

East Harlem Neighborhood Plan:
Next Steps for Economic Development and Community Participation

Amy L. Holodak

Community Board 11 Internship & Independent Study

Hunter College

Introduction

Housing New York

At the beginning of his term in 2014, Mayor de Blasio released his ten-year housing plan, “Housing New York,” to the public. Through the construction of mixed-use and mixed-income development, housing preservation, and neighborhood revitalization, the stated goal was to create or preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing city-wide by 2025. In order to create the space necessary to reach this goal, over a dozen neighborhoods, including Hunters Point, Hamilton Heights, and Cypress Hills, have been identified as sites for major rezoning efforts (Housing New York, p. 30). Significant community investments, including an earmarked \$1 billion, will be dispersed throughout these communities to help facilitate new projects (Navarro). East Harlem, along with Jerome Avenue in the Bronx, West Flushing in Queens, and East New York in Brooklyn, have been prioritized for the first round of rezoning.

Two years after the introduction of the Mayor’s housing plan, the East Harlem community stands on the cusp of major economic, developmental, and social changes. City planners have already begun surveying and identifying streets and avenues fit for rezoning. Phase Two of the Second Avenue subway line will begin construction within the next few years, with Phase One opening on January 1, 2017. El Barrio is evolving to keep pace with the development and population growth impacting all five boroughs.

As the landscape of the neighborhood changes, community members and representatives have collectively asked themselves; is all growth good? If many of the new affordable housing projects will not accept tenants earning less than 30 percent of AMI, how will extremely low-income residents be represented? If high density apartment complexes are built over an entire city block, can neighborhood transportation options, schools, and social service agencies support such a population influx? If major development projects lack architecturally distinct design, will this growth speak to the unique character of the neighborhood? Growth that comes because of this new housing plan is surely misguided if it fails to form consensus, neglects to get community support, and does not take in to account the insights of long-time residents.

East Harlem Neighborhood Plan

It was from the concerns of a vocal constituency that the concept of the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan was inspired, under the leadership of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and her staff. Between May 2015 and January 2016, stakeholders including business owners, community groups, and social service organizations, were provided formal opportunities to express their insights, concerns, and hopes for the future of the community. Most importantly, stakeholders could develop “implementable recommendations” to establish an official neighborhood plan (Office of the Speaker, p. 6).

Along with the Speaker’s office, the project partners included Community Board 11, Borough President Gale Brewer, and the community organizing nonprofit Community Voices Heard. Based on their expertise, locally-based non-profits and community-based organizations were chosen as Subgroup Leads and assigned to one of twelve “Priority Objectives.” These

objectives were identified and selected based on constituent survey results following community forums. The table below lists each topic and subgroup match. Community visioning workshops for each subgroup allowed for brainstorming, participatory planning, and a sense of community pride.

Priority Objectives	Subgroup Leads
Arts & Culture	El Museo del Barrio
Open Space & Recreation	New York Restoration Project
Schools & Education	Renaissance Charter High School for Innovation
Pre-K, Daycare & Afterschool	Harlem RBI
NYCHA	Johnson Houses Tenant Association
Housing Preservation	El Barrio's Operation Fight Back
Small Businesses, Workforce & Economic Development	Union Settlement Association
Affordable Housing Development	Lott Community Development Corporation
Zoning & Land Use	CIVITAS
Transportation, Environment & Energy	WE ACT for Environmental Justice
Safety	Office of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito
Health & Seniors	New York Academy of Medicine

The goal of the plan was to “advance the needs of East Harlem residents, and better prepare our community for the growth and changes that continue to shape neighborhoods throughout New York City” (Office of the Speaker, p. 3).

Research Objectives

The purpose of research paper is to discern how the noble goals of the East Harlem Neighborhood Plan can best be implemented by Community Board 11 and other stakeholders, and in a way that best addresses the needs and concerns of the local constituency. The recommendations detailed in this research paper to offer insights in to best practices for East Harlem's community engagement, both for current consideration and for future planning. Research was completed through independent primary and secondary research, as well as a two-month, 120-hour internship at East Harlem's Community Board 11.

Literature Review

A literature review of the East Harlem experience in terms of strengths and challenges was completed. Three overarching themes helped guide research: community participation, workforce mobilization, and place-making efforts.

Community Participation

East Harlem is an immigrant-rich community, with a history of Latin American and Caribbean immigration patterns. Researchers Kerr & Mandorff explain, “immigrant communities can share risks among members, provide informal support and financial loans, and allow for sanctions against misbehavior” (Social Networks, Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship, 2016, p. 3). Due to the resulting social cohesion, the East Harlem community lends itself to increased community participation, as well as social and cultural investment.

Long-time community organizer, Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association founder, and Parodneck Foundation Board Member Harold DeRienzo noted in his book, “The Concept of Community: Lessons from the Bronx,”

“Politics follows from the dominant economy- not the other way around. Our economy is dependent upon a pliant, mobile workforce, so there is little practical tolerance for social organization beyond the individual, the family and church groups...Our political, social, monetary and other institutional structures have been developed to complement, support and further sectors of the economy that actually undermine communities (2008, p. 19-20).”

Cynical as it may sound, DeRienzo’s insights about the reality of community organizing in the face of political jockeying are deeply important for El Barrio stakeholders to consider. If East Harlem community members lack workforce mobility and economic opportunities, Therefore, perhaps the most important objective is to begin with growing East Harlem’s economy. For this reason, this paper focuses solely on the economic aspects of the plan, and on how the community, Community Board 11, small businesses, and other stakeholders can collaborate to creatively work toward and achieve these stated goals.

Workforce Mobilization & Economic Development

As the subgroup lead of the Small Businesses, Workforce & Economic Development committee, the Union Settlement Association facilitated workshops and forums to help draw out specific goals and recommendations that the community must work toward together to encourage economic growth. The committee identified five overarching objectives, listed below.

Objectives & Recommendations
➤ Increase quality employment opportunities for East Harlem residents.
➤ Enhance the skills of East Harlem residents, which will allow them to succeed in the workforce.
➤ Protect and enhance the viability of East Harlem’s small businesses.
➤ Increase overall economic activity in East Harlem.
➤ Attract more tourists and other visitors to East Harlem.

One major component of workforce development is the investment in local small businesses and hopeful entrepreneurs. Small businesses employing fewer than five people grew 82.1 percent between 2000 and 2013 (Small Business Success, 2014, pg. 4). They make up a considerable portion of New York City’s economy, and have helped immigrants entering the country establish themselves as entrepreneurs. However, after these businesses are established,

they often experience minimal growth and very little expansion (Small Business Success, 2014, pg. 5). The agency provided insights regarding barriers to success that impeded immigrant small business owners in their 2015 report, “Unlocking Potential: Empowering NYC’s Immigrant Entrepreneurs.” Per the report, the major barriers included language and literacy limitations, trouble bridging the technological divide, proximity to city services, and difficulty navigating the city’s regulatory environment (2015, pp. 13-16).

Therefore, as a part of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s cabinet, New York City Small Business Services has expanded its business support services in each borough by providing extensive training sessions, workshops, and capital-building efforts. These efforts include a strategic priority to assist the immigrant business owners, who make up 37 percent of all small businesses citywide (“Unlocking Potential,” 2015, p. 11).

In addition to business support services, there are myriad employment opportunities within the community. Possibilities for workforce investment are evident within NYCHA alone. As of 2012, 2,584 employees of NYCHA’s total 11,560 employees resided in NYCHA housing (HR&A Advisors). In 2016, that amount rose to 25% of residents being employed by NYCHA (NYCHA, 17). NYCHA itself is second only to the NYC DOE as the largest employer of NYCHA residents. Per Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer’s testimony regarding NYCHA’s strategic plan entitled NextGeneration NYCHA, “Through the Resident Economic Empowerment & Sustainability (REES) program, NYCHA trains and places residents into jobs with NYCHA contractors. Under HUD’s Section 3 regulation, these contractors must hire public housing residents or other low-income individuals ‘to the greatest extent feasible’ for the contract work” (Brewer). This indicates that there is immense hiring potential within the East Harlem community because East Harlem is second only to the Lower East Side in the largest clustering of NYCHA housing projects in Manhattan (Official Map of NYCHA, 2016).

Place-Making

A crucial aspect of the sustainable development of a given community is found in the concept of creative place-making, in which there is a collaborative effort to create a streetscape that speaks to the unique character of a community. This could be in terms of storefront façade design, types of small, local businesses, publicly displayed artwork, and regularly scheduled community events. The entire concept of the non-profit Placeful is based on the idea that “pride of place” inspires community participation (Placeful About, 2015).

In 2011, East Harlem and Upper East Side-based land-use and zoning non-profit Civitas, released a Community Engagement Study. This report provided insights in to community needs and preferences, based on 400 local survey respondents, on issues related to zoning, land use, sidewalk use, and transportation (all of which are issues that Civitas focuses on directly). The results of this study found that more than 45 percent of respondents noted they would like to see a decrease in stationary objects that obstruct sidewalk space. This includes sidewalk vendors, news rack boxes, stands outside stores and other street furniture” (Community Engagement Study, 2011).

The importance of a safe, clean and culturally distinct sidewalks is clear in the East Harlem community through the art murals that are displayed on over a dozen buildings. This project is the result of the non-profit East Harlem Preservation, which is a volunteer advocacy organization that seeks to promote the history and community found within El Barrio (About East Harlem Preservation, 2016). The art on display feature work by local artists featuring local historical events, as well as notable political and cultural figures. Walking Tours are occasionally advertised by various non-profits. These types of place-making programs help foment a sense of personality and community investment. It is easier to economic development and workforce mobilization opportunities to thrive in this type of environment.

Methodology

To complete an analysis of challenges and goals of the community, research was directed to hear from stakeholders to discern how Community Board 11 may be able to support programming may be able to address needs. To achieve this, primary research was completed through in-person interviews with local experts in small business ownership, job training, and community development. The analysis of this primary research will be used to inform service delivery and EHNP objective-implementation.

An in-person interview was completed with Yudelka Adorno, the owner and manager of Blue Coco, a small casual healthy-dining establishment on 106th Street. Ms. Adorno had opened her business in 2014. As a minority and female owned business, Blue Coco represents the small-business ownership possibilities that lie within East Harlem.

Insights were gleaned from Jill Kaplan, Senior Director of External Affairs at Hot Bread Kitchen. Ms. Kaplan explained that their Bakers in Training program prepares women who have faced economic hardships in the trade of bread baking (J. Kaplan, personal communication, 22 July 2016). In addition, the program offers ESL and Math courses to better prepare students for employment upon completion of the program.

The final expert interview was completed with Shawn McLearn, CEO of the community development non-profit Placeful. Placeful's mission is to "foster investment in community space through socially responsible partnerships in finance, agriculture, education and the arts (Placeful About 2015). They have been contracted by the city to "lead the redevelopment effort and leverage additional public and private funds" for the repurposing and/or restructuring of La Marqueta (Placeful La Marqueta, 2015).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of primary and secondary research, economic support and programming is a deeply important of the EHNP plan. For each EHNP Economic Development Objective listed below, I have included several recommendations for how these goals can come to fruition.

Objective One: Increase quality employment opportunities for East Harlem residents

Recommendation: Create a community-wide local hiring intake center.

A collaborative effort between multiple community-based organizations including Union Settlement, East Harlem Community Alliance, and Community Board 11, a local hiring center would be a direct line between constituents in need of employment, and companies in need of employees. The first step would be the creation of a neighborhood-wide employment opportunity database. The model used by the East Harlem Community Alliance is a good starting point, however on their current site, only EHCA members may post jobs (Job Board). This site may be more effective if all business owners, regardless of their EHCA affiliation, have access to the database. Regularly scheduled job fairs, workshops and community hiring events would allow constituents who do not have easy access to the internet to be able to learn about hiring opportunities and meet with potential employers. A key aspect of the intake center would be that it is facilitated by a trained employee who can assist with resume and cover letter writing, conduct mock interviews, and help job seekers clarify their skills and goals. This position would be community facing, created to inform local establishments of the service being offered and to develop partnerships with them for future hiring needs.

Recommendation: Ensure NYCHA residents receive priority for NYCHA employment.

Pressure from East Harlem stakeholders, including Community Board 11, should encourage NYCHA to increase its hiring practices to reflect that of the neighborhoods in which their complexes are located. There are fifteen NYCHA housing complexes in East Harlem alone, providing over 13,000 units. Tapping in to the workforce potential of a large population of tenants is a worthwhile investment for NYCHA and East Harlem stakeholders to make. In addition to hiring with outside contractors, NYCHA itself should emphasize hiring tenants to work within their respective housing complexes. This fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, and buy-in, as well as easing the stress of commuting.

Recommendation: Encourage local businesses to hire within community lines.

East Harlem would benefit from an incentive program in which tax abatements are made available to businesses that consistently hire within their neighborhood lines. This arrangement is mutually beneficial as business owners can market themselves as being invested in the community in tangible ways, and community members can stay local. In speaking with Blue Coco owner Ms. Adorno, she expressed her preference to hire locals, as they are familiar with the community, care about their customers as neighbors, and can more easily commute to work (Y. Adorno, personal communication, 1 August 2016).

Hot Bread Kitchen has helped facilitate the hiring of at least 230 women in kitchens, bakeries, and food-service companies within El Barrio specifically (J. Kaplan, personal communication, 22 July 2016). HBK's residency inside La Marqueta since 2008 speaks what is already a strong commitment to the East Harlem community. By using their influence as a community change-maker to connect graduates with full-time, fair wage positions in the area, HBK can continue to support and benefit from the neighborhood in which it is located.

Objective 2: Enhance the skills of East Harlem residents, which will allow them to succeed in the workforce.

Recommendation: Invest in Job Training, Apprenticeship, and Technology Literacy Programs.

In order for residents to gain access to good paying, secure employment, they must have the skills necessary to be eligible for this work. Programs offered by various CBOs, including Union Settlement House, are vital to East Harlem community. The ability to offer free or sliding scale, regularly scheduled training programs, ranging from basic computer skills to GED completion courses, creates an environment in which residents are empowered and better prepared to advance themselves professionally (A. Jankowski, personal communication, 11 August 2016). In addition, NYCHA offers basic job programming, including paid internship and GED classes. NYCHA residents or Section 8 voucher holders ages 18-24 have the opportunity to partake in basic job training programs, paid internships, or GED classes. These programs include IT support, Software Testing Training Program, or Emergency Medical Technician Training Programs. They are limited to NYCHA tenants only, but with a sizable percentage of East Harlem residents residing in these units already, this taps in to a large swath of the potential workforce (Opportunity NYCHA).

For those interested in the construction industry, the Labor Union Local 79 offers an apprenticeship program, opening a pathway to employment in a unionized position upon completion (Local 79). In addition, the non-profit Pathways to Apprenticeship offers union construction industry pre-apprenticeships, “covering review of required work habits, basic workforce skills, conflict management, financial literacy, and the benefits and expectations of union membership” (Pathways2Apprenticeship).

Recommendation: Invest in El Barrio’s youth population.

In addition to receiving tax incentives for hiring full-time staff, local businesses would also benefit from receiving support for hiring and training youth in part-time or after-school positions. For example, an after-school position at the Urban Garden Center would expose city kids to botany and gardening, while keeping them outside and active. Summer camp programming provided by organizations such as The Children’s Aid Society and Harlem RBI should give Camp Counselor hiring priority to high school age youth. NYC’s Summer Youth Employment Program is a wildly successful way to prepare youth for the workforce, keep them busy during the summer months, and connect them to various government agencies and their functions. While not possible in every scenario, SYEP could benefit individual communities further by aiming to place all youth within the neighborhoods in which they reside. Localized SYEP placements will allow high school age youth to see their own backyard in a new light.

East Harlem-based CBOs and government agencies could easily implement Summer Youth Internship programs. One way to accomplish this is by partnering with local schools to interview candidates during the school year, thus developing long term relationships with schools and educators. High school age interns, particularly those who are either not old enough to qualify for SYEP or were not accepted, will have the ability to grow their resume and connect on a deeper level with their community. Local youth will have a greater appreciation for and

understanding of their community leaders by being treated as professionals and by being offered workplace mentoring opportunities.

Objective 3: Protect and enhance the viability of East Harlem's small businesses.

Recommendation: Increase Community Board 11's presence within, and support of, local businesses.

Community Board 11's high profile position lends itself to being a representative and advocate for small local businesses. The Community Board presence could be felt in local businesses by holding committee meetings in these public spaces. From La Marqueta to the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center, these meetings would provide these spaces with excellent exposure. Monthly Full Board meetings could be an opportunity to feature local businesses, either by offering opportunities for goods to be sold at the door, offering small samples of food items, or presenting on their business during the public session. If one local business was encouraged to present per month, it may foster an environment of inclusivity and general awareness of the retail community. Through the use of social media, the Community Board can provide regular features of local businesses, thus opening them up to a wider audience and potential customer base.

Recommendation: Create a network of interconnected small businesses.

Through the East Harlem Chamber of Commerce or the East Harlem Community Alliance, local businesses can automatically be enrolled in a community of other small businesses. This network would encourage overlap of patronage as well as provide opportunities for mutually beneficial business arrangements to be made. For example, there can be automatic discounts for store owners shopping at other businesses that are enrolled in the program. The Urban Garden Center can offer discounts to community gardens or spaces that require landscaping. Coffee shops looking to sell pastries can connect with local bakers to sell their goods. Additionally, the network would meet periodically to discuss issues regarding commercial district rezoning or BID blocks.

Recommendation: Provide workshops for small business owners.

Without the resources of a larger company, many small business owners find themselves struggling to accomplish all aspects of the business on their own. Yudelka Adorno of Blue Coco explained that she benefitted immensely from an accounting course offered by Union Settlement, as well as support from NYC Business Solutions in which she received budgeting advice. She also met with a lawyer that provided pro bono services, looking over her lease to ensure it was fair. Ms. Adorno expressed that these types of services are vital for inexperienced shopkeepers to have access to. Ms Adorno added that her most pressing need at this time is to establish an online presence (Y. Adorno, personal communication, 1 August 2016). Advocating on their behalf, the Community Board and other CBOs can connect with a few of the many technology companies, accounting firms, or brain-based coaching companies located in New York City, and request their volunteer time in providing monthly or quarterly workshops. These courses could include how to build and maintain a business website, marketing, accounting, HR training and best practices for staff retention.

Objective 4: Increase overall economic activity in East Harlem.

Recommendation: Invest in La Marqueta’s Placeful initiative.

The disinvestment in La Marqueta in the second half of the twentieth century has created a cultural and economic gap in El Barrio. According to Placeful CEO Shawn McLearn, their goal is to “diversify the permitted uses of La Marqueta,” by finding out what is currently permitted by the city, engage with community members to see what is desired, and tap in to available capital (S. McLearn, personal communication, 1 August 2016). To accomplish this, surveys will be distributed to the Johnson and Taft NYCHA housing complexes, located across the street from the market, and at least two informational meetings will be held for community input. to ascertain what the best use of the space could be. Placeful intends on presenting their vision to the Community Board in September. Based on recommendations from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and Community Board 11’s Arts & Culture Committee, initial proposals are to use the space as an arts alliance, an open space for community and non-profit use, a shared workspace, or as an incubator for pilot projects (S. McLearn, personal communication, 1 August 2016).). As Placeful works to develop a long-term plan, the Community Board, community members, and other stakeholders would do well to maintain a strong and consistent relationship with the project and its decision-makers. The final project should be one that is economically viable and sustaining. The creation of a new La Marqueta must speak to the unique strengths of the East Harlem community, and the overall vision of its constituency.

Objective 5: Attract more tourists and other visitors to East Harlem.

Recommendation: Create a Neighborhood Walking Tour.

El Barrio’s rich cultural history, eclectic street art, and diverse culinary offerings lend itself to being a tourist destination. Wayfinding signs within and just outside of subway stations, northern Central Park, and by Citi Bike stations will encourage tourists to explore further in to the neighborhood with confidence.

Additionally, the neighborhood would benefit from investing in the creation of a local tour company. Offering tours that leave from El Museo del Barrio, near the 96th Street station, or off the 125th Street station, tour guides would be members of the community, and well versed in its history, challenges, and best attributes. Youth tours could be facilitated by and geared toward younger crowds. Tours could emphasize local dining options. For the price of a ticket, tourists can experience bites at participating local businesses. Walking tours based on El Barrio’s many murals, providing information on their cultural and historical significance, could be offered in conjunction with the price of entrance at El Museo.

Conclusion

East Harlem Neighborhood Plan was a stepping stone to greater community involvement, participatory democracy, and urban planning based on community member recommendations.

By relying closely on the stated goals and recommendations of the constituency, Community Board 11 can be a leader in fomenting small business sustainability, workforce development, and economic growth community-wide.

References

- Brewer, G. "Manhattan Borough President Testimony to the NYC Council Committee on Public Housing Oversight Hearing on the NextGeneration NYCHA Plan." 26 January 2016. Retrieved from <http://manhattanbp.nyc.gov/downloads/pdf>. 27 July 2016.
- Center for an Urban Future. (2014). *Small Business Success: A Blueprint for Turning More of New York City's Small Businesses In to Medium-Sized and Large Businesses*. Retrieved from <https://nycfuture.org/pdf/Small-Business-Success.pdf>
- Community Engagement Study: Civitas. 2011. Web. <http://civitasnyc.org/live/publicneedssurvey/>. 27 December 2016.
- DeRienzo, H. 2008. *The Concept of Community: Lessons from the Bronx*. U.S.: IPOC.
- About Us: East Harlem Preservation. 2016. Web. <http://eastharlempreservation.org/about/>. 27 December 2016.
- HR&A Advisors, Inc. *Economic Impact of the New York City Housing Authority in New York City and New York State*. 12 September 2013. Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nycha/about/press/pr-2013/nycha-releases-economic-impact-reports.page>. 1 August 2016.
- Job Board: East Harlem Community Alliance. 2016. Web. <http://eastharlemalliance.org/jobs/>. 27 July 2016.
- Kerr, W. R., & Mandorff, M. (2015). Social networks, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship. *Harvard Business School working paper*, no. 16-042. (Revised June 2016. NBER working paper series, no. 21597, September 2015). Retrieved from <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=49868>
- Local 79. "Apprenticeship." 2016. Web. <http://www.local79.org/apprenticeship/>. 27 July 2016.
- Navarro, M. "New York Zoning Plan Requires More Affordable Homes." *The New York Times*. 21 September 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/22/nyregion/new-york-zoning-plan-requires-more-affordable-homes.html>. 14 July 2016.
- New York City Housing Authority. *NextGeneration NYCHA*. May 2015. Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nycha/about/nextgen-nycha.page>. 2 August 2016.
- NYCHA. *Official NYCHA Map 2016*. 2016. Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/officialmap.pdf>
- NYC Small Business Services. (2015). *Unlocking Potential: Empowering NYC's Immigrant Entrepreneurs*. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/sbs/nycbiz/downloads/misc/ibi-report/index.html>

Office of City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito. *East Harlem Neighborhood Plan*. February 2016. New York City, NY: U.S.

Opportunity NYCHA. 2016. Web.

<http://opportunitynychs.org/looking-for-a-job-love-technology-2/#more-818127> July 2016.

Pathways2Apprenticeship, Inc. 2016. Web. <http://www.pathways2apprenticeship.org/>. 2 August 2016.

Placeful. 2015. Web. <http://www.placeful.org/about/>. 1 August 2016.

The City of New York *Housing New York: A Five-Borough, Ten-Year Plan*. 5 May 2014.

Retrieved from <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/199-14/mayor-de-blasio-housing-new-york--five-borough-10-year-housing-plan-protect-and#/0>. 11 July 2016.