

Less is More Density, Zoning, and Class in New York City

By Beth

Lieberman You might not think that Modernism's egalitarian "less is more" ethos would complement middle class urban sensibilities. Yet, taken at face value, there simply isn't a more succinct description of the philosophy informing the evolving shape of New York City's middle class neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island.

These neighborhoods--Throgs Neck and Riverdale in the Bronx, Bayside in Queens, Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, and nearly every neighborhood in Staten Island-- are experiencing what Mayor Bloomberg and the New York City Department of City Planning refer to as "overdevelopment." This term has become a default technical designation for any new multi-family development in neighborhoods primarily distinguished by detached single family homes. The response to this so-called overdevelopment--the City's quick designation of scarce resources to regulate it and the amount of local press coverage--is unparalleled.

The movement to curb overdevelopment is the result of a successful lobbying effort to preserve abstract notions about urban and suburban neighborhood aesthetics. But in this case the activists are not architects or urban planners or urbanists in any way. Rather, they are the overwhelmingly white, middle class Republican residents of these overdeveloped neighborhoods. This is a striking blend of demographics in a city that prides itself on multi-ethnicity, economic co-mingling (particularly on the subway), and liberalism. In effect, this unique minority movement has dictated the direction of growth in a disproportionately large section of the City, and nearly every neighborhood with these problems receives immediate sympathy and action from this Department of City Planning.

So what happened here? Since when did residents of their own neighborhoods get the privilege to dictate development patterns?

How can a city and a mayor justify detached single family homes when there is a severe scarcity of housing? The answer is a not-so-unique equation of money, politics, and a misguided leader conspiring to achieve neighborhood preservation in only these select few neighborhoods.

Maintaining, Protecting and Upgrading: New York

City Zoning in Brief After the turn of the century, the frenetic pace of urbanization and the introduction of steel beam construction permitted development patterns that threatened all notions of order and scale. Buildings soared to heights previously unimagined, casting shadows on the ground for blocks. Noxious industrial uses, and perhaps more noxious high-rise commercial uses, were often located in the middle of residential neighborhoods. The first New York City Zoning Resolution of 1916 was an attempt to regulate this development.

The Zoning Resolution was an extremely progressive tool intended to separate incompatible land uses and establish height and setback regulations. More significantly, it was a clear indication that public policy, in this case, environmental protection and the promotion of light and air in the highest density developments, had quietly influenced the way private capital formed the growth of the city.

In the 1940's and 1950's, as the City's population changed from recent immigrants to upwardly mobile lower-middle and middle class natives, from around 5 million residents to around 8 million residents, and the City's pre-modern layout proved inhospitable to the increasingly desirable automobile, the constraints of the decades-old Zoning Resolution became more and more apparent. Looking to live in homes rather than apartments and to own a car rather than relying exclusively on public transit, these upwardly mobile types viewed the City as a symbol of their parent's generation: poverty, and huddled masses.

In an attempt to modernize the Zoning Resolution and promote the kind of development that would accommodate modern, middle class desires, the new 1961 Zoning Resolution set further limits on use and bulk, particularly in the outer boroughs, mandated lower densities and established parking requirements for all new residential developments outside of Manhattan. In an attempt to create pleasant open space in Manhattan's commercial districts, the Resolution also created "incentive zoning" by which developers would receive a density bonus in exchange for providing publicly accessible plaza space on the ground floor of commercial developments.

In other words, the public policy expressed through the revised Zoning Resolution of 1961 was no longer simply regulating private capital; it encouraged automobile use, desirable residential development in the Boroughs,

and created a serene corporate environment, ostensibly on behalf of the commuter unaccustomed to density.

Overbuilding Destruction – Zoning as a Tool for Preservation

Then, in later years, a new middle class emerged. This new class is far-removed from their immigrant roots. They are often solidly, not newly middle class. They live in the “outer”- outer boroughs: further from the center than ever before. They travel to work in cars and commuter trains and express buses, rarely in rapid transit. And most of all, they have a sense of privilege and entitlement that comes from being relatively wealthy, coupled with a sense of passion and resentment that comes from being ignored in most any other mayoral administration.

The author's of the 1961 Zoning Resolution never anticipated the skyrocketing value of land in the outermost boroughs and that development pressures and the most liberal interpretations of the Resolution would cause residents such grief. They never anticipated discussions of neighborhood density and it did not occur to them that “contextual development” would be the critical hot-button issue in most middle class neighborhoods. They certainly never imagined a lauded City Planning Commissioner, socialite Amanda Burden, and the Mayor would develop a successful campaign around “traditional”(1) design and neighborhood preservation.

It is the goal of the mayor, in the words of Chair Burden of the City Planning Commission, “to preserve neighborhoods with unique character.” Politicians may typically use ambiguous terms like “unique character”(2) to describe complex and varied neighborhoods. In this case, “unique” describes neighborhoods with formally and socially identical characteristics.

And so, today, the Zoning Resolution is again being overhauled to reflect current public policy. This time around, however, the public policy is in the interest of a minority, mandated by a Republican mayor who favors this minority party. These are the neighborhoods that won the mayor his upset election, and without them, he has no chance of winning a reelection. These are the neighborhoods that share the most personal characteristics with the mayor. These are the hard-working, relatively wealthy, and responsible residents. He celebrates their cultural institutions and their schools. His schedule is regularly packed with appearances in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island. He is truly the first five-borough mayor.

Little Neck, Douglaston, Bayside, Flushing, the Rockaways, Springfield Gardens, Ozone Park and Howard Beach residents formed the Queens Civic Congress in part to put pressure on City Hall to regulate a “...drop-dead way of making no changes to the neighborhood...”(3) The most maligned changes are those

that create multi-family development, despite the fact that Queens is experiencing severe over-crowding. To compensate for the dearth of affordable housing, many spaces are being illegally and dangerously converted for residential occupation.(4) And occasionally, especially in Queens, opponents of neighborhood growth claim that multi-family housing is simply too taxing on local infrastructure such as sewer, sanitation and water services.

With the exception of Bellerose, all the neighborhoods advocating for these changes are overwhelmingly white. Increased stock and increased affordability brings with it connotations of neighborhood change, not just in terms of density, but in terms of race and class. Paul Graziano, an urban planner who received a commission from a local councilmember to conduct a study on how as-of-right developments are destroying Bayside, Queens bluntly stated "The people moving into those (multifamily-ed.) houses are not making anywhere near what the people leaving those houses are making. If you don't maintain the middle class in this city, New York City is going to be in deep, deep trouble. And you don't maintain them by putting their neighborhoods at risk." (5)

The Mayor could respond by increasing the stock of safe, legal housing by means of multi-family development. Relatively innovative design regulations could require new, multi-family development to be sensitively integrated with existing, single-family stock. Even the Real Estate Board of New York, a conservative advocacy group for real estate professionals, promotes additional density and an increase in the housing stock as the most effective policy for creating more affordable housing.

Instead of advocating for continuing to increase housing stock with multi-family development to help as many residents as possible find a home in these desired neighborhoods, coupled with design regulations and increased services to help address the issue of context and deficient services, the Mayor chooses to comply with the demands of the reactionary residents and advocates for neighborhood landmarking and down-zoning.

The Republican Mayor Bloomberg carried the first election by winning these neighborhoods. These aggressive down-zoning policies are quite clearly his attempt to woo votes for his upcoming re-election. This is the public policy that the current zoning reflects.

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1 Office of the Mayor Michael Bloomberg, press release, September 9, 2003, "Department of City Planning Certifies Sweeping Down-zoning to Preserve Traditional Staten Island Residential Neighborhoods."

2 *ibid*

3 Davis, Pete. "Landmark Fight with Developers," *New York Daily News*, Wednesday, June 2nd 2004.

4 Fasanella, Richard. "Converting Queens: Needed Shelter or Potential Danger." *Queens Tribune Feature Story*.

5 Hagey, Keach, "Baysiders Protest Overbuilding, Demand Massive Downzoning." *Queens Chronicle*, December 18, 2003.