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The Anti-Moses And The First Community-Based Plan
by Tom Angotti
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These days the news gushes with claims about the presumed benefits of giant new development plans, like Hudson Yards and the Jets Stadium, Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, the Columbia University expansion, Olympics 2012, and the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan. But we do not hear the many more fascinating stories about community-created plans. These plans transformed entire neighborhoods by stopping redevelopment bulldozers and creating housing affordable to all residents. They confronted gentrification instead of creating it. The Planning Center of the Municipal Art Society has catalogued some 70 such community plans.

We are reminded of the first such community-based plan in New York City – The Cooper Square Plan -- by the death last month of Walter Thabit at his home on East 11th Street. He was 83.

Thabit was New York's anti-Moses. In 1959 he helped found The Cooper Square Community Development Committee and Businessmen's Association (now The Cooper Square Committee), which organized against and defeated a giant urban renewal plan proposed by the city's official master builder Robert Moses that would have wiped out 11 blocks in the Lower East Side. The project would have displaced 2,400 tenants, 450 single room occupants, 4,000 homeless beds and over 500 businesses. City officials planned to turn over the land to a union-backed developer who would have created 2,900 units of middle-income housing. In 1961, after more than 100 community meetings, Thabit completed the Alternate Plan for Cooper Square, which proposed that the original residents of the area should be the beneficiaries and not the victims of urban renewal. Community leaders Frances Goldin, Esther Rand and Thelma Burdick were joined by many others over a period of almost 50 years to implement the community's vision for a stable neighborhood affordable to people with modest incomes.

The Cooper Square Alternate Plan was the precocious pioneer of community-based planning, and its history of nearly half a century proves that gentrification can be beat if it's confronted before it starts. The plan was inked fourteen years before community boards were started, two decades before community planning became a buzz, and three decades before the first community plan was approved by the City Council.

Today, much of the housing that was going to be demolished has been preserved for low-income tenants, and hundreds of new low-income housing units have been created. The last of the vacant urban renewal sites is now a construction site. Avalon Chrystie Place includes four buildings with 708 housing units, one-third of them for low-income households; 85,000 square feet of retail space; and a community and athletic center to be operated by the University Settlement and the Chinatown branch of the YMCA. When all of the housing is built, about 60 percent of the housing units in the 11-block urban renewal area will be for low-income people and remain so in perpetuity. This is better than any other urban renewal project of this size (with the exception of those that became 100 percent public housing) and even exceeds the goals of the original Cooper Square Plan.

Thabit's Legacy To Community Planning

The New York Times shrank Walter Thabit's lifelong contributions to community planning into a short obituary (April 4, 2005). In contrast, the press tips its hat every day to city officials like Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff whose visions of urban grandeur are often linked with the Robert Moses legacy. Perhaps Thabit, and the scores of community planners in the city who were his colleagues, are invisible because they are immersed in the inglorious, behind-the-scenes tasks that don't wind up as splashy real-estate deals.

Thabit was a true professional. In the Alternate Plan for Cooper Square he methodically analyzed land use, social and economic trends, dutifully listened to what community residents and business people had to say, and transformed it all into a highly professional document that the Cooper Square Committee fought to have adopted. It took almost a decade, but the community's plan was eventually accepted by the city. It then took more than another three decades of lobbying, protesting, and organizing to get it all done. Throughout this decades-long process Thabit selflessly contributed countless hours of his professional diligence.

Thabit also did planning in Morningside Heights and East New York. His book How East New York Became A

Ghetto, published in 2003 by New York University Press, is a scathing critique of the role that racism plays in creating ghettos and destroying communities. In addition, he worked for the city at various times (a senior planner with the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and with the Department of Transportation), taught in colleges, and ran his own planning firm in New York City for 17 years.

Thabit's influence in the planning profession throughout the U.S. was substantial. He was one of the first in a generation of "advocacy planners" who worked with community groups fighting official plans that threatened to bulldoze low-income neighborhoods. In 1964, he founded and led Planners for Equal Opportunity (PEO), the first organization of professional planners that focused on questions of social equity and racial justice, which was eventually succeeded by the Planners Network.

A month before Thabit's death, we lost another planning great – Yolanda Garcia, director of We Stay/Nos Quedamos in the Melrose section of the Bronx, who died at the age of 53. That they were not as well-known as the sundry real estate moguls in the city helps explain why New Yorkers pay so much attention to just a handful of mega-projects, and so little to their own communities. If the press would spend more time covering the rich heritage and continuing accomplishments of community planning, we all might get a better picture of the other options for the future of our city.

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