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The Bronx: "The City Without a Slum"

Dominating the top of a hill in the South Bronx, presiding over the once-luxurious Grand Concourse, an expansive tree-line boulevard ambitiously patterned on Paris's Champs Elysees in the early part of this century, sits the Bronx County Building. The majestically imposing building, a ten-story limestone, Neoclassical-Art Deco fortress, is festooned with elaborate friezes depicting highlights from the history of civilization; at the top of the monumental entrance stairs are huge bronze doors decorated with fierce, carved eagles. To the extent that the Bronx is governed at all, it is from these offices and courtrooms.

On nearby side streets, many with a clear view of the looming seat of government, scores of abandoned buildings squat with their windows punched out, resembling inert, blinded, hulking giants. Parts of the South Bronx look like newsreel pictures from Beirut, or, for those with long memories, Dresden after the bombing, or, as almost everybody says, stretching to encompass the devastation, like a moonscape.

A vivid description of the Bronx County Building, also known as the Fortress, appears in Tom Wolfe's hilarious, exuberant, and appallingly reactionary, blame-the-victim novel about the South Bronx:

> The building was a prodigious limestone Parthenon done in the early thirties in the Civic Moderne style. It was nine stories high and covered three city blocks, from 161st Street to 158th Street. Such open-faced optimism they had, whoever dreamed up that building back then!
>
> Despite everything, the courthouse stirred the soul. Its four great facades were absolute jubilations of sculpture and bas-relief. There were groups of classical figures at every corner. Agriculture, Commerce, Industry, Religion, and the Arts, Jus-

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> tice, Government, the Law and Order, and the Rights of Man—noble Romans wearing togas in the Bronx! Such a golden dream of an Apollonian future!
>
> Today, if one of those lovely classical lads ever came down from up there, he wouldn't survive long enough to make it to 162nd Street to get a Choc-A-Pop or a blue Shark. They'd whack him out just to get his toga.[1]

Housing Court, located in the Bronx County Building, is where landlords, city housing officials, lawyers, judges, and the poor converge and where housing justice is dispensed. It is a fitting place to begin consideration of the problems of the South Bronx.

A visitor walking through the imperial front doors looking for Housing Court is directed to circle to the back of the building to what was once a service entrance and then descend to the basement. Before plunging into the catacombs, a visitor may note high above this back door, chiseled into the limestone, the optimistic aphorism: "LET IT BE REMEMBERED FINALLY THAT IT'S LONG EVER BEEN THE PRIDE AND BOAST OF AMERICA THAT THE RIGHTS FOR WHICH SHE CONTENDED WERE THE RIGHTS OF HUMAN NATURE." This evocation of human nature in all its myriad forms turns out to be stunningly apt.

In the bleak basement, the shabby corridor is lined with benches and clogged with people. Thick cigarette smoke swirls against the low ceiling; bored children race around stumbling over baby carriages. The noise level rising from the collective murmurings in several languages is a grating rumble. Landlord lawyers confer with each other; housing advocates talk with poor people clutching puzzling unfolded documents like *Dispossess Petitions, Stipulations,* and *Show Cause Orders;* clerks, to be heard above the din, raucously call out cases; and confusion reigns.

Strikingly, unexpectedly, everyone seems to be in costume. The landlord lawyers are the easiest to spot. Straight from Central Casting, wearing dark, well-tailored suits, they are Caucasian, typically under forty-five years of age, and usually male. Once in a while, a rumpled lawyer can be spotted, but one suspects the dress code is unforgivingly strict. Attorneys for the city, to the untutored eye, are equally well dressed but tend to have longer hair. Dapper clerks in bright white starched shirts, black pants, dark ties, gleaming badges, have .38 caliber guns strapped to bullet-encrusted belts, with handcuffs and keys dangling. A few of these gun-totting officials in this

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squalid basement affect the menacingly dark or mirrored sunglasses favored by archetypical Southern sheriffs. The housing advocates, who are usually not lawyers and who are usually not male Caucasians, are modestly but stylishly dressed, often with a bright scarf or some other distinctive touch. The poor people, and all the people who are not paid to be there are poor, are Black and Hispanic.

It is tempting to think of the South Bronx as a Third World country nested within the richest city in the world, the nerve center for world capitalism. Like all metaphors, this does not hold across the board; nonetheless, this costumed drama[2] is played out daily in Bronx. Housing Court seems right out of unsophisticated movies from the 1930s about the dispensation of justice in "Banana Republics."

Most of the official business between landlord lawyers and the poor is conducted in these dingy hallways, and renters without the benefit of attorneys' advice can be seen signing complicated legal agreements proffered by time-pressed and smilingly confident lawyers representing the apartment owners. This expediency turns Lenny Bruce's wisecrack—"In the halls of justice, the only justice is in the halls."—on its head.

Marinella Pacheo,[3] a tenant advocate with Neighborhood Economic and Educational Development group (NEED), told a visitor that, of the more than 100,000 cases that Housing Court deals with each year, most are for dispossess motions brought by landlords for nonpayment of rent. She cited a 1986 report[4] which disclosed that one-third of all cases were disposed of within five minutes.

In a warren of seven cramped, makeshift courtrooms, judges, mediators, legal assistants, landlord attorneys, and others bustle about to serve justice.[5]

The process usually begins with the landlord delivering to the tenant a "Notice of Petition and Eviction" which everyone calls a dispossess. The trigger, predictably, is nonpayment of rent. Many of the tenants in these battered buildings are on welfare, and the 1989 monthly allowance for rent did not exceed $295 a month. Even in rent-stabilized apartments where rent adjustments are supposed to be modest, the landlord is permitted to periodically raise the rent, and there are a number of legal tools that allow him to raise the rent substantially.[6] When the tenant slips behind in the payments, the landlord quickly swings into action and seeks a *judgment* against his tenant in Housing Court.

The tenant is then dispatched to the basement of the County Courthouse to answer in writing why the rent was not paid. As Car-

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men Olemeda[7] of the East-West Eviction Prevention Center, one of the few tenant advocates who is also a lawyer, told a visitor, most of the poor who receive these papers are not able to understand them: "First the papers are written in English which many Hispanic people can't read. And, they are written in technical language. The landlords never appear in court; they send their lawyers. The tenant almost never is represented by a lawyer." The lawyers try to short-circuit the process by collaring the renters in the hall and persuading them to sign stipulations (legally binding promises to make good on the rent) before the case is heard and before any legally embarrassing indiscretions by the landlord are raised before the judge. According to Ms. Olemeda, "They often agree to things that if they had the opportunity to get advice from lawyers, they might do something completely different." Most, therefore, never make it to the courtrooms in the drab basement. There, miniaturized justice is dispensed from an almost comically dwarfish courtroom that measures a claustrophobic thirteen feet six inches by fifteen feet. This, as the *New York Times* has noted, "makes it only slightly larger than some elevators. . . .They are tiny rooms with special tiny furniture. And, from their shrunken 'In God We Trust' signs to their shortened flagpoles bearing the red, white and blue, they contain most of the essentials of a courtroom. Only smaller."[8] Since the proceedings are technical and swift, as state Supreme Court Judge David B. Saxe candidly admits:

> An unrepresented tenant may not know that a challenge can be mounted against the validity of the rent claimed, the condition of the premises and the content and manner of the services of the required notices. Legal doctrines such as the warranty of habitability, constructive eviction and retaliatory eviction are known to housing lawyers but not to unrepresented tenants.[9]

It is tempting to see this whole process as a cruel maze concocted by predatory landlords and compliant city officials to victimize the poor, but, in truth, this is a complicated problem. Landlords need a reliable source of revenue to maintain their buildings, and they have a right to realize a profit. The fact is that, for whatever reason, many tenants do not pay their rent. Some students of the housing crisis plausibly contend that private investment has to be the cornerstone to revitalizing affordable housing in the South Bronx. And yet, the disparities are so stark, it is hard not to sympathize with the renters. If the landlord loses the case, the worst that happens is

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that he returns disappointed to his comfortable house, often far removed from his investment properties in the South Bronx. In the event it is his misconduct that is at issue, he may be fined, but it is still not a major setback. According to *New York Newsday*, "less than 10 percent of the fines levied against [landlords] for building violations have been collected."[10] If the tenant doesn't prevail, a Marshal may show up at her apartment the next day and dump her furniture on the sidewalk, consigning her and her children to a public shelter in a refitted armory where even hardened career criminals sleep uneasily. The issuance of dispossess notices is not rare:

> A 1986 study of the displacement pressures in the West Bronx, prepared by a number of housing groups in the borough, concluded that more than half the tenants in the area receive dispossess notices each year, the vast majority of them for nonpayment of rent. About 4,000 West Bronx tenants end up being evicted each year, the study said. Last year 91,400 dispossess notices were filed in the entire borough, Bronx Housing Court records show.[11]

Consider that; it is a startling statistic: one out of two households in this neighborhood receives a dispossess order each year. This, in an area where much of the ever-diminishing housing stock was relentlessly and systematically destroyed over the last twenty years. This, in a city where few alternatives are available, and thousands of homeless already clog the shelters or aimlessly roam the streets.

And even more discouragingly, the housing crisis is only the most visible problem in the South Bronx, an area that is racked by countless severe disorders. It was not always so. Even during the hard times of the Great Depression, the Bronx was proudly known as "the city without a slum."

Indeed, Lewis Morris, patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence wrote in 1783 to the newly elected Congress proposing that the South Bronx be declared the new capital of the United States because, apart from its beauty and key location, "Morrisania is perfectly secure from any dangers either from foreign invasion or internal insurrection."[12] Indeed, to this day, the Morrisania section of the South Bronx remains secure from foreign invasion, but everything else has changed dramatically, perhaps even its immunity from internal insurrection.

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Early History of the South Bronx

Setting a tone that would reverberate throughout the next 350 years, the first recorded real estate transaction in the Bronx was a bit one-sided. Swedish developer Jonas Bronck, an operative of the expansionistic Dutch West Indian syndicate bought a five-hundred acre tract from the Mohegan Indians in 1639 for "two guns, two kettles, two coats, two adzes, two shirts, one barrel of cider and six bits of money."[13]

On the wooded site Bronck built a stone house and three barns just across the Harlem River from Manhattan at what is now the lower tip of the South Bronx. From the land he purchased from the Indians, the ambitious white intruder carved out a grain and tobacco farm to the present 150th Street. After he died on his farm in 1643, his contemporaries named the nearby stream the Bronck River, and today the entire borough is named after its first European settler. After his death, in another instance which has contemporary parallels, the farm was abandoned.

Bronck's servants and farm hands were originally from Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, and in a recent reappraisal Bronx historian Lloyd Ultan claims Bronck's legacy was "a multiethnic settlement of people from different cultures [which] presaged the following 350 years when throngs of English, Irish, African-American, Italian, Hispanic, and Asian people would come to The Bronx, live side by side, and work together . . . "[14]

Development continued, and in 1664 another large tract of land came under cultivation when a group of Englishmen established West Farms, an area to the northeast of Bronck's abandoned fields. Part of this area was later sold to Thomas Hunt and became known as Hunt's Point. Hunt raised flax and bees; the flax was shipped to Ireland to make linen, and the honey from the bees was used as a sweetener in the time before sugar became widely available.

Meanwhile the celebrated Morris family was making its way from England to Barbados and finally to New York, which had been known as New Amsterdam until it was captured by England in 1664. They purchased Bronck's abandoned farm, enlarged it, and also arranged to import slaves from the West Indies to work their huge farm. At the same time a Dutchman named John Archer, who was accumulating vast holdings, called his land the Manor of Fordham. Like present-day rival real estate barons, the Morrises countered by somewhat pompously renaming their holdings the Manor of Morrisania.

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One is tempted, perhaps unjustly, to look to history for continuities, for the seeds that will later blossom into full-scale triumphs or pathologies. It is hard to resist seeing the disenfranchisement of tenants as the mortar that binds this story together. From the very beginning, these seventeenth century lords of the manor were jealous of their prerogatives: their tenants were not permitted to fish the streams or grind their grain in mills other than those owned by the landlord. This control by the landlords was substantial because gristmills and sawmills were an essential element of the local economy for two hundred years, until the dawn of modern industrialization.

The first school in the area was erected in 1683 by Connecticut settlers in Eastchester, which is now part of the northeast Bronx. Records[15] also indicate that in 1709 the Venerable Propagation Society established a local church-school. The non-unionized schoolmaster, one Edward Fitzgerald, was paid a modest eighteen pounds a year and had a seven-day work week, since he had to perform many religious functions on weekends. Mark Price cites a passage from an early history of the schools by Robert Bolton, who noted, "Whenever possible, `moderate compensation' was exacted from pupils able to pay for their instruction, although no schooling was denied to those unable to pay."[16]

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the first school was located. In 1930 the Bronx Boro-Wide Association of Teachers tried to find the site without much luck. They complained that the old records were inadequate because "boundaries of estates were fixed by large trees, stone walls, and natural landmarks and small streams." By 1930, of course, the fully urbanized Bronx had obliterated any surviving natural landmarks.

The South Bronx in the American Revolution

By the time of the American Revolution there were still no towns or even villages in the South Bronx. Schooling was mostly a private family affair, and it is likely that, for the most part, only the children of the land owners could be assured of any formal instruction.

The Bronx was a battlefield during the war, with the two major land-owning families squaring off against each other. James DeLancey, who had extensive holdings in Westchester County just north of the Bronx, was the local Tory leader. Royalist refugees from the surrounding areas coalesced around DeLancey, who helped drive

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General George Washington out of the Bronx in 1776. At that point, the American forces were fleeing a British advance in Manhattan after narrowly escaping decimation in the Battle of Brooklyn. This retreat resulted in the British and their Hessian allies securely holding the Bronx for the duration of the war.

Arrayed against the Tories were the Patriots, who were led by Lewis Morris, the third and last Lord of the Manor of Morrisania. They camped in lower Westchester and skirmished with the Loyalists for the duration of the war. Lewis Morris was an authentic hero who before the War had attended the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence.

After the routing of the British, the Tory lands were confiscated and Lewis Morris returned to the South Bronx and prospered. He built a bridge over the Harlem River linking his estate to Manhattan. Roads were rerouted, and this bridge became an important element in his commercial success. Meanwhile, his half brother Gouverneur Morris became an influential politician and diplomat, serving as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and American Minister to France in George Washington's administration. Theodore Roosevelt in his biography of Gouverneur Morris proclaims, "There has never been an American statesman of keener intellect or more brilliant genius."[17] Gouverneur Morris is considered the "penman of the U.S. Constitution" because he drafted its final form.[18] Before retiring to the bucolic splendor of Port Morris, the eastern part of the manor of Morrisania, he served as a United States Senator.

In 1795, the state began paying for some schooling of its young citizens. And, ten years later in 1805 the somewhat coercive "fee system" was completely abolished, and schools were made absolutely free. The population was still small; in 1795 there were only three schools within the present limits of the Bronx.

The First Half of the Nineteenth Century

The story of the South Bronx in the first half of the nineteenth century was one of modest population growth based on the early immigrant waves, impressive industrialization, and the firm establishment of free public schools.

The key South Bronx figure in the early part of the nineteenth century was Jordan L. Mott, who arrived on the scene in 1828. Mott purchased a parcel from Gouverneur Morris II, which he, not surprisingly, named Mott Haven. On it he built the first iron foundry in the Bronx. There he manufactured coal-burning stoves which revo-

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lutionized kitchens which had previously been designed around open fireplaces. This factory spurred other industrial growth and attracted workers to the South Bronx.

Also at this time the monumental public works, Croton Aqueduct, which carries water from upstate to New York City, was constructed through the Bronx and finally completed in 1849. Another major infrastructure project of this era was the building of the New York and Harlem Railroad which stimulated even more growth. Wherever a station happened to be built, houses and stories immediately sprang up, and modest villages began to flourish. The first South Bronx suburbs were thus clustered around the early train stations constructed in Morrisania, West Farms, and Tremont, a new village built on three hills.

Irish laborers built these railroads,

> an exhausting, dangerous work [that] led to the saying that American railroads had "an Irishman buried under every tie." Many of these Irish workmen, finding the Bronx a refreshingly quiet change from frenetic Manhattan, stayed on and settled down with their families in Highbridge, near the aqueduct spanning the Hudson, and in Melrose where the railroad entered the Bronx from Manhattan."[19]

It is worth recalling that, like the Black migrants and the Hispanic immigrants who saturated the Bronx after World War II, these Irish newcomers were viewed with hostility and dread. This time-honored pattern of bias was not totally without foundation as Jonnes reminds us:

> The impoverished Irish inundated almshouses, courts, and jails. Although by the 1850s the Irish were one-third of the populace, they accounted for 55 percent of the arrests (about half for drunkenness) and two-thirds of the paupers. Police vans were dubbed "paddy wagons" after their most frequent occupants. Illegitimacy was commonplace. Native-born Americans reviled the Irish as lazy, filthy, drunken brawlers who bonded into young gangs and terrorized the streets.[20]

Post Civil War

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of consolidation, increased industrialization, and the absorption in the 1880s of massive waves of German, Italian, and Jewish immigrants.

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A century ago the now-desolate streets of the South Bronx were the summer playground of the rich. Blue bloods raised prize cattle in Hunts Point, and in Morrisania, the wealthy dabbled in thoroughbred horses. Any list of the worst streets in America in the late 1960s would have to include Simpson, Tiffany, and Fox, all named after luxurious estates where the rich had frolicked a few generations earlier.

Simpson Street is the site of the notorious Fort Apache,[21] the police station of the forty-first precinct. According to a report in 1977:

> Fort Apache's station house is one of only three buildings in that particular block of Simpson Street that are still intact. Of all the precincts in the city, Fort Apache has been the most violent. But because of the widespread burning and the rapid exodus of the neighborhood's population, the level of crime has fallen in the last two years. Fox Street, once thought to be the street with the densest population in the country, is burned out and practically deserted now; ninety-five percent of its population is gone. The forty-first precinct still has a population of some 170,000, predominantly Puerto Rican and Black; 40,000 are on welfare.[22]

By 1993 the neo-Renaissance building that houses the forty-first precinct was abandoned when the police moved to a sleek postmodern structure seven blocks away. The worn station house was "known from here to Hollywood as Fort Apache, a solitary outpost in a neighborhood of death and decay and gangs with grandiosely macabre names, according to a *New York Times* article."[23] Indeed, twenty-five years ago it was a common sight on these streets to see young men wearing the colors of the Savage Skulls, Savage Nomads, Ghetto Brothers, Black Spades, Spanish Mafia, Seven Immortals, and Seven Crowns. With a 1992 per capita income of only $5,379 (as compared to a city average of $16,281), it is still one of the most impoverished areas of the city where drug dealing and prostitution still flourish openly on the streets but where murders, which use to run between 120 and 130 a year, are now down dramatically to around fifty. Partly that is the result of a drastic population decline from 93,900 in 1970 to 39,443 in 1990, but it also stems from other more positive changes which are beginning to stir.

In 1874 there were approximately twenty-eight thousand people living in the South Bronx when it was grafted politically to Manhattan. Even more tangible bonds were forged: horsecar transit lines had connected Manhattan with the South Bronx since the time of the

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Civil War, but in 1888 a rail link was built that decisively ended the isolation of the Bronx. Manhattan's Third Avenue El, an elevated track, pierced the Bronx, stopping at the southern tip of Morrisania. In subsequent years this track stretched the length of the Bronx, and unlike the earlier more expensive commuter line it was affordable to the working class.[24]

In 1874, as these first steps of what some observers called the "colonization" of the Bronx took place, there were fourteen schools in the Bronx, with five of them clustered in Morrisania. All together there were 155 teachers and principals, and the operating costs, including all salaries and janitorial supplies, were $135,000 a year."[25]

Elementary school lasted until the eighth grade, and most found this amount of instruction adequate to cope with the demands of the world. High schools were not intended for everyone and were, in fact, called "the people's colleges." It was not until 1897, when the Mixed High School set up temporary quarters, that the Bronx even had a secondary school. When the school moved to its permanent location in 1904, its name was changed to Morris High School.

Before the Bronx opened its first high school, it did have a number of private colleges operating in the rural stretches of the borough. St. John's College, run by the Jesuits and later renamed Fordham University, has been a Bronx landmark since 1841. In the northwest tip of Riverdale at the edge of the Bronx, the Sisters of Charity ran the Academy of Mount St. Vincent which, by the turn of the century, was an accredited college. Also, New York University built a campus on a bluff above the Harlem River in the 1890s.

The Bronx also proved to be a congenial place for research. At this time, in the late nineteenth century, the South Bronx became home to the Bronx Zoo, which, in addition to being the most celebrated institution to exhibit exotic animals in the country, was also a major center for scholarship. It coordinated efforts to save the American buffalo when it was on the brink of extinction. In fact, all the herds of buffalo in the American West today spring from the original Bronx herd, and "the model for the old Buffalo nickel was raised at the Bronx Zoo."[26]

This was also the time of mass immigration from Italy and eastern Europe. The Italians, who initially settled in Little Italy or East Harlem, began to ride the El up to Melrose, a neighborhood north of Mott Haven, and to an area near Fordham called Belmont that remains a South Bronx Italian stronghold to this day. The Jews initially settled in Manhattan's Lower East Side, but the more prosperous and adventurous soon rode up the Third Avenue tracks and

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clustered in Mott Haven. The earlier immigrant groups, the Irish and the Germans, were already well established by this time. Prosperous Irish lived along Alexander Avenue, and Cortlandt Avenue drew so many Germans that it was known as "Dutch Broadway." Bronx historian Gary Hermalyn describes Bronx neighborhoods at the turn of the century.

> Despite the fact that the Bronx was part of the great metropolis, most Bronxites thought of themselves as living in a small village. For example, if asked where he lived, a Bronxite would usually reply Mott Haven, Kingsbridge, or Morrisania. In the 1890s the small villages were usually only a few blocks long and surrounded by farmlands, orchards, and meadows. The streets were mostly dirt roads, and each village supported only a few stores. The larger towns contained factories, mills and breweries.
>
> The ethnic population of The Bronx at the turn of the century was not very diverse, and most often one ethnic group dominated the village. For example, in Melrose and Morrisania, where the new Morris High School building was opened in 1904, the dominant population was German, consisting of immigrants who came to the country in the 1860s. The Irish dominated in Mott Haven, where many worked in the Mott Iron Works or the Stephens' coal yard. The wealthy Irish doctors settled along Alexander Avenue, which was known as "Irish Fifth Avenue." The Irish were also well represented in Kingsbridge and Riverdale, where they served as gardeners and servants to the rich and Anglo-Saxon families.
>
> Early in the twentieth century, Black families came to the Morrisania section and into Williamsbridge. At the same time, Jews settled in Mott Haven on land purchased by the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Other Jewish families could be found in the Hunts Point and Morrisania sections as well.[27]

In 1898 New York City, which had previously consisted of only Manhattan and half of the Bronx, was consolidated into the present five boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, all of the Bronx, and Manhattan.

This political change, coupled with the massive deluge of immigrants, refashioned the Bronx fundamentally. The local schools, which were the primary route for advancement and assimilation, also had to change profoundly. Mirroring a change that was sweeping the country, Price observes:

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> Until the end of the last century, education in the Bronx had been largely a process of teaching academic subjects to boys and girls who were capable mentally and physically of absorbing instruction. Following the transition from the town system to the borough system, there began a gradual enlargement of the concept of public education and a corresponding enlargement of the educational services—both of which continue on an ever-expanding basis to this day.[28]

Price wrote at the end of World War II, but his generalization about the expansion of educational services remains true today, although he perhaps would be surprised to see the direction this movement has taken. In our time this instructional extension has embraced all manner of special educational services, including drug-abuse prevention programs, unwed mother instruction, alternative schools for the disruptive, etc. It has to be remembered that Price was writing at a more innocent time when he exulted: "The classroom . . . is now regarded as a workshop, a laboratory, a studio, a library, a place to practice gracious living."

The Early Twentieth Century

In the early twentieth century, the South Bronx boomed. The population mushroomed from 200,000 in 1900 to over one million by 1925. Subways sliced along the north-south axis of the borough, bulging with new immigrants. Apartment buildings sprang up near the subways; real estate developers were having a field day. The Simpsons, Tiffanys, and Foxes sold their estates and beat a hasty retreat to more exclusive precincts. The South Bronx suburbs were overwhelmed and quickly metamorphosed into densely populated, genuinely urban neighborhoods.

The Mott Haven iron foundries gave way to piano factories and coal companies. Photos from this era depict many manufacturing plants jumbled together wtih building supply firms and lumber yards along a canal (now covered) and suggest that a laborer looking for work may not have had to travel far. In 1897 the Bronx Board of Trade listed an impressive range of factories that issued

> a great variety of commodities, such as iron work of every description including stoves, ranges and furnaces, ice making machinery, church organs, pianos, refrigerators, artistic goods, electrical supplies, surgical instruments, beaten gold, china, small and enameled ware, naphtha launches, railway lamps, pa-

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> per boxes of every design, both as to utility and beauty, window shades, toys, segars [*sic*], brushes, carpets, dyeing and printing work, mineral waters, tape, soap, silks, shirts, drums, varnish and other products of necessity and practical usefulness.[29]

And the proliferation of subways insured that there was a generous supply of workers and consumers.

In 1909 the Grand Concourse, beginning in Mott Haven and stretching north, opened for strollers and traffic. Nearby Yankee Stadium opened in 1923. Meanwhile on the Concourse, luxury apartment houses, many in the suave, streamlined Art Deco style, sprouted along both sides of the thoroughfare. To move into one of these magnificent buildings was an immigrant's fantasy:

> Living in the high class apartment houses built in the 1920s, and added to during the depths of the Great Depression, were professional people and proprietors of establishments in Manhattan. Occupying the side streets and some of the posh residencies along the boulevard were many workers in the fur and clothing trade, who found it easy to get to work by using the subway beneath the Concourse. Most of these people were Jewish, and in those days the Concourse was a dream that any working-class Jew in Hunts Point or elsewhere could aspire to attain. It was the symbol of "making it" and was a combination of Manhattan's Fifth and Park Avenues.[30]

The lamentable fate of the Concourse and especially of its side streets is a staple of contemporary tabloid journalism. An article in the *New York Post* is typical of the genre.[31] Two *Post* reporters focus on Walton Street, one block west and parallel to the Concourse. Near a formerly elegant building named "The Cortile" where Babe Ruth once lived in a sixth-floor apartment, "today," the newsmen sneer, "the sidewalks are littered with garbage, shady characters are everywhere and the building is marred by graffiti, broken windows, and stomach-turning smells." Next to a photo of the ruined building is a gigantic shot of Ruth, The Sultan of Swat, looking solemn and somewhat bewildered. The headline reads, "Buy Me Some Peanuts and Crack."

The bustling growth of the 1920s came to a squealing halt when the Great Depression struck in 1929. The South Bronx managed to weather the storm partly because ambitious, local public works projects helped to pick up the employment slack. By 1935 some apart-

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ment building construction resumed along the Concourse. In fact, as Ultan observes, "No urban area in the country experienced more private residential development during that troubled decade, and the boast was often made that the Bronx was 'the city without a slum.' "[32] By the end of the decade the South Bronx was a secure, hardworking area built at a density unsurpassed by almost any other area of the country. It was home to laborers and the emerging middle class, and ordinary life was firmly rooted in distinct, stable neighborhoods.

Post World War II

If the 1930s was a time for the South Bronx to pause and catch its breath, then the 1940s, with the coming of World War II, ushered in profound changes that fundamentally realigned social patterns.

Directly after Pearl Harbor, thousands of South Bronx men were plucked from the neighborhoods and sent to the Pacific and Europe. The factories of Port Morris were retooled to crank out munitions around the clock. Factory workers were needed, and into this vacuum came new immigrants:

> Shortages in the labor force operated simultaneously with the ongoing mechanization of American agriculture to accelerate one of the country's largest internal migrations. During the war years, millions of Blacks left the poverty of the rural South to work in northern and Pacific coast cities. Similar economic conditions in Puerto Rico . . . sparked a major influx of Puerto Ricans to New York City.[33]

The story of this Black diaspora is movingly told in Nicholas Lemann's classic 1991 history, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America.*[34] This work focuses on Chicago, but New York City and the South Bronx, in particular, was the promised land for both southern rural Blacks and waves of economic refugees from Puerto Rico seeking employment.[35]

By the second half of the twentieth century, the South Bronx was saturated; there was little room for new immigrants to be shoehorned in, and so a new pattern emerged. It was as if, for every new family that came to settle in a old apartment or in one of the new high-rise public housing projects, another family moved out. In the 1950s, 100,000 people moved in to the Bronx, and perhaps 100,000 others, mostly White, left, settling in the suburbs or the more wide-open residential neighborhoods in Queens. The Southeast Bronx in

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and near Hunts Point turned into a lively Puerto Rican neighborhood, and Morrisania and beyond, in the heart of the South Bronx, grew increasingly Black.

At first in the postwar period, most of these newcomers settled in Harlem where housing was more available and less expensive. But a series of interrelated policy decisions fashioned in Washington had a strikingly unanticipated impact on the South Bronx and spurred changes that took on an overpowering momentum of their own.

Locally in 1944, rents were frozen as part of a wartime price stabilization strategy, but this artificial removal of rent rates from market forces unexpectedly persisted for decades in the South Bronx. At first, this had the effect of further stabilizing neighborhoods because a reasonable rent was locked in for the tenant and in the tight rental market people were reluctant to leave their apartments.

But, as we'll see, two Washington D.C. policies promulgated by the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration interacted synergistically with the lingering rent-control regulations, resulting in systemic changes that profoundly distorted the historical direction of the South Bronx.

These municipal and federal government policies, coupled with the massive loss of entry-level industrial jobs triggered by a changing economy, bred dramatic changes all through New York City. In its wake, whole neighborhoods were destroyed not only in the Bronx, but also in Manhattan and Brooklyn. The fallout from these dislocations had its most virulent impact on the South Bronx. This havoc is especially visible in the borough's housing and schools.

The Ravaged Bronx of the 1970s and 1980s

Charlotte Street in the center of the Bronx serves as a potent symbol for all the hopelessness of the South Bronx of the 1970s, and now as a result of its well-intentioned but fundamentally bungled rehabilitation in the 1980s, it stands as an unlikely monument to government's deep confusion about how to restore viability to these ruined neighborhoods.

Charlotte Street has, of course, a particular resonance because it has been visited by the last two presidents of the United States and its residents have witnessed the pledges made to mobilize the resources of the United States to end the disgraceful destruction of this neighborhood.

When President Jimmy Carter strode down Charlotte Street in 1977, there was not much left. In the early 1960s, fifty-one

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apartment buildings stood on Charlotte Street and its two adjacent blocks, Wilkins Avenue and East 172nd Street, and they contained more than one thousand apartments and three thousand residents. By 1977, there were only nine buildings left. And, according to a contemporary account in the *New York Times,* "Six of them have their windows and entrances blocked off with cinder blocks and concrete, and two of them are fire-blackened hulks."[36] At the time Carter swept through, to make a brief speech, there remained only one occupied building, with thirty-seven apartments.

Robert Esnard, who was chairman of the Bronx office of the City Planning Commission during that time, said, "By the late 1960s half the buildings were gone. Abandonment had begun. The middle class had begun to leave replaced by minorities and the poor. Those on welfare and those unemployed moved into Charlotte Street."[37]

What caused this precipitous decline replicated throughout the South Bronx? According to Esnard,

> Buildings were left to rot. Landlords left. Bankers wouldn't loan a dime. There was no such thing as insurance, fire or otherwise. The population turned over. Add to this the fact that Charlotte Street was selected as a site for two new schools, a public school and a junior high, and site-clearing went on and you have the final irony: two school sites cleared for a population that doesn't exist anymore."[38]

Time-worn PS 61, across Boston Road from Charlotte Street, once slated to be replaced, still serves the remaining population.

Today, more than a decade after two Presidents vowed to make changes, the surrounding neighborhood remains mostly untouched, but Charlotte Street itself has been transformed. After a grim walk along Boston Road through an urban nightmare of block after block of devastated buildings, a stroller is confronted with a sunny scene reminiscent of the suburbs in the 1950s. The one inhabited six-story building President Carter saw along Charlotte Street remains,[39] but the rest of the block has twenty modest, pastel, prefabricated, freestanding ranch homes sitting on meticulously tended green lawns. One conjures memories of photographs of War World II veterans beaming proudly in front of their identical homes in Levittown. There are some differences, however. All these homes have their tiny windows sealed by bars, except for the big picture window that does not lend itself to such protection, although a close look reveals that many houses have even this window secured by internal bars.

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The first strip of these prefab suburban houses, which were assembled in the early 1980s, had white wooden picket fences, and the later models now have steel picket fences, many with sharp points. Some plots are softened by shrubs, and one even has the archetypical suburban status symbol of a satellite dish to capture cable television signals. Even today, it is hard to know whether this preposterous block is a harbinger of hopeful transformation for the South Bronx or a grotesque footnote in the seemingly relentless debasement of the borough.

This modest beginning of reconstruction is the result of Jimmy Carter's 1977 visit. That brief presidential sojourn, which featured "startled winos [who] waved their bagged bottles happily at him [as] Black youths, cheered, calling. 'Give me a job, Jimmy,' "[40] stimulated a short-lived media scrutiny of the neighborhood. From press accounts it is possible to construct a picture of life in this neighborhood during what may have been the depths of its misery. More graphically, the heart-breaking story of Charlotte Street is told in eight detailed, well-researched chapters in Jonnes 1986 book. The residents of this classic Bronx working-class neighborhood, almost all Eastern European Jews, had "everything a family could want in the early twentieth century—a park, good public schools, convenient subways, synagogues, movie theaters, and excellent shopping."[41] Ten years after an abrupt shift in population in the early 1960s all that was left was rubble, "large stretches of eerie necropolis—charred ruins; fields lumpy with detritus; disemboweled, abandoned buildings."[42]

The schools at this time were facing unprecedented problems. Many young people were unprepared for instruction (or perhaps, it was the schools that were unprepared for these students): in some schools, few students spoke English, and schools had to contend with a potent distillation of all the ills of ghetto life, including one-parent families, pervasive drug addiction, street gangs, rapacious landlords, misguided government policies, high crime, and the lassitude bred by welfare.

There is surprisingly little written about the schools of that time. It is almost as if newspapers and magazines willfully averted their attention. What did get reported tended to focus on crime. For example, in a typical article, the *New York Times* reported on the rising violence at Samuel Gompers Vocational-Technical High School in Mott Haven. Focusing on the plight of staffers, rather than students, the article noted: "Some teachers contend that there have been at least 22 assaults recently on faculty members, including one

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incident in which a teacher's sweater was set afire while he was wearing it. Several women teachers said they had been molested, menaced or punched by unknown intruders from the halls."[43]

A young teacher, her idealism badly battered, admitted poignantly that she felt "more like a turnkey in a jail than a teacher" and planned to leave at the end of the term. I just don't want to get hurt," she said. The school itself was in shambles, with a charred classroom resulting from one of a reported thirteen fires set by students that year. Teenagers were loitering in the playground drinking wine. According to another teacher who wanted to leave, "The students were fine until the building started to go. That was the first sign to them that nobody cared." Added to that there were said to be forty to fifty classes a day without teachers and five hundred misprogrammed students who missed the first few weeks of school while their schedules were being straightened out. Administrators cited lack of funds caused by New York City's fiscal crisis.[44]

Of course, the city did spend some money in the South Bronx during this time. For instance, it lavished more than $100 million of public money on improvements to Yankee Stadium in Mott Haven. This money was invested in stadium amenities like ". . . its blue seats and its plazas and its VIP boxes with private bars, private bathrooms, luxurious sofas and guards, in the corridors to keep out those who do not belong. The latter category includes most of the area's residents, who can't afford to buy tickets in the more expensive parts of the stadium their money helped build."[45]

The city found funds to install high-intensity security lighting around the stadium, but "across the street . . . is a 50-year-old, unlit, ill-cared-for public athletic facility with a drinking fountain that hasn't functioned in years." Also at this time the city slashed the budget of the local Senior Citizens Center, and it could not "provide enough doctors and medicine at Lincoln Hospital—several blocks away—to stop people from dying because of inadequate treatment."[46]

Assaults on stadium fans received extensive press coverage. But relatively little was written about the marked decline in sanitation services, or the impact on health care the closing of nearby Morrisania Hospital had on the neighborhood, or the fact that "many local landlords drastically reduced maintenance on their buildings while just as drastically increasing rents."[47] Even the local YMCA and YMHA, which had provided recreation for neighborhood children for decades, closed down around this time.

The paralyzing fear of inconveniencing Yankee fans continues to galvanize government attention to the neighborhood. In 1993,

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City Hall and borough officials trip over themselves to reverse the blight near the stadium when the odious team owner, George Steinbrenner, sniffs that he is worried about the safety and parking in the area. South of the stadium is a park for residents and the Bronx Terminal Market, a cooperative of about two dozen food merchants who supply *bodegas* and other small stores. According to the *New York Times* "during a meeting of city officials last week to discuss possible parking sites, the market and a city park across the street from the stadium were mentioned among other sites."[48]

Up until recently, it was clear that the Bronx was being systematically destroyed:

> In the late sixties in the Bronx the rental apartment building (a form of housing invented in ancient Rome and reliably lucrative in every era thereafter) suffered a dramatic demise as an economic entity, becoming in short order a worthless investment. Costs had soared, rents remained controlled, while rent delinquency and vandalism were rampant. Some landlords just abandoned their buildings, others "milking" them—paying no taxes, providing no services, but collecting what rents they could. The most venal turned to arson to recoup their losses. Concurrently, "finishers" (whose vocation was invented in this time and place) and junkies mined the dying apartment houses for every item of worth. They set fires to force out tenants so they might more easily extricate pipes and other valuables. Welfare tenants, desperate to escape buildings without heat or hot water and often under siege, torched their apartments in order to get priority on city housing lists.[49]

Has this shattered collection of neighborhoods stabilized? What is the situation in the 1990s? Is there any way to go but up?

The Outlook for the Bronx

Obviously, it is not clear what the future holds. The signals are decidedly mixed. On one hand, building abandonment has slowed considerably. Although this is true in part because there is little left to abandon, the fact remains that the population has thinned and vast tracts of lands are now available for factories and housing. The infrastructure is already in place. The subways are functioning, an extensive network of highways offers easy truck access, and sewers and electrical lines are already buried in the empty streets.

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There are a number of impressively successful, small-scale "sweat equity" reclamations of previously abandoned buildings like those launched by the innovative community development group Banana Kelly, where the new residents exchanged their labor for ownership of their apartments. There is mounting evidence that, once people have a tangible stake in their housing, they will be better able to confront the pervasive forces of neighborhood decay.

Jobs, of course, remain key to Bronx reclamation, and by the late 1980s there was some evidence that New York City's economic boom, which created numerous service sector jobs, had finally begun to trickle down to some of those living in poverty.

Yet, New York City continues to bleed manufacturing jobs, according to a study commissioned by the Bronx Borough President in 1990.[50] The report cites Bureau of Labor Statistics which estimates that there was a loss of 64,000 blue-collar jobs in New York City between 1979 and 1988. The Regional Plan Association projects that such jobs will continue to decline in the 1984–2005 time period by about sixteen percent. These are the kinds of jobs best suited to graduates of Bronx high schools.

The Bronx population is recovering from the loss of almost 300,000 residents in the 1970s. Roughly 100,000 new residents moved to the Bronx between 1980 and 1990, and the Regional Plan Association estimates that another 82,000 may be added between 1990 and 2000. Moreover, the ethnic composition of the Bronx is still in flux, with the percentage of white non-Hispanics expected to decline from 34 to 24 percent between 1990 and 2000, while the number of Hispanics and Blacks will show a healthy growth.

Where will all these new entrants live, and how will they pay the rent? The current trends projected across the last decade of the twentieth century depressingly indicate, according to the Regional Plan Association, that the poorest Bronx households will mushroom by 20 percent to 242,000. In 1987, 27 percent of people in the Bronx received some form of public assistance, and, since their numbers will grow substantially, the demand for social services in the South Bronx will expand.

This, in turn, will exacerbate the housing crisis. The Regional Plan Association found that there were in 1990 about 424,000 housing units in the Bronx, not all in occupied structures, and about 43,000 households doubled up. It is expected that by the year 2000 there will be a dire need for 570,000 housing units. These projections illuminate a serious mismatch of need and reality. This boils down to a need for 189,000 additional housing units over the next decade,

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which, at a low estimate of $80,000 per unit, indicates a projected investment of $15.2 billion for Bronx housing. Since the vast majority of residents cannot afford market rates, the housing situation appears bleak.

In the early 1990s evidence suggests that the economic boom of the 1980s, which in any case, largely bypassed the Bronx, was long past. The hyperthyroid real-estate market is in collapse. As always in the South Bronx, one does not have to look far to see problems.

Epidemiologists warn that the AIDS virus infects as many as one in five sexually active men in the South Bronx. Women residents are warned that, because of such rampant infection, intercourse with a neighborhood man is like "sexual Russian roulette."[51] In fact, in New York for the last few years, AIDS has been the leading cause of death for women aged 25 to 34. A recent study highlighted startling racial disparities.

> Among Whites, the AIDS death rate rose from 0.6 per 100,000 women in 1986 to 1.2 in 1988. But among Blacks, the rate was 4.4 in 1986 and jumped to 10.3 in 1988. In 1987, the AIDS death rate among Black women in New York was 29.5 per 100,000.[52]

It is said that one in every twenty babies born in Bronx hospitals is infected with the AIDS virus, and five in twenty are born with opiates in their blood.[53]

Meanwhile, another widespread scourge has descended on the South Bronx and other inner-city neighborhoods across the country. Crack cocaine. Five years after crack first hit the streets of the South Bronx in 1983, the juvenile arrest rate in New York City tripled from 386 to 1,052. Young teens are at the heart of the crack trade because they do not run the risk of the mandatory jail sentences older dealers confront.

Crack is an extremely lucrative product: according to law enforcement personnel some youngsters can make up to $3,000 a day. This money is usually spent in conspicuous consumption and ostentatious display. Like *nouveau riche* suburban adults, the young drug dealers favor gold chains, status cars, and expensive clothes.

> Gold, in fact, is a widespread obsession with inner-city youngsters. Heavy gold cables that cost up to $20,000 are all the rage, as well as chunky three-fingered rings resembling brass knuckles. Even gold dental caps are considered chic. These styles are so widely associated with drug trafficking that school princi-

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ples are banning them. In New York City the principals of three high schools have forbidden the wearing of gold jewlery.[54]

The drug trade, and its resulting gang wars, have enslaved thousands of South Bronx residents and trapped others in their homes where they are still not safe from stray gunfire.

Bronx per capita income is the lowest in the Tri-State Region's thirty-one counties. Among elementary and junior high students, 78 percent are classified as poor under the school lunch formula. Bronx dropout rates are twice the state average and a quarter higher than the city average.[55]

The depressing litany can be extended almost indefinitely, but the point has been made. Anyone attempting to reverse the commanding forces of decay in the South Bronx has a monumental task. Where does one begin?

Before we turn to some hopeful stirrings, it is useful to explore the reasons for this collapse.

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