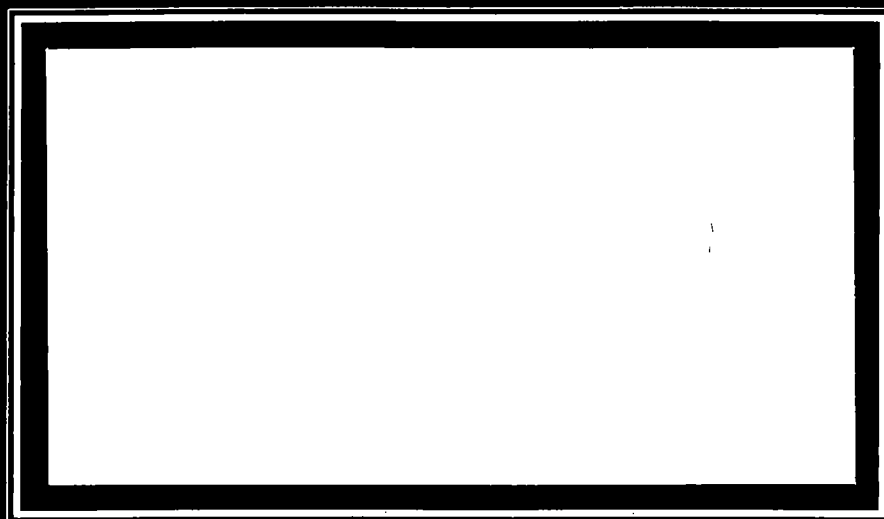


A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY ACTION



The Communitarian
NETWORK

2130 H STREET NW • SUITE 714J • WASHINGTON, DC 20052
202.994.7997 • 202.994.1606 FAX • COMNET@UNIX1.CIRC.GWU.EDU

We are publishing these cases for the purpose of providing fine-grain, deliberately descriptive studies, for class discussions in the case study tradition, for those who already are in the service of their community and those who seek to join, and for all other interested members of the community. No attempt is being made here to conduct formal social-science-like evaluations or overlay the cases with analytical concepts and discussions. The cases are meant to provide material for thought, insight, and discussion for those who read them. We would greatly appreciate hearing from you if you have found these materials of service and to what purpose they were used.

The Communitarian Network is a coalition of individuals and organizations who have come together to shore up the moral, social, and political environment. We hold that strong rights presume strong responsibilities. The Communitarian Network actively seeks to share these ideas with others and advance their implementation.

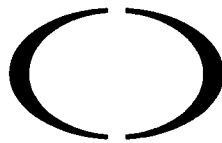
We urge you not to duplicate this case study in order to enable us to be able to provide for authors to prepare more such cases.

Please refer to the end of this document for information about other position papers, publications, and memberships available from The Communitarian Network.

THE HIGH-RISE VILLAGE:

Public Housing Creates A Community in Harlem

MICHAEL D'ANTONIO



**The Communitarian
NETWORK**

2130 H STREET NW • SUITE 714J • WASHINGTON, DC 20052
202.994.7997 • 202.994.1606 FAX • COMNET@UNIX1.CIRC.GWU.EDU

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The High-Rise Village	1
A Social Experiment	5
Partners Build a Community	7
Democracy, Security, Free Speech, Beauty	11
Community Self-Governance	13
Law and Order in the Gardens	16
Occasional Conflict	17
The Race Issue	19
Facing the Future	20
Community Can Be Created	23
Sources	25
Acknowledgments	27
The Communitarian Network	28

THE HIGH-RISE VILLAGE

On a below-zero winter night, 120 residents of a New York City housing complex slip-slide down Broadway to an auditorium at the Jewish Theological Seminary. There they spend two hours debating the merits of a proposal offered by the apartment project's board of directors. At times the debate grows heated. Some of the questions are posed in the tone of accusation. Others are as icy-cold as the wind that howls outside.

"These are just estimates you are giving us! What about practical experience?" asks one older man.

"We are supposed to be a cooperative where we all trust and share," pleads a middle-aged woman in a cloth coat. "But if a small percentage of the people are abusing their privileges, then shouldn't we do something about it?"

"There's a lot of facts missing from your presentation," sniffs an older African-American man in a business suit. "How can we make a good judgment when you are telling us about all the benefits, but none of the costs?"

The tough questions and skeptical poses struck by many of the residents suggest that the co-op tenants of the public housing project called Morningside Gardens—part of a Harlem neighborhood—are considering a dramatic, even threatening proposal. In fact, they are only trying to decide whether to convert their buildings to a modern electrical system that will meter the power used by individual apartments.

The debate is intense because very little happens at Morningside Gardens without an extended public discussion and the very active participation of the residents. Explains complex manager Elaine Weiss, "People here are very involved. They expect to be consulted on everything that happens." Weiss, who has worked in public housing for more than a decade, adds that "if we don't get some kind of consensus, we don't move forward."

Indeed, at a time when many communities seem to be drowning in apathy and many public apartment projects are disintegrating amidst crime and decay, Morningside Gardens defies the accepted wisdom about public housing. As the community meeting illustrated, many people at Morningside Gardens identify strongly with their community. They know their neighbors. They participate in making great and small decisions alike. They take pride in the six tall brick buildings and rolling gardens that occupy the city block in Harlem bounded by Amsterdam Avenue, Broadway, and LaSalle and 123rd Streets. Crime is virtually nonexistent here. Social clubs and committee meetings fill the calendar. A careful examination of life at Morningside Gardens shows that this small community thrives in large measure because its citizens have held to the ideals and policies of the project's founders who sought 40 years ago to create a stable, middle class housing project in one of the city's poorest areas.

These values are reflected in the price controls that have kept apartments at the Gardens affordable for the middle class. Under the rules of the government program used to finance the development, apartment owners were barred from reaping a substantial profit on their investments. In exchange, the apartment complex received tax abatements and subsidized mortgage financing. Under this system, prices were kept artificially low even through boom periods in the New York real estate market. As a result, apartments at the Gardens remain among the least expensive in New York City. In late 1993 the shares for a two-bedroom co-op cost about \$45,000 and monthly charges were about \$600. Both the share price and the monthly charges were far below market rates. The program that funded the Morningside development was intended to

create stable, affordable housing that would not be affected by real estate speculation or inflation. In the case of Morningside Gardens, it has worked. With an apartment turnover rate below 5 percent a year, the Gardens is a paragon of stability.

“Friends told me about it and after I came here a couple of times I knew I wanted to move here,” explains Geraldine Donovan, a 44 year-old who has had an apartment at Morningside Gardens since 1974. “It’s affordable, safe, the people are nice. People come and they stay here their entire lives. Why would they want to leave?”

Morningside Gardens is an attractive place. The waiting list for apartments is 400 names long. People want to live here because it is safe, racially mixed, and vibrant. (The project’s management office estimates that about 40 percent of the residents are white, 30 percent are African-American, and the rest are from other racial groups.) Residents produce plays, attend art workshops, and participate in a variety of social activities. Notices tacked to the bulletin board in the manager’s office advertise classes in yoga, quilting, and African dance. An on-site senior citizens center bustles with activities. Children are served by a day care center/nursery school, and teens can participate in cultural activities and clubs.

The activities, the well-kept grounds, and the moderate prices all make the Gardens appealing. Applicants will wait for years to move in and then celebrate the contract signing. On a recent afternoon a middle-aged Asian-American woman waited patiently in the lobby of the manager’s office as her lease and other papers were prepared. When a secretary at last brought them out, she signed her name carefully, checking each paper to make sure she hasn’t missed anything. When she finished, the secretary took her hand.

“Congratulations are in order,” she said.

“I guess they are,” the new resident answered with a grin.

It may be difficult for many Americans to imagine a tenant celebrating public housing. In the past 20 years political critics have described government housing programs as uniformly disastrous. In the public mind, urban housing projects have become associated with drug dealers, welfare cheaters, and gang bangers. These stereotypes have often been based on reality. In many cities public housing projects built in the 1960s and '70s have decayed into rundown, violence-plagued war zones.

Experts who have studied these tragic communities blame a series of factors. As John Atlas and Peter Drier point out in “From Projects to Communities: How to Restore Public Housing” (*American Prospect*, Summer 1992), tenant selection policies have tended to create concentrations of poor families in high-rise, urban public housing. Second, Atlas and Drier note, inadequate public safety efforts open a door to crime, making many of these projects nearly “unlivable.” They also blame the stigmatizing ugliness of many high-rise projects for creating a dispiriting environment.

Morningside Gardens offers hope to those who would break the cycle of decay that afflicts public housing. Here, a collection of buildings has become a true community. The residents say their success is due, in part, to the special mix of people—mostly middle and lower-middle income, according to managers of the complex—who live in the Gardens. But in dozens of interviews, residents said they believe that policies followed in their community—co-operative ownership of the apartments, a strict resident selection process, grassroots decision making, a strong public safety program—could foster healthy public housing communities elsewhere.

The key to understanding the Garden's success is knowing that it didn't happen by accident. From its inception, this particular housing project has been a deliberate social experiment. Like steadfast parents who are determined to turn their children into good citizens, the founders of Morningside Gardens promoted a specific set of values that are evident in the sense of responsibility residents can bring to such a minor matter as electric meters. From the beginning, these values made Morningside Gardens different, and they have helped nurture the community's success.

A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

“Doesn't a neighborhood get into your character after a while? I would like to see a generation that came out of good housing.”

— Rev. George B. Ford, 1950

Speaking in 1950, Father George B. Ford of Corpus Christi Church expressed the concerns of a group of city leaders who headed institutions that shared a neighborhood called Morningside Heights, on the border of a section of Harlem known as the Valley. Most of these institutions were churches and schools, among them Father Ford's parish, Columbia University, Barnard College, the Julliard School, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and International House, a center for foreign students. Father Ford and the others worried about a host of social problems—most especially crime and racial tension—that seemed to flow out of the crowded tenements in the Valley. At the time, the *New York Times* described the area as “one of the worst slum areas of the country” and a “human wasteland.” As the neighborhood declined, college and church staff found it increasingly difficult to obtain safe, affordable housing near their jobs. Slowly, the institutions were becoming isolated from their surroundings.

The ironic juxtaposition of crime and poverty next to a remarkable collection of prestigious religious and academic institutions was not lost on Father Ford and his colleagues. Four years earlier, in 1946, International House had hired a consultant from the University of Chicago to survey the problem. Wilbur C. Munnecke noted that the great institutions had ignored the surrounding community even as it declined. In a *Times* report he called for a “total approach” to redevelopment that would be led by the schools and churches but include people from the community. The wealthy institutions would provide the capital and expertise to get the job started. Within a year a nonprofit corporation—Morningside Heights Inc.—was founded to begin this work. Its president was David Rockefeller.

From the beginning, Rockefeller and the board of Morningside Heights Inc. intended to improve both the physical condition and the spirit of the community that flanked Columbia and the other institutions. This would require better housing, of course, but the leaders also wanted to improve the relationship between the lofty institutions and the neighborhood of the Valley. The Morningside Gardens housing project offered an opportunity to meet both of these goals. The colleges and church organizations would not just sponsor the development. They would also reserve some of the apartments for their staffers. At last, the institutions and the people who lived nearby would truly be neighbors.

In bringing the institutions and churches together with the neighborhood, Rockefeller and his board also sought to achieve a third aim—racial integration. It is clear, from the recollections of original tenants, that integration was one of the overarching goals of those who planned the Gardens development. But in the social atmosphere of the 1950s, when much of the country was still rigidly segregated, this one aspect of the plan was not widely discussed. Integration is not mentioned in the minutes of the board meetings, nor is it covered in newspaper accounts of the time. But it was clear to the pioneering tenants who would occupy the apart-

ments that Morningside Gardens was a kind of social experiment, a place where all kinds of people would live together in a way that had not been seen in New York.

“In the 1950s, before Morningside Gardens, there really was no integrated housing in New York City and there weren’t many places for an interracial couple to look for an apartment,” recalls Phyllis Johnson, a white woman whose husband John is African-American. The Johnsons were among the first to move into the Gardens in 1957. They are both now in their sixties. “Here people were going to try to live together, make friends across racial and economic lines. It was supposed to be something new.”

PARTNERS BUILD A COMMUNITY

“...seeing what benefits could come to the whole community, the institutions overcame the inertia which had existed and banded together to help make over the community as it should be.”

—David Rockefeller, 1950

The birth of Morningside Gardens was not without complications. Beginning with the vision of a project that would house both institution staff and local residents, Morningside Heights Inc. then conducted a series of studies to find the best sight and the right design. This work was helped by several community advisory boards, which sought that the voices of the people who lived in the area would be heard. As the director of a neighborhood community center said at the time, “We need to involve people, get them together mixing freely, taking surveys themselves in this way, then keeping them interested in community councils and projects. Soon they’ll be taking responsibility for the whole community.”

The redevelopment effort included campaigns to spruce up storefronts, improve local schools, and boost the spirit of the neighborhood. A businessman’s association was formed and

petitioned city officials for better police and sanitation services. But the centerpiece of the program, and the key to its success, was the promise of better housing. In 1950 the Valley was an overcrowded, dangerous place with 60,000 people jammed into about one-half of a square mile. Once-attractive homes had been converted to boarding houses. In some buildings it was easy to find six or eight persons living in a single room. Laundry was strung across alleys. Children played in the Broadway traffic beneath the clattering trains of the elevated subway line.

The site chosen for the project, one long block between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, was close to the institutions on the Heights and one of the most overcrowded sections of the Valley. Architects drew plans for six 21-story buildings that would contain just under 1,000 apartments, enough space for about 3,500 residents. There was also room for a nursery school, several stores, and a parking garage. The cost of construction was estimated to be \$12.5 million. Co-op shares would cost about \$2,500 per apartment, and rents—covering maintenance, utilities and other expenses—averaged \$21 a month.

As soon as the project was announced, the people who lived on the site began to fear the trauma of relocation. In the spring of 1952 about 100 of these residents crowded the hall of the Board of Estimates and shouted their objections to a project they believed would be “reserved for Columbia University professors.” (In fact, less than 20 percent of the apartments were reserved for professionals from Columbia and the other institutions, the rest would go to local citizens.) The opponents also worried that the program to relocate them would be inadequate. Some were so angry and insistent that they were forcibly removed from the hall. The Board of Estimates then approved a zoning change that allowed the project to go forward.

With the support of Rockefeller, the institutions, and the New York City government, the Morningside project moved ahead quickly. In many ways, the project was a model for the

way that government agencies can work together to aid a community. Most of the decision making power remained with local authorities, but the locals could never have seen the project through without government aid. The 10-acre site was acquired and cleared with funds provided by the federal government through the National Housing Act of 1949. Low-cost financing for construction came through New York State, which had created programs to help non-profit corporations build affordable housing. Finally, the city provided tax relief that would last 25 years. The combination of grants, tax abatement, and low-cost construction financing meant that Morningside Gardens would pay for itself through the sale of co-op shares and the monthly rents paid by tenant/co-operators.

Government involvement also put some backbone into the founders' plans for a racially diverse community. Funding was provided on the condition, written into state law, that space in the residential or commercial portions be let without consideration of "race, color or creed."

As the project progressed, the board of the Morningside Heights Inc. struggled to set policies that would nurture the community they hoped to create. At one meeting in February 1954, board member Lawrence Orton talked about the kind of people the project should attract. "Middle income and lower-middle income families," were targeted, because they were viewed as the most stable. A minimum income level was established—\$3,500 per year—rather than a maximum. This meant that anyone who moved into the complex would have the money to pay for shares and rent. And by avoiding a cutoff, or maximum allowed income (many of today's housing projects set such maximums), the board encouraged people with higher incomes to become part of the community as well.

In January 1955, as the apartment buildings rose from the cleared site, the board discussed the difference between selling co-op shares and offering people the chance to actually buy specific apartments. (Condominiums are sold this way.) They chose the co-op approach in

order to encourage people to think of themselves as co-owners of the entire project, rather than isolated property holders. “The identification of tenant-owners with the overall project, rather than a single apartment, tends to shift accountability,” noted one board member.

These policies were all designed to create a new kind of housing project where residents would feel committed to the success of the entire community. (Toward that end, plans for a private school were rejected in favor of encouraging families to use the local public school.) This effort to create a genuinely cooperative housing complex with a racially diverse population qualified Morningside Gardens as a true social experiment. The board, which was dominated by intellectuals from the institutions of the Heights, saw in Morningside Gardens “the hope for urban America.”

As construction of the apartment towers neared completion, prospective tenants were screened to weed out “credit risks” and “moral risks.” Morningside officials directed the office workers who screen applications to keep track of the makeup of the tenant community. They knew that about half the people making applications fell into a middle-income salary range of between \$5,000 and \$10,000. About one-quarter earned below the \$5,000 mark and 20 percent made more than \$10,000. This spread of incomes, and the wide diversity of racial and ethnic groups represented among the applicants, suggested that Morningside could easily meet its goals for diversity.

Some board members, however, were nonetheless concerned to make black residents of the Valley feel welcomed at Morningside Gardens. They made a special effort to encourage prominent black New Yorkers to sign up for apartments in the towers that rose along Broadway. One of those recruited was a civil rights lawyer named Thurgood Marshall.

DEMOCRACY, SECURITY, FREE SPEECH, BEAUTY

“We weren’t all like pilgrims, with pre-set values. We came for different reasons. Some for the diversity. Others because it was so affordable. But after you got here you looked around and said, ‘Hey, this looks like a really interesting place.’”

—Beatrice Gottlieb, 68, 1994 interview

The people who moved in just as Morningside Gardens was completed recall vividly the muddy grounds, elevators crammed with household effects, and the unusual experience—especially considering that the year was 1957—of meeting neighbors of all different races, religious backgrounds and national origins. Many, if not most, had arrived knowing that Morningside was to be an experiment in diversity, but others had simply been attracted to the spacious new apartments and the low prices. (The apartments were designed to be airy and well lit, and many came with balconies that overlooked the Hudson River to the west.)

“I came here with no real conception of the integration aspect,” explains Mazie Mendes, who was one of the first settlers. A more typical resident than the better-known lawyers and professors, she came to the Gardens for some very practical reasons. “I came here because of a cousin who worked at Columbia and told me about this lovely place to live.”

Mrs. Mendes recalls that she was soon impressed by the ease with which people of all different backgrounds came together. Looking back, she traces the stability of the community to the tenant selection committee, which reviewed and either approved or rejected applicants for apartments, and to policies that seemed to encourage the middle class to come to Morningside Gardens. With similar education levels and incomes, says Mrs. Mendes, the tenants had enough in common that racial differences faded in importance. “We all felt like we were at the same level. It was pretty easy for us to get along.”

The Johnsons, she white and he African-American, remember the early days a little differently. Mrs. Johnson recalled being concerned about how people would get along in a complex with a mixed racial composition. “Those initial years were see-saw, I think,” added Mrs. Johnson. She recalled that many blacks were reluctant to move into the complex “and many whites were reluctant too. But it helped that many of the black people were highly professional, successful people. Gradually we learned that we were more alike than different and we came to live together pretty comfortably.”

The community also benefited from the number of talented and highly educated professors and staff members who worked at the institutions on the Heights and made the Gardens their home. Encouraged by an active recruitment campaign, these professionals brought a worldliness and even intellectual excitement to the community. They helped found the workshops for artists, potters, actors, and photographers that operate to this day. Besides Thurgood Marshall, the notables who lived at Morningside in the early years included bestselling novelist Robert Crichton and Julliard String Quartet founder Robert Mann.

“These people all had good, solid values that went beyond self-interest. Some of it may have been because some were affiliated with the religious institutions in the area,” explains George Bundy Smith, an African-American Gardens resident and a New York State judge. “I had grown up in the segregated South. I had heard that Morningside was place where I would have no trouble, racially, getting in. It was true. These were people who were easy to get along with. The white people there supported black aspirations.”

Though the early tenants may have gotten along, it was not without some conflict. Residents argued about noisy elevators, hall lighting, and where children could, or could not play outside. (A group of mothers who campaigned for play areas were opposed by residents who

considered them overzealous. A compromise established play areas and quiet, 'no-playing' sections of the property.)

At many points in their community's short history, the people of Morningside Gardens have seized the initiative, creating their own solutions to the community's problems rather than relying on the professional managers hired to run the buildings or on the board of directors. They founded a co-op supermarket, a credit union, and a workshop for volunteers to use while building community projects such as park benches and playgrounds. A Garden Committee was established to oversee the lushly landscaped property. Early on, tenants decided to invest heavily in the gardens, hoping that the natural beauty would be a positive influence on their community. It has been. On any spring day, hundreds of area residents will stroll through the gardens, appreciating dozens of species of trees and flowers. The money invested in landscaping—the bill for labor and supplies now tops \$100,000 a year—has provided the complex with beauty and tranquility, two assets that are rare in any urban environment and virtually nonexistent at high-rise public housing projects.

COMMUNITY SELF-GOVERNANCE

Although the clubs and committees contributed to the quality of life in the project, the most important institution created by the residents is the Morningside Gardens Tenant-Co-operators Committee (MGTCC), which brought small-scale democracy to the project. The MGTCC provided a forum for problems to be discussed and a mechanism for bringing them to the board of directors and the project's managers.

The committee, which still functions today, was designed to give residents easy access to power. Under the committee's rules, each floor of each building elects a representative. The

floor reps hold regular meetings—sometimes weekly—where residents talk about problems or present ways to improve life in the community. The building floor reps also select three of their number to be delegates to the MGTCC. These delegates make up the committee that brings problems and suggestions to the officials who actually run the project day-to-day.

The second naturally occurring institution that proved vital to the success of the Morningside Gardens community was a newsletter called the *Morningside News*. Founded in the first few months of Morningside Garden's existence, it has been published irregularly ever since. Residents invariably mention the newsletter as one of the keys to making the housing project something more than an address. The *News* has recorded the life of the community, writing its history, recording births and deaths, creating shared stories, and binding people together.

Because it has always operated independent of the board of directors, the *News* has been a community paper, not a mouthpiece for administrators or members of the board. Many of its columns have been taken up with helpful advice for the residents. Articles ranged from "How to Hang Wallpaper" to tips on "Turtle Tending." But in between the homey bits and pieces, the *News* has also been the forum for lively community debates on controversies ranging from co-op finances to squirrels.

Whenever squirrels are mentioned, older residents are likely to smile. Since the very beginning of the life of the complex, the squirrels that have inhabited the grounds have been a source of constant squabbling. One group of citizens finds them a nuisance and a threat both to automobiles and to public health. Another faction defends the squirrels as amusing, harmless reminders of a natural world that clings tenaciously to life in an urban setting. In May 1991, resident Norma Varga complained, "Why do the same squirrel haters keep writing the same letters over and over again? Why do other projects in the city enjoy their squirrels without

feeling the need to trap and murder them?” The squirrel controversy was resolved with a classic Gardens compromise. Trappers were hired to relocate a portion of the furry population to rural areas.

While the squirrel debate may be amusing, it illustrates the value that the community places on open discussion and a free press. And indeed, over the years the *Morningside Gardens News* has been a constant guardian and promoter of many community values. It has exhorted people to serve on committees covering everything from noise control to finances, run for the board of directors, and vote in elections. Editorials in the *News* have reinforced the co-op spirit that binds people together. “We all have a direct financial interest in our development,” a December 1958 editorial declared. “Attend floor meetings! Voice opinions! Volunteer! Respect property!”

Incorporating the young into the life of the community has been a major concern of Morningside Gardens. In October 1958, resident Martin Kaplinsky wrote an open letter that reflected on some teenagers who seemed adrift. “These children now regard Morningside Gardens with indifference or worse, hostility, where once they viewed it as ‘their place.’ How can we help these children regain their sense of belonging?”

Over the years, children have been instilled with a sense of community through various programs and activities. An on-site nursery school provides day care and early education. Recreation programs and after-school tutoring have helped older kids. Teens have also been involved in special maintenance and cleanup projects, and received public praise. All of this seems to extend the sense of ownership and community to the younger generation.

The *Morningside Gardens News* has also chronicled the lives of the people in the Gardens. From birth announcements to death notices, it has recorded both the important and the

mundane. A typical example of this kind of hometown news appeared in the October 1958 issue in a regular column called “Over the Garden Gate.”

LAW AND ORDER IN THE GARDENS

“One of our most active members is Mr. Thurgood Marshall, building VI, who serves as a full-time lawyer for the NAACP. Mr. Marshall has pleased many cases before the Supreme Court, most of which he has won.”

—*Morningside Gardens News*

Public safety and good citizenship have been high priorities since the Gardens opened. Early in the community’s life committees drafted rules of behavior—for children, teens, and neighbors—which were approved by the board, published, and given to all tenants. From time to time the rules have been updated and amended. With the rules clearly stated, residents have a framework for peaceful coexistence. They know how long they are allowed to sublet apartments (15 months) and whether they are allowed to shake a dust mop on their balconies (they aren’t).

Mindful of the relatively high crime rate in Harlem, Morningside Gardens maintains its own security force. Even though violent crime has increased in the streets surrounding the Gardens, the security officers who serve the complex have been able to limit crime in the Gardens enough that residents say they feel safe. Officers are posted in a plexiglass-walled stations. They also patrol buildings and grounds. They offer advice on staying safe at home and on the street. They escort residents to and from subway stations. And they aid outsiders who are on the grounds, or who come to them from the neighborhood seeking assistance. “We do not want to become an island apart and could not, in any case,” states the 1971 Morningside Gardens Handbook for residents. “Our greatest security is to be found in the respect and goodwill of our neighbors.”

OCCASIONAL CONFLICT

Goodwill has not always reigned in this community. On occasions, conflict and hatred have flared. In the mid-1970s, racist and anti-Semitic graffiti was discovered on the doors of several residents' apartments, recalls Mary Thompson, an original settler who, at age 80, remains active in the Gardens. "We have had a minimum of this kind of problem, but it does happen and when it does, we deal with it."

The community dealt with the graffiti attacks in a very open, yet informal way. First neighbors helped each other remove the paint. Then floor meetings were held so that residents could vent their emotions. Anger, fear, and outrage poured out of those who spoke, recalls Thompson. "If the person who did it lived in our community, he knew that we weren't going to put up with any more," she explains. "That was expressed very forcefully and agreed to by everyone." No further incidents occurred. Thompson credits the community's response, and increased patrols by the Morningside Gardens security officers.

The residents of Morningside Community have always been willing to pay the cost of security through their monthly service fees. In November 1962, the *News* published a front-page article reminding residents that even though the project spent \$40,000 a year on security officers, "we must be ever alert." Over the years the security budget has risen to \$100,000 dollars and the number of full-time patrolling officers has increased to 18. They cover the complex 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Improvements such as a door-buzzer system and security video cameras for the building lobbies have been added. These security devices and the staff of private guards have provided peace of mind to a resident population that has aged along with the project.

“People who live here know they are safe because of the security staff,” explains Clara Shapiro, an 80-year-old original Morningside Gardens settler who feels so confident in the security staff that she will venture out alone even though her age and slowed step would otherwise make her feel vulnerable.

“In the 1950s, and early ’60s, Harlem itself wasn’t scary,” she recalls on a morning when sun poured through the windows of her apartment. “There were restaurants and shops we went to all the time. But that started to change.” In 1968 Ms. Shapiro had her bag snatched as she walked on a nearby street. The incident itself was bothersome. But she was more disturbed that none of the people who were standing nearby moved to help her. As a white woman, she knew that the ease she once felt in the mainly African-American community was gone. Racial tensions had increased so far that she, as a white woman, could not depend on bystanders for help. “Something was changing in that environment,” she recalls. “You just knew it.”

This change did not affect Morningside Gardens. Through the turbulent 1960s, Blacks, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, and others continued to live together inside the Gardens. “There was nothing like the ‘white flight’ that other parts of the city experienced, with white people leaving for the suburbs,” adds Ms. Shapiro. “People were committed to living here. They liked the urban life-style. They felt safe. This was their home. There was no reason to flee.”

By the early 1970s, some of the children of the first group of settlers were filing applications to get their own apartments. Their ties to the community were so strong that they wanted to stay. Today it is not uncommon to find two, and even three generations of a single family living in Morningside Gardens. These families enjoy the support of relatives and friends who are near enough to help with children or run errands for the elders.

George Bundy Smith, the state judge who calls the Gardens home, is proud to say his son George, a 28-year-old television reporter in New York City, is one of the second generation on the waiting list for an apartment. At least in part, Smith credits Morningside Gardens with helping young George survive and thrive. "My son has seen examples of successful people of all races," said Judge Smith. "He saw that people can get success by hard work, no matter where they come from. That has been good. He has also grown up with no racial animosity whatsoever. I think Morningside Gardens has had a lot to do with that. It's a place where a child gets a pretty good idea of the diversity of the world and what's possible for them. They see successful people of all groups side by side. They are role models."

THE RACE ISSUE

The relative racial harmony prized by Judge Smith did not happen by accident. From the beginning, when board members sought out black settlers, the community was designed as a model of integration. Many residents believe that the Tenant Selection Committee, a elected group that screens applicants, enforced an informal quota system to keep the racial balance. But people who have served on the committee say they have never spoken about the race of a tenant applicant or the racial makeup of the complex.

"The balance has remained about the same because that's who applies to live here," says Mary Thompson, a former committee member. "It has just sort of happened naturally. I can't explain it any other way."

One cannot be certain that over the years, Morningside Gardens maintained its racial mix without some intervention by the Tenant Selection Committee. Many residents believe the committee informally monitored the racial composition and kept it level, at 40 percent white,

30 percent black, and the rest from other racial groups. But this kind of balancing act was barred in 1988 by the resolution of a lawsuit filed by the Reagan administration against Starrett City, a Brooklyn housing complex that enforced racial quotas. The Starrett decision found that such quotas discriminate against minority applicants. The ruling, upheld by the Supreme Court, effectively ended all formal and informal race-based tenant policies in public housing.

Because it is a stable community with very little apartment turnover, it would take many years for the racial composition to change at Morningside Gardens. The apartment complex manager reports that even in the years since the Starrett decision, new tenants have fallen, roughly, into the forty-thirty-twenty mix. “It’s hard to say why,” adds Elaine Weiss. “But I do think it is natural selection. All kinds of people want to live here and the mix is pretty much the same as when they started.”

FACING THE FUTURE

“Someone said it was a battle between the old socialists and the yuppie scum. I don’t think it was that clear a division along age lines. It was more a difference in values.”

—Original Gardens settler Mary Thompson, 1994 interview

The homegrown institutions that developed in the Garden’s early years—the MGTCC and the *News*—have provided forums for identifying and then adapting to the kinds of changes that confront any community. In recent years the people of this project have also relied on a third institution, Morningside Retirement and Health Services (MRHS), to deal with their most significant challenge: a rapidly aging population. Because apartment turnover is very low, the population of the Gardens has grown older with the project. Today, about 70 percent of the residents are over age 62. (This makes the Gardens what the government calls a NORC, or

naturally occurring retirement community.) As they struggle to remain active and live independently, these aging Gardens residents require new and different kinds of support.

MRHS helps older residents continue to live at home. The center arranges for home-care services for the sick, provides counseling on insurance, financial and legal matters, and even helps with shopping for those who have trouble getting around. MRHS is also a social center for the aging residents of the Gardens. It offers holiday parties, weekly get-togethers and such diverse activities as music therapy, knitting circles, weekend movies, and forums run by the Feminist Issues Group.

Most importantly, MRHS gives residents—especially older retirees—an opportunity to remain active by serving their own community. While Morningside Gardens does provide free space, MRHS depends on donations from residents and government grants to fund its \$100,000 annual budget. Almost all of the services are provided by the residents themselves. At the end of 1993, more than 120 people were frequent volunteers. Almost all were older people serving their peers.

But even as the original members of the community band together to maintain their way of life, they worry about who will sustain Morningside Gardens when they are gone. Younger residents are beginning to take on responsibilities, serving on boards and committees. But a dramatic shift in the project's financial structure has made the future uncertain. In late 1993, as city tax abatements expired, residents had an opportunity to reorganize. As the law allowed, they voted to become a private corporation. The tax abatement was lost and, most significantly, the price for co-op shares, while still controlled, was allowed to float to near-market value. This meant that shares for a three-bedroom apartment that cost about \$45,000 in 1993, would cost \$126,000 in 1994.

Older residents, who purchased their co-op shares for as little as \$6,000 in the 1950s, stand to reap the greatest financial benefit from the reorganization. They could take profits in excess of \$100,000 and retire in warmer climes. But, perhaps not surprisingly, many older residents were among the most resistant to the change. They argued that the success of the Gardens had come, in part, because no one expected to get rich by speculating on the value of the real estate. For more than a year, they fought to preserve the low-cost share structure that keeps the door at Morningside gardens open to the middle class.

“Someone said it was a battle between the old socialists and the yuppie scum,” laughs 80-year-old original settler Mary Thompson. “I don’t think it was that clear a division along age lines. It was more a difference in values. But I do think some people saw dollar signs in their eyes and decided to grab for it. Others felt this was middle class public housing at the start and it was never intended that people make a lot of money on their shares. We all paid the same price and came in by luck of the draw. Now the high prices could lock out the middle-income families who were the center of the community in the first place.” Thompson fears the values of the co-op are changing. “We were willing to submerge self-interest for the benefit of the whole group. Maybe I was too idealistic. I thought people would continue to want that.”

Those who backed the reorganization do not believe the basic values of the community will change. Ronald Huff, president of the co-op boards, has said the new financial arrangement will increase the value of the project and allow the board to fund long-overdue maintenance without pricing middle-income families out. With prices in the low \$100s, apartments at the Gardens would be inexpensive compared with others in Manhattan. The managers of the complex believe the higher share prices will motivate about 15 percent of the tenants to cash in and relocate by mid-1995. This means that as the financial picture changes, so will the human character of the community change.

While some older residents predict the demise of community spirit, there are some younger ones who regard themselves as keepers-of-the-flame. “The old guard is what made this community what it is, and they are going to be gone eventually,” admits Geraldine Donovan who, at age 40, is one of the younger members of the board of directors. “The number of people associated with the institutions, the churches, and colleges is also going down. I am committed to the kind of community they built here, and there are others who feel the same way. But I am scared about what will happen when this becomes like a private co-op.”

COMMUNITY CAN BE CREATED

The Gardens project has had a positive impact on the larger Harlem community, according to Terry Williams, a longtime Harlem resident and author of several books about the Harlem community, including *The Uptown Kids: Hope and Struggles in the Projects* (Putnam, 1993). Williams notes that Morningside Garden’s neighbors enjoy walking amidst the flowers and trees. They have benefited from the commercial establishments that are part of the project, and even participate in some of the social activities. But, most importantly, the Gardens has stood as an example of security, stability, and achievement.

“The place provides a psychological lift for an area that needs it,” adds Williams. He says that racial tensions are low, and older residents of the Gardens are safe walking the streets because the community has won the respect of Harlem. “The people there—including whites—are accepted because they are staying put, making a commitment. The guards, the manicured grounds. All of that is very attractive and respected.”

In the decades since the first tenants moved in, Morningside Gardens has helped stop the physical decline of the community closest to Columbia University and the other institu-

tions. It has also offered a step up the social ladder for area residents. "Moving into a co-op like that is considered a move up," concludes Williams. "It is a place that middle class people want to get into."

At the MRHS center, 15 Morningside Gardens residents recently spent a couple of hours talking about their community. They agreed with Tomoe Asai, a Japanese-American resident who said that she will not move away, though she is 76 and relatives would love to have her in Hawaii, because the Gardens has become her village. "I do not go to Hawaii not because I want to stay in New York City," she said, "but because I want to stay here, with the people at Morningside Gardens."

"I came here in 1970, and one of the things that I noticed immediately is that this is really a small village where people know one another, care about one another," said another resident, 75 year-old John Beard. "The opportunity to participate here has meant a great deal to me. I have served on the board of the co-op supermarket and participated in chorus, the players, the camera club. I met so many people that it takes me a half an hour to walk across the grounds because so many want to stop and talk."

The emotions revealed by tenants such as John Beard and Tomoe Asai illustrate the power of community. Because they share ownership and responsibility for their home village, these residents of Morningside Gardens have an attachment to the mortar and brick, the rolling gardens and, most of all, their neighbors. "Living this way is considered, by some, to be a thing of the past," notes another old timer, Beatrice Gottlieb. "But just because it's old, that doesn't mean it's a bad idea."

SOURCES

Interviews: Morningside Gardens residents, Harlem residents, management officials at Morningside Gardens.

Published Sources

Atlas & Dreier, "From Projects to Communities How to Redeem Public Housing," *The American Prospect* (Summer 1992).

Warner & Mitra, "The Selling of Eden," *City Limits* (November 1993).

Ramos, "Hud-dled Masses," *The New Republic* (14 March 1994).

Morningside Gardens News, issues published 1957-1993.

Morningside Heights Housing Corporation board of directors, "Plan of reconstitution of Morningside Heights Housing Corporation," 20 April 1993.

Morningside Heights Housing Corporation, "Morningside Gardens Tenant-Cooperators Handbook," 1971 and 1975 editions.

Morningside Gardens Tenant- Co-operators Committee, "Trees of Morningside Gardens," 1993.

Samuels, "Community at Work: A Lesson for Others," *The New York Times Magazine* (6 August 1950).

"Private Financing Sought to Replace 7 City Slum Areas," *The New York Times* (22 January 1951).

"Slum-Clearance Housing Planned Near Columbia by 9 Institutions," *The New York Times* (1 October 1951).

"Plan Board Backs Columbia Housing," *The New York Times* (18 October 1951).

"Welcome News on Housing," *The New York Times* (13 November 1951).

"Morningside Group Expands Activities," *The New York Times* (28 January 1952).

"New Stimulus to Housing," *The New York Times* (25 April 1952).

"City Clears Way for Housing Unit," *The New York Times* (9 May 1952).

"Cost Estimates Cut by Big Co-operative," *The New York Times* (21 March 1952).

"Educator Heads Housing Project," *The New York Times* (11 January 1953)

“\$8,946,458 Granted for Housing by U.S.” *The New York Times* (15 January 1953).

“Wreckers Attack Morningside Site,” *The New York Times* (12 January 1954).

“Morningside Rebuilds,” *The New York Times* (5 August 1954).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation to The Communitarian Project at the Center for Policy Research, Inc. We are grateful for the guidance of Dr. William A. Diaz, then at the Ford Foundation, during the designing stages of the project.

The author would like to thank the residents and staff, particularly manager Elaine Weiss, at Morningside Gardens for their cooperation.

THE COMMUNITARIAN NETWORK

The Communitarian Network, a membership organization, is a coalition of individuals and organizations who have come together to shore up the moral, social, and political environment.



Membership:

Become an Associate of The Communitarian Network. For \$50 you will receive:

The Responsive Communitarian Platform; 10% off an annual subscription to *The Responsive Community* (quarterly); 50% off *The Spirit of Community*, by Amitai Etzioni; a subscription to *The Communitarian Reporter*; invitations and discounts for all conferences, meetings and events; a subscription to all "Action Alerts"; and special invitations to issues briefings.

Active • \$35

The Responsive Communitarian Platform; a subscription to *The Communitarian Reporter*; invitations to all conferences, meetings and events; and a subscription to all "Action Alerts."

Attentive • \$25

The Responsive Communitarian Platform; a subscription to *The Communitarian Reporter*; and invitations to all conferences, meetings and events.



Case Studies in Community Action (\$25 each)

- *Back to the Farm: Raising Livestock, Strengthening Family, and Building Community in Eastern Kentucky*, by Suzanne Goldsmith (37 pages)
- *The High-Rise Village: Public Housing Creates a Community in Harlem*, by Michael D'Antonio (24 pages)
- *The Takoma Orange Hats: Fighting Drugs and Building Community in Washington, D.C.*, by Suzanne Goldsmith (44 pages)



The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities — the only communitarian quarterly. (Two years- \$48; One year- \$27)



The Responsive Communitarian Platform — the platform of the communitarian movement. (\$4 each)



Communitarian Position Paper Series

- *A Communitarian Position Paper on the Family* (\$10)
- *Core Values in Health-Care Reform: A Communitarian Approach* (\$10)
- *The Case for Domestic Disarmament* (\$10)
- *The Rights and Responsibilities of Potential Organ Donors* (\$10)
- *Character Building for a Democratic, Civil Society* (\$18)



The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda, by Amitai Etzioni (paperback- \$12 each)



Communitarian Message Video (10 min.- \$7 each)

To join, receive information, or order any of the above, please write or call:

The Communitarian NETWORK

2130 H STREET NW • SUITE 714J • WASHINGTON, DC 20052
202.994.7997 • 202.994.1606 FAX • COMNET@UNIX1.CIRC.GWU.EDU