

Tower of Terror: The Dual Forces of Federal and Privatized Housing Segregation

Although New York City's *Two Bridges* neighborhood has never been well-recognized, its historical significance cannot be overstated. A lack of clear geographic boundaries mean it is often subsumed by nearby neighborhoods such as Chinatown and the Lower East Side, which it overlaps with both physically and culturally. Over the years, Two Bridges has provided a home for shifting working-class populations, including prominent groups of Chinese, Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants, and eventually, it made history by becoming one of the city's first integrated neighborhoods.¹ This mid-20th century introduction of public housing projects that ushered in a large Black and Hispanic population led to inevitable ethnic and economic tension, but ultimately, work done by local organizations and neighborhood councils has helped the community settle: By the early 2000s, the area had grown into an affordable and community-oriented place to live. This gritty past and modest present has been disrupted by the 2014 construction of 72-story luxury tower *One Manhattan Square*, which dwarfs most structures in the area, including its defining attribute, the Manhattan Bridge. Although the community is no stranger to urban growth and renewal, this development has ignited concerns regarding gentrification and historic conservation, with many residents citing feelings of resentment and displacement. Despite years of protesting and intensive legal battles to halt its development, the building's construction continued, but it has failed to fill many of its luxury-priced apartments, even amidst pricing drops brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.² This conflict, although relatively unknown to the larger city population, is an echo of citywide struggles to combat gentrification in affordable, mostly minority neighborhoods, many of which

¹Rolando Pujol, "City Living: Two Bridges," April 25, 2015, <https://www.newsday.com/news/new-york/city-living-two-bridges-1.1142035>.

²Rachel Holliday Smith, "Embattled Two Bridges Towers Gets Appeals Court OK - but Two More Cases Await," August 28, 2020, <https://www.thecity.nyc/2020/8/27/21404961/two-bridges-lower-east-side-court-battles>.

have been created through or around federally-subsidized housing. Ultimately, this building's controversy provides an interesting perspective on citywide housing conflicts, including the role that private corporations have in providing affordable housing, and the tools that community organizations have at their disposal for combatting these organizations and larger governmental imposition.



One Manhattan Square's stature and shiny glass exterior may be foreign to the neighborhood, but Two Bridges is no stranger to urban renewal. After decades of providing a haven for Eastern and Southern European immigrants, many of whom participated in machine-style politics, Two Bridges' demographic was slightly shifted due to the development of Knickerbocker Village, a federally-subsidized middle-income housing complex that was among the first of its kind in the 1930s.³ This urban renewal effort continued into the late 1990s,

³C. J. Hughes, "Two Bridges: Once Quiet, Now at the Edge of Change," The New York Times (The New York Times, December 6, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/realestate/living-in-two-bridges-lower-east-side.html>.

including the development of subsidized public housing complexes like the Alfred E. Smith Houses, and the James Rutgers Houses, both built in the 1950s and 60s by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). The construction of these two buildings brought a large influx of Black and Hispanic populations to the neighborhood, bringing ethnic tension and conflict.⁴ In later years, the neighborhood also became home to a population of first and second generation Chinese immigrants due to its close proximity to Chinatown⁵, creating a culturally-diverse community that was primarily middle and working class, even if somewhat divided over ethnic and racial lines.

To combat fast-growing integration tension, the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council was formed in 1955, giving the neighborhood the name we know it by today. At the time of the council's creation, the neighborhood was still regarded as part of the Lower East Side and because of this, "tensions were high and gang violence was common, as the area was becoming one of the city's first racially integrated neighborhoods."⁶ Although it was created initially to resolve racial conflict, the council quickly began to act as a vessel for communication between churches, community leaders, and settlement houses, eventually settling into a role where it worked to provide equitable access to food and housing for those throughout the area. This culminated in successes such as the creation of over 1500 low to moderate income apartments from 1972 to 1990.⁷ The council's work has been supplemented by other neighborhood organizations such as Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, and Tenants United Fighting for Lower East Side (TUFF-LES). Although their

⁴"Victor Papa," NYPAP, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.nypap.org/oral-history/victor-papa/>.

⁵*Ibid*

⁶"History," Two Bridges (Two Bridges Neighborhood Council), accessed April 9, 2021, <https://twobridges.org/about-us/history/>.

⁷ *Ibid*

goals are generally aligned, these groups were even more united by the appearance of a more disquieting enemy: The proposal of Extell Development's One Manhattan Square.

From its conception, the tower transgressed social boundaries by replacing an affordable neighborhood supermarket, Pathmark. Although it was not the only grocery store in the area, "once Pathmark closed, other nearby supermarkets raised their prices, prompting complaints from the neighborhood."⁸ Although the tower's developers promised to open a new grocery store in the building at ground level, it still has not appeared, and rising food prices are among a myriad of problems residents face, including a feeling that the tower constituted "racist development."⁹ Having such an extravagant tower surrounded by public housing projects and rent-regulated buildings seems to be an almost comically-exaggerated example of the inequality coming to define NYC, witnessed within the stretch of one city block.

In an effort to stop the tower's development, community organizations proposed a rezoning of the Two Bridges community. Initially, the building was approved by the City Planning Commission (CPC) in December 2018 under the guise of a "minor modification" to the neighborhood, despite the fact that it is nearly 40 stories taller than most mid-rise buildings in the area. The CPC was able to justify their decision under the Large Scale Residential Development (LSRD) plan, which has governed Two Bridges' urban development since 1972, but this meant that the building would not undergo a public study from the Uniform Land Use Review

⁸Panyin Conduah, "Clash Over Tower in Two Bridges," Clash Over Tower in Two Bridges | Manhattan, New York, NY | Local News, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150402164731/http://www.nypress.com/local-news/20150225/clash-over-tower-in-two-bridges>.

⁹Hannah McCarthy, "Protesters Voice Outrage Over Extell's 'Building From Hell,' Coming to the LES," Bedford + Bowery, April 28, 2015, <https://bedfordandbowery.com/2015/04/protesters-express-outrage-over-extells-building-from-hell-coming-to-the-les/>.

Procedure (ULURP), which would have assessed “the impacts of any change or variance in zoning that’s intended to give all affected parties a chance to weigh in.”¹⁰

Community members were affronted by this lack of input on a project that would likely destroy their historic neighborhood, and even before the CPC’s decision, had organized protests and rallies after the 2012 destruction of Pathmark. In late 2017, five years later, GOLES and CAAAV began their mission to propose a rezoning of the Two Bridges area, which would restrict building height in addition to requiring commitment to affordable housing, anti-harassment policies, and special permits for commercial businesses.¹¹ Although community leaders such as Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, City Council Member Margaret Chin, and City Council Speaker Corey Johnson were all initially hesitant to collaborate with these LES-based groups, they eventually all cosigned proposals and lawsuits, all of which challenge the CPC’s decision, one of which hinged on its lack of ULURP-certification, and the other two regarding zoning and environmental concerns.¹²

Once the building was actually developed, tensions only rose. One Manhattan Square’s developers, Extell, tried to ameliorate the situation by creating an affordable 13-story building next door, despite previous criticism regarding its usage of “poor doors.” Extell had previously come under fire for having its affordable-unit tenants use a separate entrance within luxury towers, and while having a separate building for these units is marginally better, this plays into the economic segregation that many Two Bridges residents have said they experience.¹³ This

¹⁰Karrie Jacobs, “A Tale of Two Bridges,” Curbed NY (Curbed NY, September 25, 2019), <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/9/25/20878228/lower-east-side-two-bridges-nyc-zoning-development>.

¹¹Jackson Rollings, “Will a Rezoning Proposal Stop the Construction of the Two Bridges Towers?,” The Architect’s Newspaper, September 27, 2017, <https://www.archpaper.com/2017/09/community-groups-rezoning-two-bridges-towers/>.

¹²Caroline Spivack, “Inside the Legal Fight for Two Bridges Towers,” Curbed NY (Curbed NY, June 7, 2019), <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/6/7/18654096/nyc-two-bridges-towers-legal-fight-lawsuits-court>.

¹³Shelby Welinder, “Opinion: City Has Gone from Allowing 'Poor Doors' to Permitting 'Poor Buildings,’” City Limits, November 4, 2019, <https://citylimits.org/2019/11/04/opinion-city-has-gone-from-allowing-poor-doors-to-permitting-poor-buildings/>.

struggle harkens back to what many in NYCHA housing felt when federally-subsidized urban renewal was first beginning, and the difference between housing projects such as Smith and Rutgers Housing, which are comprised of mostly black and Hispanic residents, and Knickerbocker Village, which was devised for middle-class white residents, is apparent in terms of upkeep. In some ways, certain housing projects are just city and federally subsidized poor doors, illuminating the way that separate and unequal standards of living persist throughout the United States, even after all this time. Although developers may claim that “this is the price to be paid for integrating neighborhoods,” they are easily combated by housing advocates who “refute that this form of financial apartheid is an affront to American values and rights, uprooting the general sense of community and furthering the wealth gap within an already alarmingly gentrified city.”¹⁴

To add insult to injury, One Manhattan Square’s imposition on the neighborhood seems even more necessary by its failure to fill its units. Even before the COVID-19 crisis decimated Manhattan’s housing market, Extell, the building management company behind the tower had begun offering subsidies for up to 10 years of common rental charges in order to incentivize possible tenants.¹⁵ The \$3000 that some of these more affluent tenants would save is equivalent to a couple of months rent for many residents in nearby subsidized-housing, and would likely make a greater impact there. In order to instill more equity into a neighborhood that it is actively segregating, investing into community organizations, structures, and amenities may be a better way for Extell to spend this money it is so readily willing to write off. Despite this veritable failure to fill apartments it still has not lapsed on its plans to build similar buildings in the

¹⁴*Ibid*

¹⁵ “Desperate Extell Offers to Waive up to 10 Years of Common Charges at One Manhattan Square,” Bowery Boogie, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.boweryboogie.com/2019/04/desperate-extell-offers-to-waive-up-to-10-years-of-common-charges-at-on-e-manhattan-square/>.

surrounding area. In a city whose housing crisis has only been exacerbated by COVID, this continual development of unaffordable and inaccessible housing seems ridiculous. But even worse, many in the Two Bridges surrounding area were dependent on pandemic-relief measures such as the Tenant Safe Harbor Act and the eviction moratorium to remain housed¹⁶, showing how truly out of touch these corporations are with the communities they are invading.

This conflict is only one example of growing gentrification in an affordable neighborhood, but emphasizes the way that both federally and privately subsidized housing often fails to integrate neighborhoods. The work which falls on community groups, which are often led by the marginalized, working and middle-class residents of their neighborhoods is reflective of how marginalized groups are constantly fighting for equal access to amenities that they have been systematically denied. Especially during the COVID crisis, we are seeing inequity in not only spread, but in treatment, and access to medical care as a whole. Community action is important and should be celebrated, but creating properly integrated communities should be a municipal and federal responsibility, not a residential one.

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¹⁶ i_beebe, "How COVID-19 Has Highlighted Housing Issues," City & State NY, February 11, 2021, <https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/excelsior-newsletter/how-covid-19-has-highlighted-housing-issues.html>.

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