that the benefits of the new stadium to the community are extremely limited, and in fact, may actually make the neighborhood worse. Therefore I would expect that values after 2009 would remain flat, or creep back down, depending on where certain properties are located. Grand Concourse properties will probably retain a higher value since the street will have been renovated. However, for the side streets, I don’t see the benefit. Also, the Gateway Mall will not necessarily be a huge plus for the neighborhood. It’s too far to walk there, and the developer has designed it to primarily attract business from vehicles using the Major Deegan Expressway. It does not seem to be intended for neighborhood people to use – but instead as a regional shopping center. Therefore, the neighborhood gets the traffic, and outsiders get to buy cheap stuff at BJ’s Wholesale Warehouse. People in the neighborhood who do have cars may find it just as easy to drive up to Yonkers anyhow.

Also, let’s not forget the schools. Middle-class growth in any neighborhood includes having people with families move in. But why would you move here with your kids when our public schools are notoriously bad? Unless you have money for private school, you will be forced to send your kids to over-crowded schools with failing test scores. Or else, maybe you’ll be “lucky enough” to send your kids to that new 2000-student mega-school that the City is constructing on that toxic dump site behind Concourse Village (directly behind Cardinal Hayes High School on the Metro-North Railroad right-of-way). What middle-class parent in their right mind would sign up for that? There’s plenty in this neighborhood to keep middle-income families away – the likelihood that your kid will get asthma is another good reason to not move here if you are starting a
family. With this type of situation you’ll probably only see growth with single people or couples with no children, since schools don’t affect them. The other growing demographic – empty nesters – will probably stay away because most of them are too prejudiced against the South Bronx because of a lifetime of negative images being thrown their way (Herbert Nov. 2007).

Joyce Hogi, the involved volunteer and 30-year Concourse resident has a keen awareness of what’s going on with businesses and parks in the area:

Regrettably, the culture doesn’t exist in this area for any dramatic changes in the near future. Witness the 161st Street Merchants’ Association that applied for a BID (Business Improvement District). The money was raised and deposited with the city, but the association has decided not to pursue it because the city wants to install a director of its choosing to run it. They plan to let the contract run out, but there are no firm plans after that. Meanwhile, the small stores in the area are uninspired and just barely surviving. I have just learned that there are restaurants that are part of the association that the consultant has never been into. How crazy is that? The stadium has been in this community for over 80 years and never brought any economic benefits to the community. There is no reason to think this will change. The Gateway Center Mall will be just that; a mall that will bring shoppers in but provide nothing beyond its boundaries. There is a concern that the homeless intake center at Walton & 153rd Street that is now being expanded into a multi-level facility will send many to “hang out” at the mall and the surrounding eateries. Residential units will, by nature of necessity, become more desirable. Affordable housing is very hard to come by in the city and the Bronx has a lovely supply of it. However, the commercial areas will not keep pace with this influx of residents (Hogi Nov. 2007).
“A curiously handsome high-rise penal institution” is how the Bronx House of Detention for Men is described in the AIA Guide (Willensky, White 1988:510). Designed by architect Joseph H. Freedlander (architect of nearby Bronx County Courthouse) the former Bronx County Jail opened in 1931 and is shown here during Nov. 2006 being dismantled for The Related Companies Gateway Center Mall. A parking structure is under construction on the site where the old jail stood, at 653 River Avenue at the southwest corner of 151st Street. Photo by William Casari.

Do you enjoy living in the Bronx and why or why not? Why did you first move here? Do you have any concerns about the area you would like to voice as a resident? Will you still live here in 3-5 years?

J.J. Brennan

I moved to the Grand Concourse in 2003 and my move here was a business decision. I was living on Fort Washington Avenue in Washington Heights (a.k.a. Hudson Heights) at the southern border of Ft Tryon Park and the Cloisters. Although I had a really small apartment compared with where I am living now, I was really happy with that area. The park is spectacular and I already knew a lot of people there.

There were a few things I didn't like there, for example the A train is local after 11 pm, there is no 24 hour bodega, it wasn't really a convenient place to live if you like to go around on a bike, and it felt very suburban and quiet.
But my apartment in Washington Heights had gone up in value a lot, and I realized I could pay basically nothing for an apartment here. And that's what happened.

When I moved to the Concourse I moved into a much larger apartment. My new building had a doorman and a garage in the basement, unlike my old building. It was near three express trains and an express bus. There was a 24 hour deli and everything necessary for everyday living: dry cleaners, supermarkets, parks, bars, restaurants, etc.

But I really didn't think I would like living here as much. Although I live across the street from Franz Sigel Park, I knew it wasn't as spectacular as Ft Tryon. Although it is a nice park it really isn't as nice as that one. And I didn't even realize that this neighborhood would be a much better place to be in terms of biking. I can be in Central Park in 20 minutes by bike!

So I was really surprised to slowly realize that this is really a much better place to be than “Hudson Heights” and now I tell everyone that if they can consider living in Harlem, Washington Heights or Inwood, they should do themselves the favor and move to this specific area of the Bronx. I now realize that it is superior in every way.

I enjoy living in this area of the Bronx, and I like living in the Bronx. I like going to Orchard Beach and City Island. I like going to Belmont and the Botanical Garden. Queens is ten minutes away by car. It is super convenient to get home from wherever I am downtown, either by subway or taxi. I never have to backtrack when I go downtown by train. Whichever subway line is nearest will generally take me home.

But more than that, I like the neighbors, both those that have been here a long time and those who have moved in since I have. One thing really impressed me when I started looking was that usually the sellers offering their apartments for sale were moving to another apartment in the same building, and then I saw that you had different generations living in the building. That kind of stability seems rare in New York.

I can't say that I will live here in five years. Who knows? I can say that I would prefer to live here than any area of Manhattan, most areas of Queens and some areas of Brooklyn. But who knows if I will be here or Brooklyn in 10 years, or another country?

As far as concerns, I can't say I have that many. I wish there were a New York Sports Club nearer than 145th Street and 8th Avenue in Harlem. That's about it. (Brennan Nov. 2007).
Sam Goodman

I enjoy the Bronx because I feel at home here. Most people are outgoing and accepting of others rather than condescending and judgmental. My primary complaint pertains to the overall attitude held by city officials and outsiders that “less than good is good enough for the Bronx.” I moved here in 1994 having purchased my cooperative apartment in 1987 for use by my sister. Given that my office is across the Grand Concourse from my residence, I plan to stay here for at least the next 15 years. My concerns pertain to the availability of living wage employment for low-skilled workers. As such opportunities diminish many of those now living in the Bronx may be forced out of work, creating an entirely new wave of people dependent on the city for their ability to survive. Given that the Bronx and Community District Four has one of the highest numbers of people lacking a high school education, this issue is especially relevant (Goodman Nov. 2007)

Lukas Herbert

Yes, absolutely. It was a good move for me to move here. I moved here because I got a tip from somebody who used to work at the Bronx BP’s office. He told me about the Concourse reconstruction project and how it would raise property values, no matter what. Also, at about the same time, I went on a walking tour that was run by Sam Goodman, which showcased how nice some of the buildings are. I also interviewed for a job at the Bronx Office of the Department of City Planning, where I was told that the neighborhood was being targeted for a lot of future growth. So using these “insider tips”, I decided to call the phone number on the sign outside my current building and asked them how much an apartment costs. When they said $65,000, I was like “I’ll come right over”. I had been trying to buy an apartment for years in my old neighborhood (Washington Heights) but I was always chasing the minimum down payment needed since it was a moving target that kept going up. At $65 K, I could get in with no problem. However, now that the values have risen substantially, I’m not sure I would pay these higher prices to live here. I mean, you get to live in a nice apartment, but where are the neighborhood amenities? As I said earlier the future potential for these amenities doesn’t look great. I’d still gladly buy another apartment for $65 K, or even twice that…but I do not think spending $300-400K for an apartment in this neighborhood is a good investment. You can buy stuff for that price in other neighborhoods, or in lower Westchester, and get more amenities. Why not just move to those other places?

Personally, I am in a very tricky situation right now. I would like to stay here longer, but I need to buy a bigger apartment so that my girlfriend and I are better situated to get married and start a family. While I can sell my apartment and make a big profit, I’d have to sink that entire profit into a relatively small down
payment for a larger place in my own building. It may not make financial sense. On top of that, even if it did make sense, why would we start a family here if the schools are so bad? It may be better to take the profit of my apartment and roll it into a down payment on something in a better school district, or in a neighborhood with better amenities (Herbert Nov. 2007).

Joyce Hogi

I enjoy living in the Bronx. I have cultivated an awesome cadre of friends and acquaintances. Many I met during our protest against the stadium being built on our parks (Macombs Dam and Mulally). There is such a wealth of smart people in this borough. I didn’t make a conscious effort to move here, but my husband and I saw a building that we liked. We eventually left because it wasn’t all we had anticipated. We wound up in our current home ~ 30 years now ~ and have been very happy here. My concerns are the lack of growth. It seems pretty stagnant and people are slow to change. The sense of community that I think sustains a neighborhood doesn’t exist here. What struck me during the stadium protest was that I met people who have lived in the neighborhood longer than I have, but had never explored their surroundings. That pretty much blew me away, but I have always been the explorer type and want to know what’s around me. My fantasy is to keep my apartment and have a country place that I can escape to. Friends of my daughter have just sold their house in Katonah, NY, but I wasn’t in a financial place to buy it. That would have been ideal (Hogi Nov. 2007).
Bronx Terminal Market building at River Avenue and 149th Streets, just below the Major Deegan Highway. This structure will be retained to preserve a sense of the area’s historical character. The mall will have many retailers besides big-box stores like Target and Home Depot. Photo by William Casari, Oct. 10, 2007.

What do you think of the businesses in the area? Do you do most of your shopping in this area or elsewhere? Do you think the mix and diversity of business will be “better” (more selection, better service) after the stadium and mall open? Why or why not? What kind of store is missing that you would like to see?

J.J. Brennan

Well, the businesses around here are fine. Keep in mind I am not much of a shopper and my idea of hell is a “boutique” so you'll understand that I am okay with the selection we have here. I use the pharmacies, dry cleaners, vegetable store, supermarkets, hardware store, and bodegas. I get sandwiches from the deli and eat in the restaurants. I buy wine in the liquor store. There is a farmer's market every Tuesday I sometimes buy from. And now there is a food co-op which just opened nearby which I haven't used yet.

A lot of times a neighborhood gentrifies (am I a gentrifier?) before the "services" are in place, but everything you need for everyday life is already here and has
always been here. Maybe because of the courthouse (certainly not because of the stadium) this neighborhood never lost the basic middle class services/shops you need.

I always forget about “perp plaza,” the shopping center on 161st Street. There is a Radio Shack I have visited before and a pet store my friend Sam (Goodman) uses. There is also a movie theater I have been to, usually when the weather is crap and I don't want to go all the way downtown to see a flick. I don't really go over there very much, though.

I am curious to see what affect the stadium and mall will have. The stadium will be a “mallpark” and it seems like the idea is to offer fans all the souvenirs and food/drink options they currently have in the neighborhood. Right now we have an overabundance of tee shirt/souvenir stands which hopefully will be replaced with shops that offer more to the residents of the area, rather than the fans who descend 82 days a year. That would be a good thing. I would like to see most of these tee shirt places converted to little restaurants that serve the food of the immigrants who have moved into the area: Africans and Middle Easterners, etc.

I am worried about the hardware store. Gateway Center Mall will surely have a Home Depot and what will happen to the local hardware store? Maybe it will be okay. The owner has really built up his stock over the past 4 years I have lived here, and he seems to be focused on all the little things you need to run out for but don't need to get at a huge store.

Of course it would be nice if the tax preparation storefronts were better utilized, and I guess the things I would like most in the neighborhood would be a good cafe (even a Starbucks), a gym, and more dining options. Since I have moved here New York Sports Club has opened a location on 145th Street over in Manhattan, which is the very next neighborhood over. It is close, but this area won't really “improve” radically until we have one on this side of the river. But as my pal Ben says, I am happy with the area just the way it is right now. I didn't really expect to like it as much as I do (Brennan Nov. 2007).

Sam Goodman

The availability of appealing retail shops in the area is extremely poor. This is due to the fact that the area’s overall median household income is approximately $27,000 per year. I rarely buy anything here because the quality of products and selection is poor and limited. The area lacks any type of retail offering fresh baked goods and produce. Most of the clothing sold is geared for those younger than me and of questionable quality. The opening of the stadium will have no

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9 “Perp plaza,” referenced earlier in this thesis, is so nicknamed by local police officers because of the parole office in one of the Concourse Plaza Mall buildings, and the nearby criminal courts that bring perpetrators of crimes and their victims into the area.
positive impact on the surrounding area given that it functions only 82 days a
year. If however, the stadium’s use is expanded its impact will be more
significant. The mall’s opening may prompt a loss of business on 161st Street
over the short term, but over a period of five years, if the mall’s success is due to
its higher quality retail venues, this improved quality of store may start appearing
on 161st Street. I would like to see a full-service health club in the area (New
York Sports Club). Currently no such facility exists anywhere in the Bronx south
of 180th Street. I would also like to see more full service banks in the area. In the
Bronx the number of such facilities is one full service branch for every 24,000
people-making a visit to a bank anywhere in Bronx County a 40 minute
experience. Lastly, the lack of a bookstore is an overriding issue many people in
the community cite as troubling. In fact there are only three such stores in the
entire borough. To buy the “New Yorker” or any other weekly news magazine I
have to take a subway to 86th Street (Goodman Nov. 2007).

Along the 161st street retail strip there are three full-service banks: Chase, Apple
and Washington Mutual. It should be noted that this concentration of banks is highly
unusual for almost all Bronx neighborhoods except perhaps Riverdale. It speaks to the
ongoing stability of this area and the strength of the courts, attorneys, judges and middle-
class residents and working people who transact business in the area. One local resident
and life-long New Yorker, when asked about customer service at the Chase Bank, used
an expletive to describe it, based on his experience at other Chase Manhattan branches he
frequented growing up. The branches are not as nice or well kept as many in Manhattan
and customer service often needs improvement.

Lukas Herbert

We do almost all of our shopping outside of the neighborhood. Unless you like
spoiled produce, why would you shop here? The only good supermarket is Food
Bazaar – but that is a long walk, and the place is really crowded – especially
during “check week” when you can wait in line for as long as 45 minutes to pay
for your groceries. Both my girlfriend and I do our shopping near where we
work, and bring the stuff home on the train. When we get an occasional rental
car, we go up to Trader Joe’s in Westchester and do a big shopping trip. That’s
the only way you get quality stuff around here. The only exception is the new
South Bronx Food Co-op which is starting up. I am a member, although they do
not offer enough stuff to keep us going. That is my only hope for good food shopping in this neighborhood. I do not expect the mix and diversity of businesses to get better in the near future. Perhaps maybe after a generation of change, maybe. But I can’t wait that long. I’ll probably either move, or continue shopping by my work.

As for restaurants, forget it. Unless you like pizza or Chinese food you have no other choices if you want food delivered. I guess I’d like to see a better diversity of restaurants. With all of the jobs by the courthouse and whatnot, you’d think this neighborhood would be able to support at least a better variety of restaurants. I had a lot of hope for that Havana Sandwich Queen when that place opened. The food there was really good – but they shut down after only a couple of months (Herbert Nov. 2007).

**Joyce Hogi**

The businesses in the area are awful. There is no imagination in marketing to the public. I am totally inspired by beautifully stocked stores. I always spend more than I planned as a result. I do 95% of my shopping outside the area. I am not optimistic about a more diverse mix of businesses. Good customer service is sorely lacking in the current climate.

It appears that this city is just so hard for people to live in that they seem to be “sleep-walking” through their days without giving a lot of thought to cultivating a clientele. I think the fact that the stadium will have its retail facilities inside will hurt the neighborhood because merchants won’t be inspired to provide any better service to compete. They don’t have the experience of having done it. That’s probably what has been lacking here and why there are so many eating-places in the area. Lots of people come to the courthouses; they have to eat so why not open an eating-place? I would love to see a Chelsea Market or Pike Market (as in Seattle) type business in this area with lots of interesting vendors and services. I would love to walk down the street to a nice spa after a day at work and then stop in a lovely little shop for a salad, wine and dessert. And of course, a well stocked supermarket on the order of a Whole Market or Fairway. It appears that there is a template for the Bodegas in that they all look and smell the same. Why do they have to plaster posters for every item that they sell in the windows? They are very unpleasant places and don’t speak to my needs (Hogi Nov. 2007).
Roumel Smith stocking items at his parents “U.S. 99” cent store, located on 165th Street near Walton Avenue. Roumel remarked that few people in the neighborhood actually work for a living and many are on government assistance. His family emigrated from Guyana in 1994 after being sponsored by in-laws who were already in the United States. The most popular products at the store are prayer candles, Du-rags, cleaning products and toilet paper. The rent for the store, which previously had sat vacant for years, is $2,400 a month. The family owns a house in the Bronx and another in Florida. Photo by William Casari, Sep. 26, 2007.

Lukas Herbert

In terms of the longer term – I have my doubts as to whether the revitalization of this neighborhood will live up to the hype. When you listen to the real estate speculators, and compare that to what you hear at Community Board meetings, you get two very different pictures. While it is true that middle-income people are moving here (including myself), this neighborhood is still overwhelmingly trapped in poverty. There’s basically nowhere else for these poor people to go. Where are they going to move? As a result, middle-income people probably are not going to get the types of retail they want, and that might keep a lot of them away. Why would a sushi restaurant open when you can make more money running a 99-cent store or a McDonald’s? Yes, there are middle class people here, and more are moving in. But given the limited amount of retail space
(remember, Grand Concourse is not zoned for retail…only the side streets) you make the most money when you serve the majority of the local population. We have a lot of poor people moving here as well, in addition to the middle class. The Community Board has applications all the time for new low-income restricted developments, or housing for people with special needs. It is almost as if this part of the Bronx is a “dumping ground” for housing that is not wanted in other parts of the city. Every time you see a glitzy real estate ad for a place downtown or in Brooklyn advertising tax abatements to the wealthy new tenants, it means that developer is getting that abatement because they are financing low-income housing in places like the South Bronx. It is my opinion that this type of situation will stunt any meteoric growth that some people are hoping for (Herbert Nov. 2007).

**Urban Future Distilled**

The thing that strikes me most about these responses is the overwhelming negative feeling about retail and restaurants in the area. The cohort is very unhappy with the food and shopping experience near 161st Street. While J.J. Brennan admits most of his needs are being met with the current retail mix even he pines for a nicer coffee shop, a new gym and a better mix of restaurants. Some wish certain stores that are open would go away or better utilize their spaces: the tax preparation storefronts (open for four months a year) and the tee shirt shops among them. The cohort also wants the other businesses along 161st Street, like the three bank branches and delis, to get better at serving customers. With these criticisms in mind what do these businesses and services say about the current mix of incomes and people in the area? Definitely lower and some middle incomes, but this is obviously a low-income area overall, predominantly black and Latino. Several check-cashing places are also in the retail mix and the U.S. Army recently opened a recruiting center above the small hardware store J.J. Brennan mentioned. How many of those are located along 72nd Street on the Upper West Side? While storefronts may be occupied and restaurants may be in business, people may find
many are not nice once they step inside. At least two respondents pointed out there will be a lag before retail services get better. Even with more middle-income people moving into the neighborhood, the vast amount of poor and lower-income people will keep the shops and selection the same in the near future. If a merchant wanted to open a nicer store at this point why not just go to the brand new mall opening up a few blocks away? As Joyce Hogi pointed out, part of the reason there are so many “eating places”10 is because of the courthouses. Most attorneys, judges, stenographers and paralegals are eating breakfast or lunch, not shopping.

According to this group very little will change when the new stadium and mall open up, in fact things may deteriorate in terms of traffic congestion. The new Metro-North station may be a boost but that remains to be seen. The biggest boost may come from new higher-income homeowners and renters moving into the area, but that is limited to families without children due to questionable public schools. Of course for someone new to move in, someone else, probably lower-income, has to move out. History is repeating itself with higher income people moving to the lower Concourse even though they are the “financial” and many times racial minority.

To round out the cohort’s views I felt it was also important to include the opinions of someone who recently moved to the area. Rafael Velez, the life-long New Yorker who grew up in the Lower East Side, needed more space and found a large two-bedroom apartment for $850 a month near 160th Street and Courtlandt Avenue. He has lived in the

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10 Not necessarily “restaurants”, many eating-places do not have seating (forget about table service). Some may have minimal furniture you can sit on while waiting for your order to be called.
neighborhood four months yet already plans to return to Manhattan when his lease expires. Rafael said that his new space is a catch-22 situation: it’s a bargain apartment but he has to wait for services to improve. He stated moving to the area was “really an adjustment” in that there’s not much shopping variety: no place to buy falafel, do yoga or shop at a bookstore. He’s used to smaller stores in Manhattan that offer a greater variety, and is overwhelmed by the large suburban-style Food Bazaar supermarket located at Concourse Plaza. “If you want to eat healthy you have to do that yourself. You’re not going to have health food places in the South Bronx.” He has found himself planning a lot more around shopping and traveling since products have to be transported on the subway. “I don’t know how gentrification is going to happen here,” he said, and felt the huge population of low income and Section 8 tenants would make that difficult. For these reasons, among others, Rafael doesn’t “enjoy” his neighborhood and can’t really strike up a conversation with anyone on his block. “I have nothing in common with the people in my building, he said” (Velez 2007).

After four years working at Hostos Community College and three years living on the Concourse, it’s easy for me to feel worn down if I let the neighborhood get to me. There is sadness on certain streets; when walking a few blocks off the Concourse things aren’t so great anymore. It’s just a different feeling, not so nice but not horrible. Ironically I am much better off in the Bronx. My building is better maintained than my previous one in Brooklyn, and I am a homeowner in a full-service building with

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11 Section 8 is Federal government rental voucher program administered by the City of New York whereby the tenant pays a percentage of rent based on family income and the federal government pays the difference. The South Bronx has a large number of Section 8 apartments that are usually in privately owned buildings.
uniformed doormen. My standard of living rose even though I moved to a “poorer” neighborhood. Three of my best friends moved to Executive Towers nearby so that has helped socially. I have met more new friends since moving to the Bronx than I met the previous eight years in New York. I see them often for breakfast or dinners at their homes and we sit outside in the warmer months, enjoying the views from their expansive terraces. This represents an incredible change from my Brooklyn neighborhoods of Greenpoint and Crown Heights. I love exploring new neighborhoods as well and the Bronx is full of them; it interests me so much I wrote this thesis. While it took a lot of energy to pull it together, buy an apartment and uproot myself from Brooklyn, I now have a twelve-minute walk to work through a beautiful public park and rarely take the Bx1 bus unless it’s raining or very cold. Biking to Central Park takes 20 minutes while Orchard Beach and City Island are an hour away by bike. I have no regrets about moving here. It remains one of the best decisions of my life.
Conclusion: The Grand Concourse, an American Icon

For some former Bronxites the borough only exists in nostalgia-hued memories. For others “the Boogie Down” is the place they come home to every night. The Concourse, a main street in America, has become iconic with the passing of time and now reflects the entire 20th century. From the optimism and dreams of immigrants in the early 1900’s to suburbanization, followed by decades of neglect and finally, urban renewal, the Bronx exemplifies America. Through all the years a conflict existed between the moneyed interests—those with real estate like landlords and the Yankees—and those without, like renters or newly arrived immigrants, subject to market whims. Let’s not forget the complicity of New York City and its planners, neglecting the Bronx and then manipulating a public park into a privatized new ball field.

While the Bronx functioned as a place for upward mobility furthering postwar dreams, white gentrification was a part of its history then and now. As Louis Risse walked along the rural area that would become the Grand Concourse he may have envisioned the century of progress and development that would follow, while later settlers may have simply seen an apartment for the moment. Some may even argue that because of all that has happened to the Bronx it developed an identity crisis: a place to live but not a place to call home. These conflicts and transitions were reflected in the built environment and manifested in demographic changes at structures like the Concourse Plaza Hotel and Young Israel of the Concourse Synagogue. This thesis helps answer the question “what is the future of cities?”
Nearly always a way station onto a place somewhere else the “Bronx Tale” has been defined by media and outsiders for the duration of the 20th century. That is only now beginning to change in that the Bronx is being defined by the people who live here.

In closing Sam Goodman reflects on the Concourse neighborhood I am studying and on the broader question of an identity for the Bronx. He explains:

The Bronx has always been a stepping stone. It was never a place that people moved to because they wanted to—it was a conduit to someplace else. Now the Bronx is determined to create its own identity. People can do almost anything if they are determined. People have created entire neighborhoods out of ashes. Despite all the hardships the Bronx is still here creating a unique profile—a place in and of itself. We are just beginning to develop our own identity, which will take 50 years. That’s what’s happening. The entertainment media defined the Bronx during the second half of the 20th century. We are defining ourselves now (Goodman 2006).

Despite its identity crisis and back-from-the-ashes stories the South Bronx continues to resonate through its fame as the birthplace of hip-hop at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, cultural attractions and the home it provides for people. It could be argued all of these things, including the Concourse, contribute to the appeal and urban meaning it holds for so many generations, regardless of ethnicity:

The Bronx has worldwide recognition because of its substantial population, its vital stepping-stone role for immigrant Americans, its distinctive name, and the 1970’s South Bronx crisis of abandonment and arson. Its name reverberates because of the Bronx Zoo and the Bronx Bombers (the New York Yankees) (Bromley 1997:206)

As the centenary of the Concourse approaches in 2009 it is time to take stock of what this street has meant for generations of Bronxites and its place in New York City history.
“To Bronxites, the Grand Concourse has always been the elegant boulevard,” said Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx borough historian. “As a showcase, as a symbol, it stood a lot for what the Bronx is and was” (Williams 2006:B1).

In many ways, though poorer, the Concourse area exists as it has for generations: a home for people who want a decent place to live with acceptable access to city services. Things are improving in small ways though that very improvement may be tied to gentrification which may increase with the new Yankee Stadium, Grand Concourse reconstruction, and a new middle-class population returning to the solid buildings around Joyce Kilmer Park. However, many of those interviewed are mixed on the future of this part of the Bronx. Is the Grand Concourse just another New York City neighborhood? Yes, but a spectacular one that has weathered more than most with many future stories to tell. “We’re Still Here” may be the rallying cry of many in the South Bronx who stayed through the turbulent years, lived to tell, and are looking forward to a bright Bronx future.
From the Bronx Institute Oral History Project:

…Growing up, it was so different. We used to… I’d say at 16, when you went with a boy, naturally they didn’t have cars. Our big thing was to go on the Concourse bus and ride down to 145th Street and ride back up. That was a nice ride, and it cost a nickel and that was your date. –Frances Ciccarone (Ciccarone 1982).

Couple leaving Franz Sigel Park and walking up the Grand Concourse in the late afternoon sun of Sept. 21, 2007. Photo by William Casari.
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