



# GROUNDSWELL

**Urban Review  
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# SPRING 2026 GROUNDSWELL

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We live in a time of enormous disruption—technological, economic, political, and environmental. Our cities are the focal points of these collective challenges as well as the foundations for social resilience that sustains us through this groundswell of change.

As planners, we are directly involved in the decisions that shape our city, socially and physically. We shepherd technological development, contending with moral and financial questions in the hopes of making people safer and happier. We also change space to fit our image because our cultural beliefs and daily rituals create specific spatial needs. In their pieces, Dimitris Koutoumbas and Jeff Becker share the planner's perspective on implementing these changes.

Sometimes, especially when plans are led by moneyed interests over community need, planners make risky decisions that enable contentious change, where it is unclear who is calling the shots and who benefits. Other times, a lack of change leads to mis-allocation of space and resources, and we look to implement new models that require experimentation and trade-offs. In their articles, Gabriella Walker, Owen Bomba, and Sara Rabb explore new ways we're negotiating value in the city.

Looking out for one another and daring to actualize better world are critical to fostering a socially resilient city, particularly in times of disruption. City dwellers experience phenomena like pandemics, state-led violence, economic inequality, and racism side by side. Pieces by Tony Maras and Mir Jivotovski explore how city inhabitants' relationships with one another and our built environment are critical to shaping how we weather the storm. People take care of one another when city planning fails.

Ecological change is re-shaping our cities before our eyes and we are in turn attempting to re-shape them to live with our changing climate. Planners try to find solutions that solve issues of both mitigation and adaptation without placing undue burden on people. Sometimes questions of responsibility and cost can make it difficult to meet our current needs and protect the future, but communities try to fill these gaps with collective action, resulting in rich urban resilience that is both ecological and social. Sonja Greenan-Neve, Kiron Roy, myself, and Anna Moggia-Palzer examine this new reality in our pieces.

Finally, it's critical to look at history and the present side by side, identifying how past decisions are impacting our current world—for the worse and the better. Planning can be slow, but the impacts of change long lasting. Raga Maddela and Benjamin Cornwell's pieces help us reflect on the change planning has facilitated and encourage us to think long term in our decision making.

Groundswell comes from all sides. The best kind of planning is that which creates a better city through it.

*Jilly Edgar*  
*Editor in Chief*

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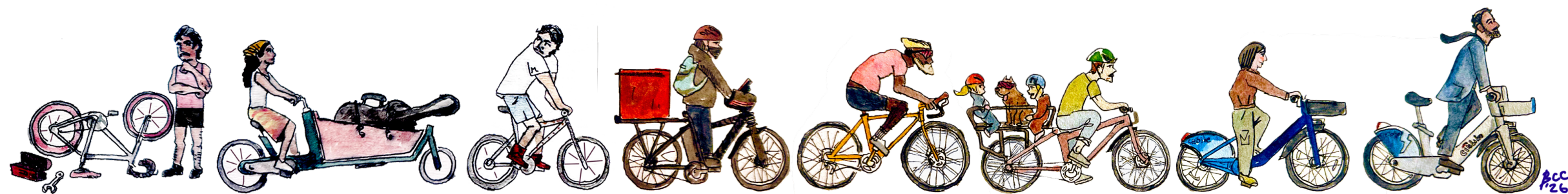
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# STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE



Crossing guard assists as a school bus with automated enforcement cameras unloads students. Photo by author.

## OPERATIONALIZING VISION ZERO Advancing Traffic Safety in New Haven By Dimitris Koutoumbas

In February 2025 New Haven's automated school bus camera program launched with a 30-day warning period. For the first time in the city's history, New Haven began issuing automated violations to drivers who illegally passed stopped school buses. During the program's first month, the City issued more than 3,400 violations to drivers who failed to stop for buses actively loading and unloading children. Systems like New Haven's school bus safety program are beginning to make this behavior visible at scale, changing traffic enforcement in Connecticut by shifting it from sporadic observation to continuous detection.

Despite advances in vehicle technology and roadway design, the United States continues to experience an epidemic of traffic violence with pedestrians bearing the brunt of it. Sixty-five

pedestrians lost their lives on Connecticut roadways in 2025. By early May 2026, motorists had already killed ten pedestrians statewide. On April 25, 2026, Evelyn Aponte, a sixty-six-year-old Stamford resident, died after being struck by a pickup truck that failed to yield while she was using the crosswalk.

These outcomes point to a broader limitation in how traffic safety has traditionally been approached in the United States. For decades, transportation systems were designed primarily to move vehicles efficiently, often placing the burden of safety on individual behavior rather than the system itself. Roads became wider, speed limits increased, and people outside of vehicles were expected to adapt to an increasingly car-centric environment. Safety efforts largely operated within a framework that ultimately assumed compliance.

More recently, that approach has begun to shift. The Safe Systems Approach, which now guides the United States Department of Transportation's National Roadway Safety Strategy, starts from a different premise: people will inevitably make mistakes, and the transportation system should be designed so those mistakes do not result in death or serious injury. The approach extends beyond physical design. It emphasizes proactively identifying risk before crashes occur and recognizes that responsibility for safety is shared across agencies, designers, operators, and road users.

That shift has emerged alongside a broader deterioration in driving behavior and roadway culture. Speeding, distracted driving, aggressive driving, and disregard for pedestrians remain persistent on American roadways. Recent research highlighted by the

American Automobile Association (AAA) found that nine in ten drivers admit to behaviors such as speeding, tailgating, or cutting off other vehicles. Aggressive driving is often contagious. The more drivers experience hostility and recklessness on the road, the more normalized that behavior becomes.

For decades, the traffic stop has been the primary tool used to correct dangerous behavior and reinforce expectations on the road, but that model has recently come under increasing strain. Traffic stops by all police agencies in Connecticut more than halved between 2019 and 2020, a decline that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic as government personnel reduced nonessential contact. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests also brought renewed scrutiny to the role of traffic stops in racial profiling and police violence, as research has shown that people of color are more often stopped than whites. In many places, traffic enforcement

has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

As dangerous driving behavior becomes more normalized and traditional enforcement becomes less consistent, automated systems offer governments a way to identify and document violations in situations where public safety personnel cannot be continuously present. In practice, as these technologies have matured, they have made it possible to apply enforcement more consistently and at a broader scale than traditional methods allow. Automated warning systems, such as wrong-way detection on highways, and automated enforcement tools, including school bus, red-light, and speed cameras, reflect this shift.

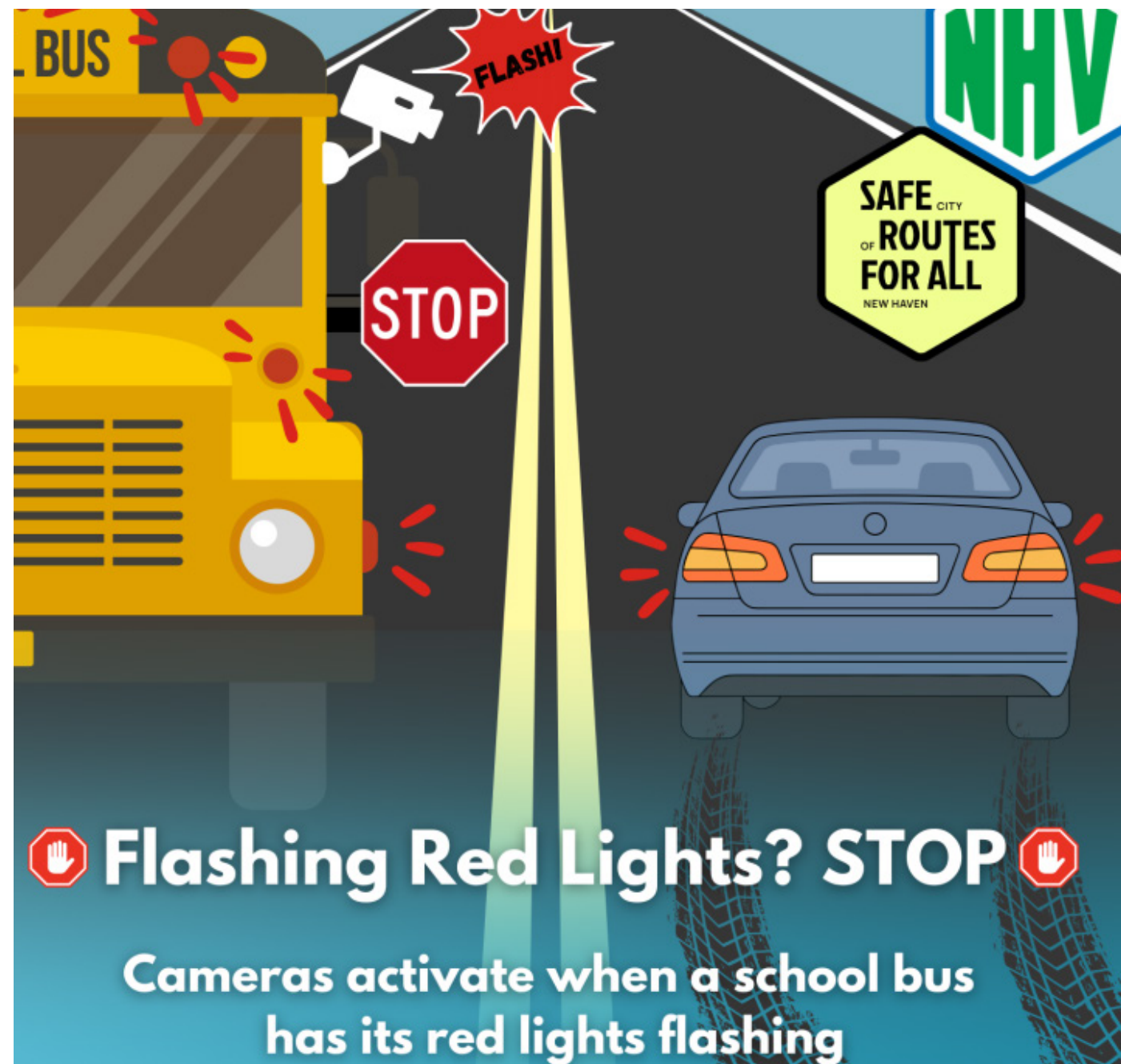
The clearest example of this shift at scale is already underway across Connecticut. Following a rise in fatal wrong-way crashes, the state enacted Public Act 23-51, leading to the Connecticut Department of Transportation installing detection

systems on highway exit ramps designed to identify and alert drivers entering in the wrong direction. These systems use sensors and illuminated signage to detect vehicles entering in the wrong direction while simultaneously notifying the state's operations center and law enforcement. Since 2023, more than 200 of these systems have been deployed statewide. While wrong-way systems focus on detection and warning, the state agency has also begun applying similar technology to help with enforcement through automated speed control in highway work zones. While automated systems have been expanding on state highways, their rollout at the local level is still in its early stages.

In New Haven, much of the public conversation has focused on the city's upcoming red-light and speed camera systems, but the first operational automated enforcement program is already in place — and it's on school buses.



A school bus camera records vehicles that illegally pass when the bus is stopped with flashing red lights activated. The system captures violations in both directions of travel and records video and still images for review prior to citation issuance. Photo by author.



Educational graphic developed by the City of New Haven as part of its Safe Routes for All initiative, reminding drivers to stop for school buses displaying flashing red lights. Graphic courtesy of the City of New Haven.

Under city ordinance, drivers must stop for school buses displaying flashing red lights and remain stopped until the lights are deactivated. If they fail to do so, a \$250 citation is issued to the registered owner of the vehicle.

“Police officers cannot be everywhere at once, and automated enforcement gives us another tool to deter dangerous driving behavior and protect children traveling to and from school,” Mayor Justin Elicker said about the program.

Ignoring a stopped school bus is inherently reckless, yet many violations have historically been unaddressed. Before the automated program, enforcement largely relied on school bus drivers documenting incidents themselves, an approach that was both limited and disruptive to their primary responsibility of transporting children safely. Cameras installed on school buses now capture vehicles that illegally pass when stop arms are deployed, with violations reviewed by authorized

city staff before citations are issued.

Bringing the program online required coordination far beyond installing cameras on buses. The system had to be integrated into a fleet of more than 300 school buses operated through a separate contract with New Haven Public Schools. Because the automated enforcement cameras were managed by a different vendor than the one operating the buses, the City had to establish a memorandum of understanding, outlining how the program would

function and how responsibilities would be coordinated between different agencies.

Haley Simpson, now Director of Transportation, Traffic, and Parking, helped coordinate the effort in her previous role as Deputy Chief of Staff in the Mayor's Office after the administration directed staff to begin developing the program. Simpson said one of the biggest challenges was aligning multiple agencies, contracts, and operational responsibilities into a single functioning system within a relatively short timeframe. "There was overwhelming support for the program because people understand how dangerous these violations are," Simpson said. "But maintaining trust means showing that the system is improving safety and changing behavior, not just issuing tickets."

When a school bus stops and activates its flashing red lights, the camera system begins recording vehicles traveling in both directions. The system captures video, still images of the vehicle and license plate, and the time and location of the event. Captured violations do not automatically result in citations. Each event is reviewed by authorized municipal staff before a citation is issued to the registered owner of the vehicle.

Managing the program now largely falls on the Transportation, Traffic, and Parking Department. Historically focused on traffic operations such as signals, signage, parking, and crossing guards, the department has in recent years evolved into a more comprehensive transportation agency overseeing planning, micromobility,

microtransit, and now automated enforcement programs.

Eric Hoffman, Deputy Director of Transportation, Traffic, and Parking, helped develop the framework for both the school bus camera program and the city's future automated enforcement initiatives, including drafting ordinance language and coordinating implementation. "I never expected the volume to be this high," Hoffman said. "Even after decades in traffic enforcement, it was surprising to see how consistently people were violating the law around stopped school buses. People have a hard time understanding that cameras don't blink."

The camera hardware and processing infrastructure are provided by the enforcement vendor, while existing city employees absorb the administrative responsibilities tied to review and adjudication. As the system continues operating at scale, the challenge increasingly shifts from identifying violations to managing them.

Automated enforcement also changes how traffic safety is experienced in public space. Unlike traditional traffic stops, these systems operate continuously, capturing behavior at a scale that would be impossible through in-person enforcement alone. That raises broader questions about surveillance, data ownership, and public trust. In Connecticut, however, these systems operate within a framework established through state enabling legislation that defines how municipalities can deploy and administer automated

enforcement programs. In New Haven, all data collected through the system is ultimately owned and controlled by the city rather than the vendor operating the technology.

These questions have taken on added significance as federal agencies have expanded their use of surveillance tools and data aggregation in recent years. Reporting has shown how agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) draw from a wide network of data sources, including license plate readers and third-party databases, to track individuals and build cases. In that context, decisions about data ownership, access, and oversight become an increasingly important part of how local enforcement systems are designed and governed.

For New Haven, the school bus camera program has also become a template for future automated enforcement initiatives under the city's broader Safe Routes for All and Vision Zero efforts. But even supporters of the program acknowledge that technology alone cannot fully change roadway culture. One New Haven school bus driver said it is still too early to tell whether the cameras are reducing violations long-term, and that some drivers will continue to ignore the law regardless of enforcement. The challenge for cities like New Haven may ultimately be not just deploying these systems, but determining whether they can meaningfully change behavior over time. **UR**



Entrance to the village of Kiryas Joel, NY. Source: friedavizel

## NAVIGATING SPATIAL CHALLENGES IN KIRYAS JOEL Suburban America's 15-Minute Hasidic Satmar Village

By Jeff Becker

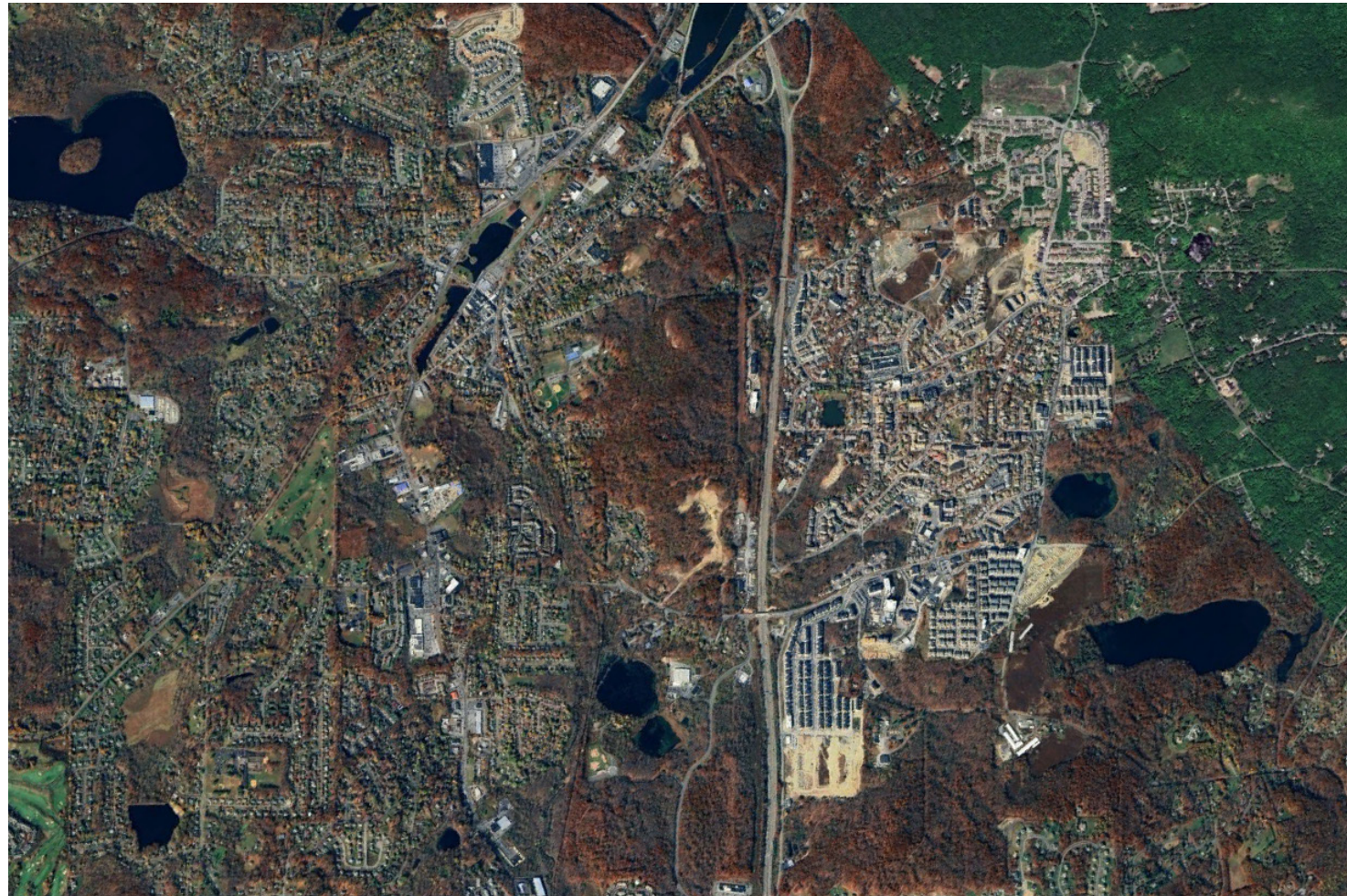
**B**lack hats, Torah, Yiddish and...mixed use zoning? All converge in the Satmar community of Kiryas Joel, New York. The Satmar are an ultra-conservative Hasidic Jewish sect founded by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum in early twentieth-century Romania. After the Holocaust destroyed much of the community, Teitelbaum escaped Europe and rebuilt the Satmar population in South Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Despite living in relative isolation, the Satmar were deeply affected by

postwar urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s. The construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway cut directly through South Williamsburg and disrupted the dense, walkable neighborhood structure the community relied on. Importantly, Satmar dwelling units "typically need to be within walking distance of their synagogue in order to avoid driving or paying for transportation on the Sabbath." This requirement necessitates densely walkable neighborhoods organized around religious life.

At the same time, these

neighborhoods must conform to strict building height limitations. Religious Jewish housing generally is limited to heights that do "not require an elevator ride on the Sabbath." Many religious Jews have created a mechanism to accommodate preserving the Sabbath with high density living by developing Shabbat elevators (elevators which automatically stop on every floor, thus not requiring passengers to press any buttons) in multi-story buildings. The Satmars, as an ultra-conservative sect, reject and prohibit the use of Shabbat elevators.



Satellite juxtaposition of Monroe (left) and Kiryas Joel (right). Source: Google Earth Pro.

This creates a unique planning challenge in which the community depends on extreme density and walkability while also limiting residential building height to “six- and seven-story apartment buildings.” These housing needs are further shaped by household sizes that commonly include “eight to ten children.” As a result, the Satmar face significant pressure to accommodate rapid population growth without sprawling outward or building significantly upward.

Teitelbaum responded to this disruption of the neighborhood fabric in South Williamsburg by pursuing a suburban alternative that could still support these specific spatial needs. In 1974, the Village of Kiryas Joel was founded in Orange County, New York, specifically to accommodate the

Satmar community and its distinct approach to urban life.

Over the following decades, Kiryas Joel grew rapidly amid both population growth and legal battles over governance and land use, particularly with the neighboring suburban community of Monroe, NY. Today, Kiryas Joel is one of the youngest and fastest growing municipalities in the nation. The village is now home to more than 40,000 predominantly Satmar residents with 53% of the population under the age of 15, and continues to expand with a recorded population growth rate of 6.6%, substantially higher than the average percent change in growth of 0.7% for cities in the Northeast with populations ranging from 10,000 to 49,999.

To better understand how the Satmar community balances rapid growth with strict spatial and religious requirements in the heart of American suburbia, I spoke with Frederick Wells, RLA (formerly of Tim Miller Associates, Inc., planning consultants), one of the planners behind Kiryas Joel’s 2018 Comprehensive Plan, which sought to create a built environment framework meant to accommodate the Satmar’s unique spatial requirements.

The following is an excerpt from our conversation, edited for clarity:

**JB:** "A lot of the written material on Kiryas Joel pertains to lawsuits and legal issues surrounding the village, and I’m trying to look at it more from the built environment perspective. That’s what interests

me—the physical layout and how development happens there.

**Wells:** Right—the street layout, the development pattern, all of that. The Hasidic Satmar community definitely has its own way of doing development. It’s very interesting.

They have their own way of doing things, for sure. They work within the general constraints of zoning and other laws, but the pressures of their lifestyle influence how they deal with conventional systems. As long as they don’t bother other people too much, people tend not to bother them. That’s kind of how it has gone.

**JB:** Can you tell me how you got involved with the village of Kiryas Joel?

**Wells:** Kiryas Joel wanted to annex property from the Town of Monroe. In order to do that legally, they needed to have an adopted

comprehensive plan, which they didn’t have at that point. They had zoning, which they had sort of been using as a stand-in for a comprehensive plan. But the law requires zoning to be based on a comprehensive plan, so they had to go through that process. They also had to complete environmental review through SEQRA, so they did it all at the same time in 2018. That kind of work—SEQRA, planning, environmental review—is what Tim Miller Associates specializes in. We had done a lot of work in Orange County, including for Monroe and surrounding towns, so Kiryas Joel hired us to handle it.

**JB:** Kiryas Joel had their own zoning process before the 2018 comprehensive plan?

**Wells:** They had their own planning board and, of course, the village board on the political side. I want to say their zoning goes back to

sometime in the 1970s. I think one of the founders basically took another town’s zoning and adapted it for Kiryas Joel. It was pretty standard zoning, and officially that’s what the planning board would use to make decisions about approving projects. Ultimately, if a municipality is agreeable, it can approve a lot of things. I suspect that some of what was built there wasn’t exactly according to zoning, but it was approvable by the village, so they approved it. When we rewrote the zoning, we started with the old zoning, updated it, and made it fit their development style better. The purpose was to make the zoning ordinance fit what they were actually doing, which was mostly multifamily development.

**JB:** In developing the 2018 comprehensive plan, what was the core vision for Kiryas Joel? The Satmar community needs

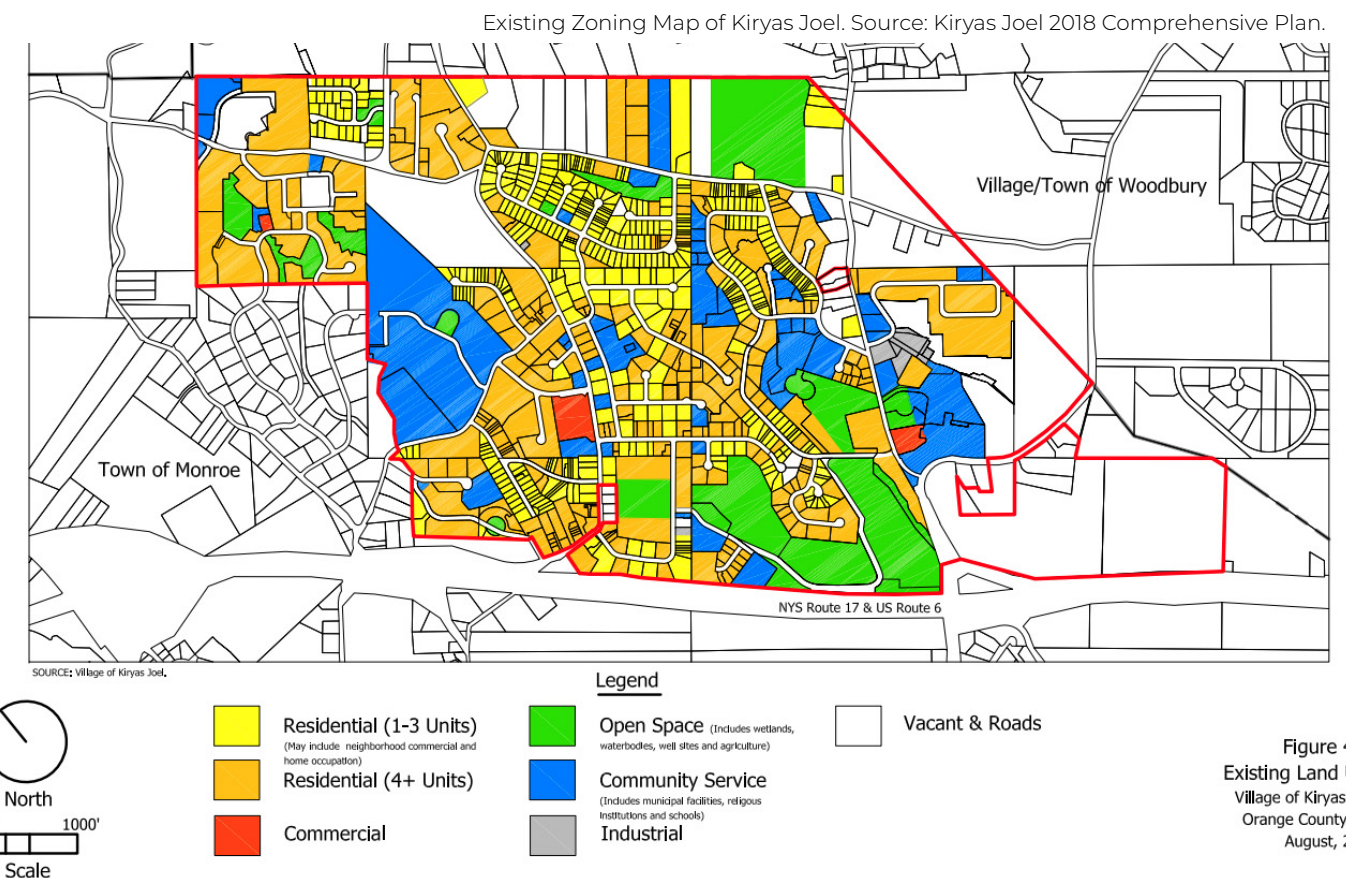


Figure 4-2: Existing Land Use Village of Kiryas Joel Orange County, NY August, 2017

high-density multifamily housing, but at the same time there are religious constraints—they can't really build upward because of issues like elevators, and there are requirements like sukkah balconies (balconies which must be partially exposed to the sky). How did those factors shape the core vision?

**Wells:** Those kinds of development patterns drove much of the wording in the proposed zoning text. One thing that comes to mind is that there were apparent situations with retail operations in basements. Much of the retail there is small-scale, mom-and-pop businesses that serve the community. But they were operating in places without windows, or with only one means of egress—conditions that typically wouldn't be legal. A lot of the wording we put into the zoning was intended to legalize some of that activity if certain improvements were made—for example, adding a second entrance or separating the entrances for residential and commercial uses. There were people living in buildings who complained that basement businesses were using the same door, and they didn't like that. So the zoning was written to allow some of those mixed-use situations, but in a more orderly and neighbor-sensitive way.

**JB:** Did you ever consider utilizing form-based codes for Kiryas Joel in place of conventional zoning?

**Wells:** We didn't really consider that in our document, mainly because of time constraints. They were trying to get through the legal and approval process efficiently, so they didn't want to introduce something

unfamiliar that would require people to learn a whole new system. But yes, the way they approach development is more consistent with form-based thinking, especially with the kinds of constraints you mentioned—like no elevators and other religious requirements. I think you're absolutely right that form-based zoning might have been a better option, or at least a better option in



Constructed pedestrian sidewalks in the village. Source: Google Earth Pro.

the future.

**JB:** How does the planning process in Kiryas Joel work? I've read that the Village Administrator of Kiryas Joel, Gedalye Szegedin, is referred to as the "Robert Moses of KJ."

**Wells:** It's a very unique operation. They do have a planning board—they're required to by state law. And it functions. They probably meet once a month, which is typical of a municipal board, and they make decisions. It is top-down, and Szegedin has the voice of a leader but doesn't have the final word in any formal sense. That is what the

Village Trustees and planning board are for. But with many years of experience as Village Administrator, Szegedin is very active and influential in planning matters in the Village.

**JB:** Is there a difference between the decisions made by the Kiryas Joel planning board and the role played by Village Administrator, Gedalye Szegedin?

**Wells:** Szegedin is more of an overseer or coordinator. He knows what the village board is doing and what the trustees want to do, so he can relay that to the planning board and nudge them in a certain direction. That's not unusual; in many municipalities, someone from the town board attends planning board meetings just to stay informed.

**JB:** Let's speak about infrastructure. Because the Satmar community doesn't drive on the Sabbath or on holidays, they need high-density living, but they can't build too high

and they can't spread out too far. That seems to create a strong need for pedestrian infrastructure and walkability. How did pedestrian infrastructure fit into the comprehensive plan?

**Wells:** It was definitely a priority. There was a street map in the plan that the village gave me as a sketch, and we formalized it. It showed that the village has a lot of cul-de-sacs and dead-end streets, but they connect them with sidewalks. The sidewalks are reasonably wide—not enormous, but enough to handle a lot of foot traffic—because many people walk, and many women don't drive, so walking is essential.

As the village builds out, they can't go higher and they can't spread too far because then it becomes too far to walk to community facilities. So they've effectively broken the village into smaller areas or "sub-villages", each with access to things like a mikvah (spiritual bath house) or community gathering space within a certain radius.

On the Sabbath in particular, people have no choice—they have to walk from their house to the synagogue or another gathering place.

**JB:** Kiryas Joel has one of the highest birth rates in the United States and a recorded population growth rate of 6.6%. Was making the village child-centered—in terms of public space, safety, and proximity—part of the planning process?

**Wells:** Specifically, yes, in practical terms. Most of the time, you have mothers and children moving around together. Older kids can often get around the village on their

own, but accessibility was important: wide sidewalks, accessible crossings, enhanced crosswalks, that sort of thing. We looked at those things from a traffic standpoint as well.

Walkability was a big deal, both for safety and convenience. And one of the constraints is that the area is hilly, so achieving safe slopes in winter was tricky. That affected where some sidewalks could or couldn't go.

**JB:** On the topic of children and population increase do you think the continued growth of the village could lead to friction with surrounding towns and neighborhoods? And if so, were there any mechanisms put in place to limit that friction?

**Wells:** That's a major question, they really have had significant growth. You can do a plan that works for 10 years, maybe even 20, but then what happens when they build out and want to expand again? We ran projections for 10 years in the comprehensive plan, but even within the roughly five years we were working on planning issues there, they were already trying to accommodate their growth. The place was bursting at the seams in some areas.

**JB:** Has there been pushback from surrounding suburban communities such as Monroe?

**Wells:** Opposition groups were active there for years, and at every stage people from Monroe and surrounding areas were angry about what they saw as uncontrolled growth. That's a concern, and I don't really know what the long-term answer is. They

(Kiryas Joel) may eventually have to create other communities, and I think that may already be happening in the area.

**JB:** There are growing numbers of people in the U.S. who value proximity and car-free lifestyles. If you remove the religious component of Kiryas Joel, you are left with just the physical model: multifamily housing, commercial uses integrated into buildings, pedestrian paths connecting destinations within walking distance, and cul-de-sacs that still create a somewhat suburban feel. Do you think Kiryas Joel could serve as a model for housing in America moving forward, or is it something uniquely Satmar?

**Wells:** The features you just described are important to any community. To me, it's ridiculous to approve 100 homes with no sidewalks, but it happens everywhere. That's the failure of Euclidean zoning: it forces people into their cars and off the streets. So yes, cul-de-sacs combined with walkability should absolutely be part of any good plan. Mixed uses should be part of it too. Conventional zoning separates residential from commercial, so you don't get a corner store anymore in many places. The closest store to me is two miles away. From a smart growth perspective, that's absurd. Personally, I would not advocate for conventional zoning anywhere if there were another option.

**JB:** You would be very well received in the Hunter Urban Planning Program. **UR**

# THE ECONOMY OF SPACE



NYPD nomobile 21 days after January 2026 snowfall. Photo by author.

## FROZEN ASSETS

By Gabriella Walker

### The Rising Supply of Nomobiles in a Warming Climate

*Nomobile (nō-mō-bēl): noun, a street-parked car that has become incapacitated by snow and/or ice and has been visibility stagnant for an extended period of time.*

In January and February of this year, a sequence of severe winter storms struck the East Coast, bringing sustained periods of subzero windchill and a cumulative 41 inches of snow. The repeated precipitation combined with persistently low temperatures prevented a natural melt cycle for several weeks.

In response, city agencies deployed extensive plowing operations, dropped approximately 380,000 tons of salt, requested emergency

civilian shoveling support, organized warming centers, and deployed snowmelting “hot tubs” across the five boroughs. Despite these efforts, many neighborhoods remained lined with meter-high snowbanks and plow berms for weeks. Curb lanes became largely unusable, vehicles were immobilised, and pedestrian spaces narrowed as sidewalks dissolved into slush and ice. New Yorkers experienced widespread difficulty accessing bus stops, navigating intersections, and maintaining

storefront access for weeks after the initial snowfall.

This winter’s storms acted as a tour de force of urban transformation, collecting no taxes, taking no time off, and delivering record amounts of service in record amounts of time. They also served as a seasonal groundswell of scrutiny on roadside infrastructure, exposing systemic weaknesses in urban street design and prioritization.

This was most visible at the curb. For the weeks that followed this

stretch of subzero windchill, thousands of snow-entombed vehicles, here defined as nomobiles, remained stagnant along city streets, existing as frozen fixtures of the winter streetspace. Nomobiles are street-parked cars that become incapacitated by snow and/or ice and remain visibly immobile for an extended period of time. They no longer function in accordance with their intended use as instruments of private mobility. Instead, they become static elements of the public realm, providing a way to examine how curb management distributes cost, risk, and responsibility, and to assess the underlying assumptions of roadside infrastructure.

Nomobiles were present in neighborhoods citywide, causing many to take to social media to voice their disdain. Streetsblog wrote: “New Yorkers barely use their cars and, instead, use them to seize public space.” At scale, this reaction raises a broader question: if countless vehicles could remain unused for extended periods without halting everyday life, what role does the privately owned car serve in dense urban contexts, and how are the costs of maintaining this mobility distributed when operability fails?

Personal vehicle convenience rests on three assumptions: that a vehicle will operate when needed, that storage will remain available at a reasonable cost, and that disruptions will be short-lived. When public curb management systems collapse, this framework quickly unravels. In a city where curbside parking has long received due scrutiny, where emergency response systems are already



Nomobile 21 days after January 2026 snowfall. Photo by author.

strained under climate volatility, and where outerborough transit deserts persist, these tensions intensify seasonally. Winter conditions introduce a distinct reallocation of cost, risk, and labor of the urban commons. Under these circumstances, it has become necessary to evaluate the promise of convenience attached to car ownership, the consequences of publicly subsidized vehicle storage, and the labor required to maintain access during periods of systemic stress. Nomobiles represent a tangible moment of all three assumptions failing simultaneously.

For the City, nomobiles impose both tangible and immeasurable costs on public systems as plowing routes become less efficient when curb lanes are obstructed, and bike lane clearance requires greater coordination. These costs are absorbed as operational overhead, not billed to individual owners, even as access is preserved despite

reduced operability.

From a municipal perspective, the economic value of the curb is not incidental. Recent statements by the Mamdani administration indicate growing interest in treating curb space as a fiscal and administrative resource, including expanded metered parking to generate revenue and exercising more deliberate curb management. Research shows that “curb parking on New York City streets is worth \$12.3 billion annually if drivers paid the market rate for storing their vehicles in the public right of way.” The social contract surrounding this public, shared resource is temporarily suspended as new friction exposes who absorbs the cost of the shared space, disrupting the assumed rules of access, revealing an economy all its own.

At the household level, the same conditions are immediate and compounding expenses rather than

abstract inefficiencies. For some residents in neighborhoods with incomplete transit access, vehicle ownership can be a means of securing reliability between infrastructure gaps. New York City’s 2022 Citywide Mobility Survey stated that the majority of residents who increased their vehicle count from 2019 did so because they “wanted the flexibility and convenience of having a vehicle.” This expectation of reliable mobility is reinforced by the continued provision of free curbside storage, also reflected in thirty-seven percent of residents who decreased vehicles in their households because “parking was difficult or expensive.” More than ninety-seven percent of New York City’s three million parking spaces are free, keeping costs of preserving vehicle access low and leaving the fiscal responsibility largely hidden during normal conditions.

“I basically just wrote it off for two weeks,” one Brooklyn schoolteacher shared. “I was like, alright, I just don’t have a car right now.” They had purchased a vehicle to shorten a long commute to a neighborhood without robust transit options and relied on curbside parking at home. “I hate that I have to own a car... Whatever kind of autonomy I have is illusory and, you know, for suckers.”

During this period, they spent several hundred dollars on rideshare trips while their vehicle was immobilized, incurred additional transit fares attempting to connect between networks, and paid over a thousand dollars in winter-related mechanical repairs.

Beyond fiscal expenditures, households also absorb significant amounts of unpaid physical labor, including digging vehicles out of compacted snow and ice, walking extended distances to reach alternative transit, and recalculating commutes.

“The best case scenario is that you get plowed in, you dig yourself out, but you get plowed back in again. The worst case scenario, at least on Staten Island, is that you don’t even get plowed in because the plows haven’t gotten to your street yet. So you can dig all you want, but good luck getting anywhere,” said a St. George resident who purchased a vehicle after years without one to

***“Whatever kind of autonomy I have is illusory.”  
– Brooklyn teacher & reluctant car owner***



supplement limited borough connectivity. “It’s so obvious that something isn’t working here.”

As the economic burden of ownership snowballs, those with greater financial flexibility are better positioned to maintain mobility through viable non-automobile options, while those without such resources must supply labor, tolerate prolonged immobility, or rely on more constrained transportation choices.

This winter was a reminder that car ownership does not insulate

individuals from unreliable systems. The existence of nomobiles functioned as a disruption to the shared street environment as a whole. Even while these vehicles did not generate movement, they continued to generate work in a layered subsidy structure: public funds provided baseline accessibility, private labor absorbed recovery, and informal makeshift markets monetized the gap between the two. This system persists not because it is efficient, but because its costs are delayed, dispersed, and rarely itemized. It exposes a critical misalignment between how convenience is experienced and how it is maintained.

Free curbside parking is central to sustaining this arrangement. It is a publicly-subsidized habit that maintains the illusion that private mobility is largely self-contained. Nomobiles reveal the limits of this assumption, revealing the payments we make in our fiscal and political economies to sustain private mobility, even when that mobility becomes obsolete. As climate change produces heavier snowfall and longer freeze periods, the gap between perceived convenience and actual cost is likely to narrow further.

Nomobiles provide a practical analytical lens for critique through which roadside infrastructure can be examined with greater precision. They reveal space otherwise obscured by patterns of routine circulation. Let them serve a warning to citizens and planners alike: where habit and preference prevail, function will suffer. **UR**



Night-time rendering of The Coney, courtesy of FX Collaborative.

## PLANNERS AT THE POKER TABLE

### Casino Licensing in New York

By Owen Bomba

As 40,000 spectators filed into CitiField for the Mets 2026 home opener against the Blue Jays, a small group of fans, no bigger than two dozen, chanted different slogans and held different signs than the rest. Adorned in blue and orange, they rallied against Steve Cohen, the franchise's owner, and his recently-approved bid to build a casino and hotel resort on the stadium's parking lot.

The scene was reminiscent of the one that played out at the CUNY Graduate Center on December 1st, 2025, when the State's five-member Gaming Facility Location Board (GFLB) held a public meeting to deliver its

recommendation for three downstate casino licenses—two in Queens, and one in the Bronx. The small assembly of anti-casino protestors and chants of “shame on you” were underwhelming. For a city that routinely turns out large crowds to protest modest housing developments, was this all the opposition it could muster against billions of dollars of investment into an industry designed to make you poorer?

The licensure came on the heels of a year-long competitive blitz, in which 11 proposals across every borough except for Staten Island vied for a license. Developers assembled teams of planners, engineers, and marketing

consultants to propose public realm and transit improvements, investments in affordable housing, school construction and other enticements, seeking to gain the favor of local residents and elected officials. Steve Cohen's proposal was advertised as a way to “undo the wrongs of Robert Moses” and “turn a parking lot into a park.” Thor Equities' proposal in Coney Island was “a vision of renewal” for the historic boardwalk – the catalyst to turn the People's Playground into a year-round destination. Bally's plan for the largest ever privately funded development in the Bronx even pitched residents of the borough on a collective 9% equity stake.

While developers rushed to win over the public, many New Yorkers were left wondering why the debate centered on which casino to build instead of whether to build one at all. They could be forgiven for forgetting that these licenses were authorized by voter referendum more than a decade earlier, in 2013, sandwiched between ballot questions about Adirondack land use and age limits for judges. The governor at the time, Andrew Cuomo, had championed the initiative, leading the “Vote Yes on Prop 1” campaign and promising an increase in revenues for transit and schools. He was supported by various business and labor councils who were enticed by the promise of revenue growth and job creation at these new destinations. The measure was drafted with a multi-phase implementation—four upstate licenses were to be awarded first, followed by three downstate licenses at least seven years later.

The 12 year interval between the passage of legislation to the issuance of these licenses was rapid in contrast to New York State's broader history of gambling regulation. Though the practice was largely unregulated for the state's first century, a 1894 constitutional amendment effectively banned it. Ever since, deregulation has been a slow process, with horse racing legalized in 1939 and a public lottery established in 1967, the second in the United States following New Hampshire. But while the nation was adopting Native American-owned casinos in the 1970s, New York State only

managed to legalize games of chance for non-profits. It wasn't until 20 years later in the 1990s that the first Tribal casino would open its doors in New York, and even today they remain limited in number.

There is a long and storied history of prior attempts by the gaming industry to legalize Vegas-style casinos in New York. Historically, those attempts have been met with fierce opposition. But in 2013, the pervasiveness of gambling and fiscal urgency paved the way for legalization. States compete with one another to raise necessary revenues while maintaining the lowest possible tax rates, incentivizing growth in new sectors. As advocates argued in 2013, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania benefitted greatly from New Yorkers crossing the border to gamble.

The internet, too, has amplified gambling's ascent. From its earliest days, the internet has enabled activities which are otherwise illegal or highly-regulated to flourish in the margins of legal jurisdictions and in the absence of digitally-responsive legislation. The offshore-hosted online casinos of the 2000s were effectively supercharged in 2018 when the Supreme Court ruled that states could permit sports betting. Today, less than a decade later, 39 states have chosen to do so, with New Yorkers' \$20 billion in annual sports bets leading the nation.

Though this wagering is nominally confined to digital platforms, it's

becoming an increasingly visible feature of public space. Following the rollout of mobile sportsbooks, ads were plastered across the city and on mass transit, promoting the various platforms and their “no sweat” signup bonuses. DraftKings became the official and exclusive sports betting partner of Madison Square Garden, the Knicks and the Rangers. The Brooklyn Nets were broadcast by Bally Sports, named for the gambling conglomerate, until 2024 when they rebranded to FanDuel Sports Network.

That same year, billboards in Times Square began to pepper the passing crowds of tourists and commuters with new gambling propositions. Manhattan-based firms Kalshi and Polymarket offered prediction markets that extend far beyond the outcomes of sports, though they offer odds on those too. These platforms allow users to buy futures contracts on everything from hourly fluctuations in the weather, to staffing changes at the White House—even the likelihood of missile strikes in Iran or the return of Jesus Christ. Many New Yorkers, consciously or not, followed the fluctuations of the 2025 mayoral campaign through data published by these platforms. Capitalizing on the media frenzy surrounding the election, these bookmakers even took a jab at the mayor-to-be by opening “free” popup grocery stores.

It is in this context that the deferred implementation of the 2013 ballot measure authorizing new commercial casino licenses has come due. Developers, already

keen to capitalize on the city's recovering economy following the COVID-19 pandemic, followed these consumer trends. They invested tens of millions of dollars into developing proposals alone, which, if constructed, would amount to billions of dollars in investment.

A coterie of accomplished former officials were appointed to the Gaming Facility Location Board, and charged with evaluating proposals along four criteria: economic activity and business development (70% weight), local impact siting (10%), workforce enhancement (10%), and diversity framework (10%). Expansion bids for existing facilities at the Aqueduct Racetrack in Southeast Queens and Empire City in Yonkers, were considered early favorites. They already had an established presence in their respective communities and they could open their doors and generate tax revenue years before any competitors. Three proposals emerged in Manhattan and emphasized their proximity to established tourist and visitor destinations: Freedom Plaza neighbored the UN; The Avenir was adjacent to the Javits Center and Hudson Yards; and Caesars Palace was in the heart of Times Square. Two applications, Metropolitan Park and Bally's Bronx at Ferry Point Park, focused on how their proposals redeveloped underutilized sites, albeit outside of Manhattan's downtown. The sole proposal in Brooklyn, The Coney, tried to do a bit of both, acknowledging the entertainment history of the neighborhood and promising that

its 1.5 million square foot multi-block redevelopment had the ability to turn it into more than just a summertime destination.

In many respects, these projects were a planner's dream—neighborhood-defining proposals backed by developers with endless pockets. The challenge, therefore, didn't come down to value engineering out the ambitious goals for green space expansion and affordable housing. Rather, it was figuring out how to use those benefits to mollify a public skeptical of the casino at each proposal's core. In Midtown East, for example, Soloviev Group and Mohegan enlisted the Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) and OJB Architects to create a plan for Manhattan's largest vacant lot. Their 4.1 million square foot master plan featured two hotels and two residential towers atop a meticulously programmed 5-acre park. According to BIG and OJB, it was this greenspace that was at the heart of their proposal—not the gaming floors. In fact, their site plan conveniently placed the economic engine of the development beneath the park, rendering it invisible in most marketing materials.

This “don't look behind the curtain” strategy characterized most proposals, however some teams dared to emphasize the obvious. The Coney's multi-block design, wrapping around the original Nathan's Famous hotdog stand, was presented to the community through a series of kaleidoscopic renderings depicting the corner of Surf and Stillwell as a vibrant, modernized

version of the historic neighborhood.

Neither strategy proved effective—the public called Freedom Plaza bland, soulless, and sterile; while The Coney was destructive and unserious. These complaints would prove too loud for officials to ignore. The most effective strategy, unsurprisingly, was spending big on lobbying. LLCs representing the two Queens-based applicants, Resorts World and Metropolitan Park, spent a combined \$6.7 million dollars in 2025 and represented the second and third highest spenders for all disclosed lobbying. Although these projects were the subject of critique similar to The Coney and Freedom Plaza, they were largely championed by elected officials and faced little-to-no coordinated opposition. Queens Borough President Donovan Richards even called them his “pocket aces.”

Applicant teams had until June 27, 2025 to secure entitlements and submit their applications to the GFLB. Ahead of this deadline, backroom negotiations and politicking reached a fever pitch. Cohen's Flushing casino appeared to have been killed when the local state senator refused to introduce the required parkland alienation legislation. Cohen ultimately got through to another senator who broke with standard procedure and introduced the bill himself in exchange for public improvements to his district. Bally's in The Bronx had a similarly gloomy prognosis when the City Council rejected the project at the direction of the local member. Then-Mayor Eric Adams

resurrected the proposal by issuing a rare veto, claiming that the Council unfairly put their “fingers on the scale.”

Before that dust could settle, applicant teams began preparing for the next level of scrutiny from a bespoke set of public-facing panels known as Community Advisory Committees (CACs). These panels looked to the same criteria as the GFLB, hosted a

to the “wrongs of Robert Moses,” Freedom Plaza as a fresh take on LeCorbusier's towers in the park, and The Coney as a “vision of renewal.” The teams without catchy taglines leaned on the traffic improvements, infrastructure upgrades, and green space expansions planners worked for years to develop.

The CACs proved dramatic and tensions flared on September 17th

four teams in December.

For a few weeks things were relatively quiet. Opportunities for public comment had concluded, and without developers and politicians coming face to face with each other and the community, the news cycle moved on. But as if right on cue, the public was gifted one final surprise. The developers for MGM Empire City released a statement



Freedom Plaza Site Plan, courtesy of the Bjarke Ingels Group.

series of public meetings, and listened as the community voiced their support or concern. Ultimately they also held a vote with the potential to kill a project. The CACs were different for each project, made up of appointees by elected officials at all levels of state and local government. In order to win their support, applicants emphasized their grand visions for economic development and community benefits. Planners and marketing consultants worked hand in hand to pitch Metropolitan Park as an antidote

when SL Green CEO, Marc Holliday—furious over losing both his Times Square proposal and his chance at a \$10 million bonus—called the committee “despicable.” Namecalling continued in Queens where a member of Metropolitan Park's opposition was kicked out of a hearing for calling supporters “sellouts.” By the end of September, the CACs relegated half of the applicant pool to “Never Built New York,” killing all three projects in Manhattan as well as The Coney. The stage was set for the GFLB to select from a field of

on October 14th announcing a change of heart—they were withdrawing their expansion bid in Yonkers. Officially, they cited a change to their financial assumptions, but supporters wanted a better answer. Yonker's Mayor and steadfast booster of the project, Mike Spano was certainly caught off guard, insisting the Governor start an investigation. Reporters quickly pointed to possible influence from the Oval Office, as the President stood to gain a nine-figure sum if Bally's  
(Continued on page 64)



Property management and security technologies.

## THE NEW LANDLORDS

### How PropTech Extracts Value From New York Renters

By Sara Rabb

The mechanisms through which renters' rights are intruded upon are becoming increasingly digital. As urban housing becomes more costly and more digitized, a new layer of extraction has swelled: one where property is not only a financial asset but also an online data commodity. In today's market, property technology is reshaping rental dynamics, reproducing inequality, and provoking new forms of resistance.

#### What Is PropTech?

PropTech, short for property technology, is digital platforms,

algorithms, data systems, technologies, and AI tools that act as mediators for real estate sector participants. PropTech is now foundational to almost every real estate transaction. In 2023, the global proptech market was valued at \$27.3 billion and is projected to grow at over 15 percent annually through 2032. In New York City, 78 percent of real estate firms now report using AI for market analysis and predictive modeling.

Zillow and StreetEasy are household names for online apartment searching, but the industry has an enormous suite of additional products. There are online real

estate marketplaces, data analytics firms, property managers, smart home technologies, transaction managers, and more. EliseAI, a NYC startup, builds AI assistants that automate tenant communications. It schedules, answers lease queries, and provides resident services without any human involvement. Another NYC company named Findigs uses AI to streamline tenant screenings. Other physical technologies include security cameras, online payment systems, video intercoms, or electronic locks. A new technology, Latch, controls keyless front door entries all around the city.

Although these platforms attempt to reduce friction and stress for tenants, economic value is prioritized over tenant care when the two conflict. The convenience of these management and marketplace services can be beneficial, but these building technology upgrades also often raise rents and discreetly monitor tenants. Large institutional landlords aggregate data to sell, or use it to target certain tenant demographics. Rental marketplace platforms like StreetEasy charge users fees only to profit once again by selling user information to third parties.

Digital platforms extract value from the data users generate simply by participating, a dynamic coined as 'platform capitalism.' Every apartment search, rental application, and background check generates data that someone owns and profits from. PropTech optimizes convenience and seamlessness, but this framing obscures the exploitative relations of property and labor behind the speculation. Digital rental platforms consolidate market power. The critical questions are: who gets to control the platform and what gets extracted?

#### Dual Value Extraction

Traditional landlordism extracts value from physical property. PropTech introduces a second asset class atop the first: technological property, comprising digital infrastructure, software, and data that govern every stage of the rental process.

Individual landlords primarily use proptech to amplify returns on

their physical assets. They use rent-setting algorithms, smart access systems, and automated background checks to maximize income from existing housing. But large institutional landlords are 'dual asset-holders.' They extract rent from both the physical housing and the platforms and data they own or consolidate. Tenant data is then capital, a product in its own right.

Internet infrastructure itself further perpetuates extraction. The data centers and servers that run the cloud are often owned by

real estate investment trusts, or REITs. Equinix, "the internet's biggest landlord," started as a regular technology company. But in 2015, it successfully pleaded to the IRS that its data centers were legally equivalent to rentable real estate. After prevailing as a REIT, Equinix pays little to no corporate income tax as long as it distributes most of its profits to shareholders. These data centers that process and store rental applications are themselves financialized assets, circulating among global investors who profit from them the same way they profit from buildings. The



Equinix NY9 Data Center at 111 8th Ave New York, NY 10011.

landlord extracts rent and the platform extracts data. Then, the server housing that data extracts value through financial markets.

### Tenant Data and Bias

The consequences of proptech monopolies go beyond affordability. Algorithmic tenant screenings pull everything from credit history to eviction records to prior lease payments. These histories are founded on structural racism, income inequality, and the legacy of redlining. The outcomes of these algorithms reproduce disenfranchisement of renters.

### Urbanism and Economics

Researcher Julien Migozzi studied biased rental platforms in Cape Town that automated screenings based on credit scoring developed during apartheid that classified the population by race. The algorithms used financial data, but the scoring metrics were computed in a context of profoundly racialized debt and housing inequality. Sorting by strict good and bad scores reproduced sorting by race. The same dynamic can be observed in American cities, where 'objective' algorithmic risk assessors recreate redlined geographies.

In NYC, there is a pattern of facial recognition and smart access technology being deployed in affordable housing complexes located on rezoning borders. A 2022 report from the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project documents this pattern. When an area is being rezoned, it's expected that property values will rise and landlords will attempt to uproot low-rent units. Proptech tools can identify lease

violations by flagging for possible unapproved actions, pets that could be unregistered, or visitors that could be subletters. This serves as a targeted acceleration of the displacement of rent-stabilized tenants. A surveillance startup named Teman overtly advertised itself to landlords as a tool for catching violations that justify eviction. Its founder said the company "evicted over 600 stabilized tenants in the last two years." Professor Erin McElroy,



whose work critically examines tech-centric housing exploitation, and their co-authors in housing and civil rights advocacy suggest that landlord technologies automate gentrification and carcerality by deploying military grade surveillance under the guise of safety while actually speeding up displacement.

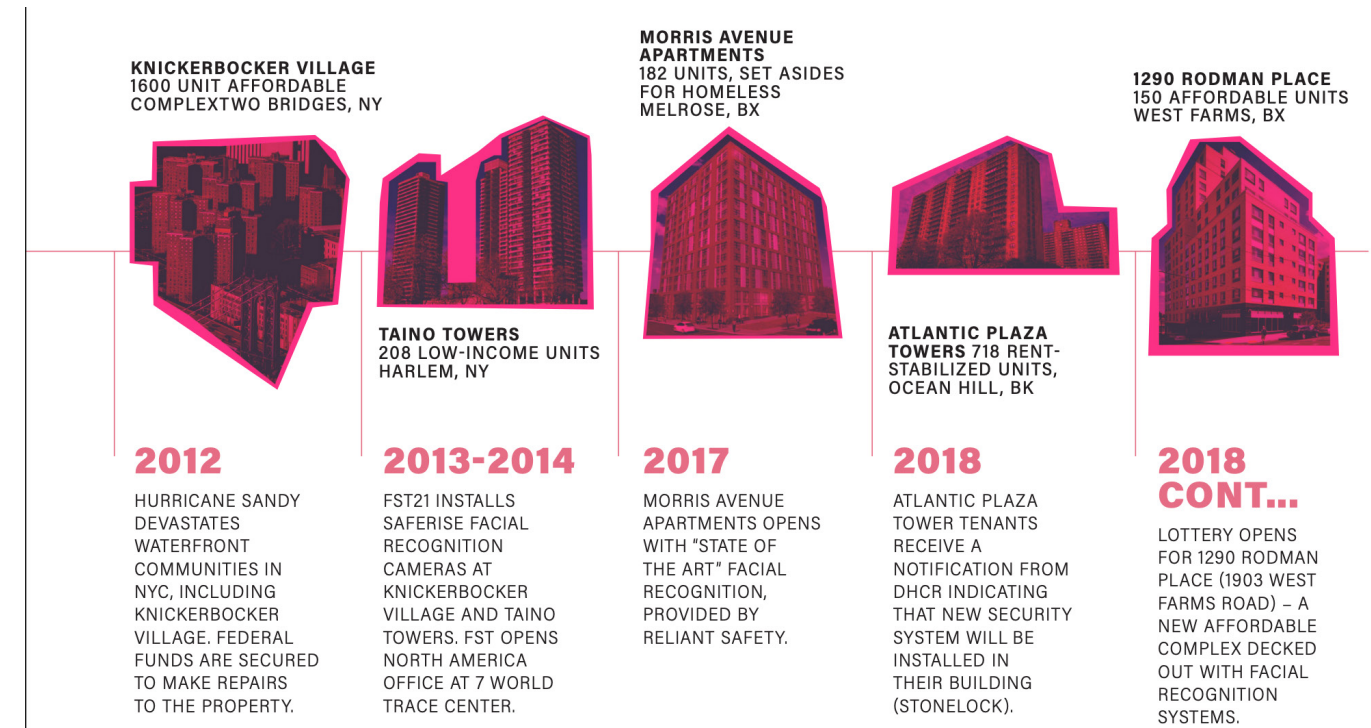
The screening platforms generate revenue from their tenant and

landlord users. User data is used to build proprietary scoring models, and then these scoring models are used against renters, constraining their housing options. The renter is both the product and the customer. Like many of the technology interventions intended to increase speed and landlord profits, it does not guarantee that new or longtime residents will be living in better physical conditions.

### Speculative Value and the Undersupplied Housing Market

Proptech valuations raise speculative value, driving rent prices even higher. Rent-setting tools have more power in constrained markets like New York City; because rental demand is extremely high, landlords have less need to compete by reducing prices. Rent-setting software's suggestion to raise prices is more normalized.

Rent-setting algorithms have not been implemented without resistance. Rent-setting software, YieldStar, for example, fed aggregated rent data from its user network into a pricing algorithm that suggested landlords raise rents beyond what they would have set independently. Multiple lawsuits, including one brought by the Department of Justice, accused its founder RealPage and Yardi of running an illegal rent-setting monopoly. Assembly member Linda Rosenthal said, "Real estate giants are sidestepping the free market, and their tenants, by supplying price fixing software with non-public data to enhance their profits. Our antitrust laws must reflect the world around us... they're training algorithms." In



Left: Example of SafeRent tenant screening score. Above: Timeline of Facial recognition deployment in affordable housing complexes.

June 2025, New York became the first state to ban this type of software. RealPage and Yardi continue to lobby for a ten year moratorium on local restrictions, but New York's ban stands as a precedent.

After the 2008 crisis, 'rentability,' the measure of what qualifies to be rented out, expanded to a broader range of assets. Spare rooms, parking spots, and co-living beds are profiteered via the same tools as housing units. Ironically, even co-living arrangements meant to be a solution to the crisis are subject to housing financialization and commodification. Companies market multiple occupancy rentals as a convenient and flexible service rather than a symptom of structural undersupply and exclusion.

### Proptech Reclaimed

The same digital infrastructure that enables extraction and surveillance also enables a counter resistance: accountability. Rent

freeze movements, community land trusts, and cooperative housing models are pushing back against this new value extraction and working to sustain social housing. Tenants are using proptech itself, turning real estate institutions' weapons into their own. Tenant organizations use proptech tools to log landlord violations and demand accountability. City agencies are piloting proptech to improve policy enforcement and fair housing outcomes.

Community land trusts offer a structural alternative. The Interboro Community Land Trust in East New York, operating in a neighborhood heavily targeted by landlord tech and rezoning, acquires land to develop permanently affordable, tenant-controlled housing outside speculative markets. The Northern Manhattan Community Land Trust organizes against displacement in Washington Heights and Inwood, preserving social housing while

resisting the surveillance infrastructure that landlords deploy along with gentrification. Cooperative housing models like the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board have helped NYC tenants convert buildings into limited equity co-ops, removing units from the speculative market entirely.

Tenants in market and rent-stabilized housing can also organize or take legal action against landlord abuse. The tenants at Atlantic Plaza Towers in Brooklyn organized from 2018-2020 when their landlord tried to install a biometric facial recognition entry system in their majority Black affordable housing complex. Tenants said the system was designed to surveil them and ultimately remarket the building to higher income renters. Their collective pressure stopped the rollout of surveillance infrastructure. Even against institutional power, their organizing was successful. In a

2024 landmark civil rights lawsuit, *Louis v. SafeRent Solutions*, Mary Louis sued an AI screening algorithm for factoring in non-tenancy-related debt such as medical bills and student loans, which disparately impacted Black and Latino public housing voucher holders. The case mandated SafeRent to stop issuing accept/decline scores for applicants with vouchers, and the company paid a \$1.175 million settlement. Black box algorithms continue to be challenged in property management.

Several free tools have also been developed for tenant empowerment. A ‘Who Owns What’ tool by JustFix exposed the now-closed Ink Property Group for harassment across multiple buildings and thousands of HPD and DOB violations. In 2022, a New York Attorney General settlement had the company pay back \$400,000 to tenants and revert dozens of apartments to

rent-stabilized status. In California, the Tenant Power Toolkit helps roughly 500 tenants per month file eviction defenses. This accounts for about 10 percent of all evictions filed monthly in Los Angeles County. Professor Erin McElroy created a Landlord Tech Watch tool that maps the deployment of surveillance tech across cities.

Even city agencies are stepping in. The NYC Economic Development Corporation’s Proptech Pilot Program, launched in partnership with JLL and UrbanSense, aims to use proptech equitably in NYCHA. It explicitly addresses that most proptech innovation serves Class A and luxury assets. What unites these efforts is a refusal to accept extraction as inevitable. Tenants, lawyers, organizers, and even some city agencies are reclaiming the tools of surveillance for accountability. The question remains whether resistance can swell before the platforms

consolidate further.

The digitization of rental housing has deepened the patterns of traditional landlordism. Physical property operates across physical housing, digital platforms, data repositories, and the server rooms housing it all. The tools being deployed for large landlords are sophisticated, consolidated, and normalized, while the tools available to tenants remain fragmented and gatekept. What is clear is that proptech reflects the priorities of whoever controls it, and so far, that has overwhelmingly been on the landlord side of rent relations. The question of whether the digital infrastructure of housing can be meaningfully reclaimed – for accountability, for organizing, and for genuine housing stability – depends on who gets to sit at the table when these systems are designed, regulated, and deployed. **UR**



Atlantic Plaza Towers.

City Dwellers Unite and Uplift City Dwellers Unite and Uplift City Dwellers Unite

# EYES ON THE STREET

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Minneapolis May Day Celebration 2026.

## I <3 MINNEAPOLIS

**M**inneapolis is love thy neighbor in the truest sense. I feel like there's something special about Minneapolis, where you invest deeply in your community."

In March 2026, I interviewed my friend Kat Lochen, a life long resident of South Minneapolis, about the city we both love dearly. For those who have never visited the city, Minneapolis is home to strong neighborhoods, a high quality of life, and a thriving small business culture. The streets are verdant and lined by big Victorian houses and townhomes. Minneapolis proper has a population of around 430,000 and is the dense beating heart of a

sprawling metropolitan region. The character of Minneapolis is defined by its commitment to activism, collectivism, and love for one's neighbors. The Minneapolis residents I know are fiercely loyal to their city and love it to its core, and this ferocious love is palpable in the urban fabric of the city.

"I learned a lot about what community looks like and what it looks like to care about the people around you growing up in South Minneapolis. My parents knew all of our neighbors' names. They go to our next door neighbor's house to play cribbage and are over the fence talking to each other."

What it means to love Minneapolis

By Tony Maras

has changed dramatically since 2020. Minneapolis is now a city whose geography is defined by grief. In 2020, George Floyd was murdered at the intersection of Chicago Ave and E 38th St in South Minneapolis, prompting uprisings that pushed the Black Lives Matter movement to the global scale. Then, on August 27th, 2025 a mass shooting at the Annunciation Catholic School in South Minneapolis claimed the lives of two schoolchildren. In 2026, Operation Metro Surge, a vicious new front in President Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration, resulted in the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by Federal ICE agents. The scars left by these acts

of violence are visible on every corner of Minneapolis. Walls are plastered with images of these fallen Minnesotans and messages calling on its citizens to resist and come together as a community. This geography of grief has called into action an outpouring of solidarity, resistance, and strength. Minneapolis, which was formerly known as the home of Prince and a city of many lakes, has found itself at the center of dramatic social upheaval. During our conversation, Kat and I reflected on Operation Metro Surge and the effect it had on her community. Our conversation began with the impact of George Floyd's murder on the city, illustrating how both events are deeply intertwined.

"I don't know how else to say it but South Minneapolis rides and dies for its community. And I think that the reaction to the heartbreak [of the murder of George Floyd] was a sound wave across Minneapolis and across the world. People have seen it [police brutality] happen time and

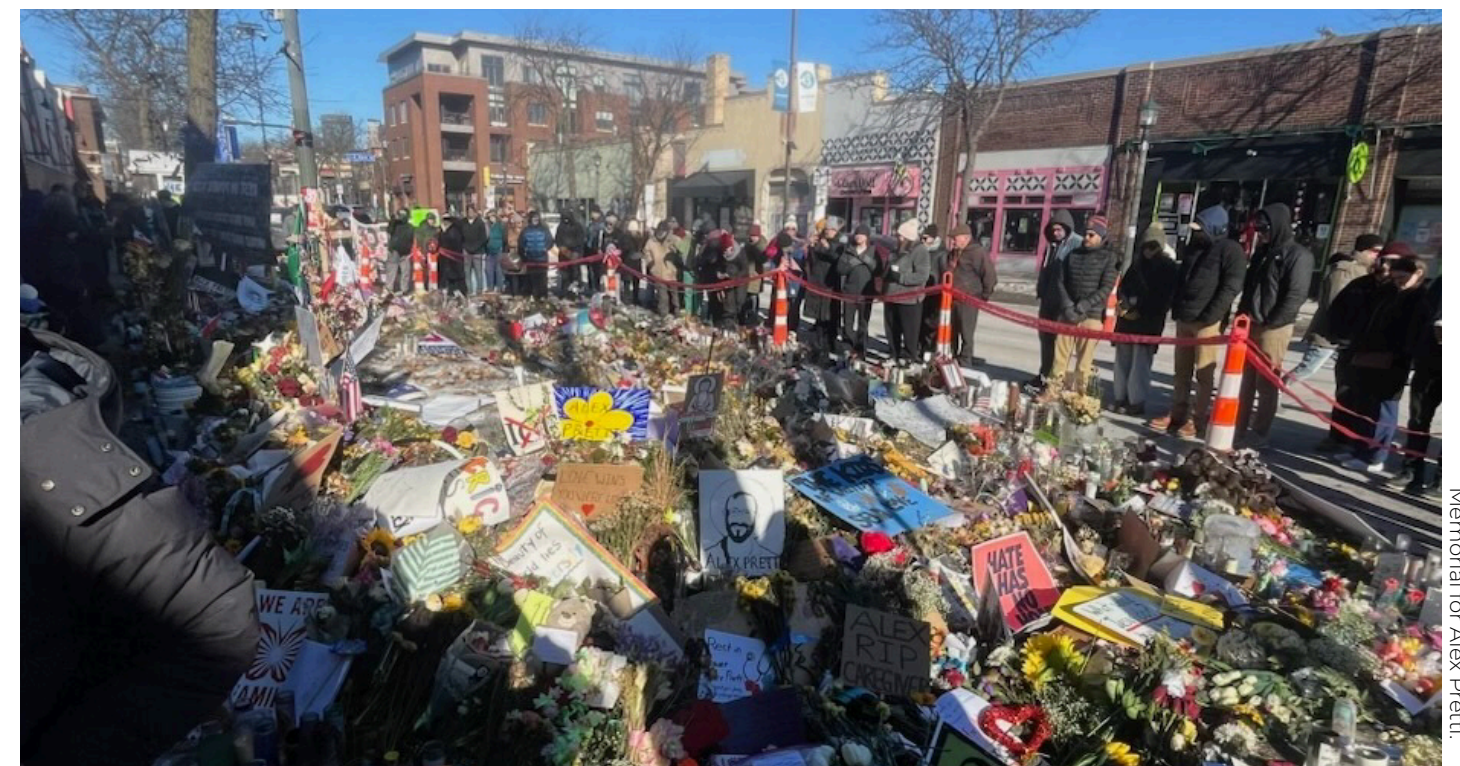
time again, it was one of those moments where it felt like enough is enough."

After the murder of George Floyd, the people of Minneapolis created extensive grassroots action networks and mutual aid efforts. When President Trump deployed 3,000 federal ICE Agents to occupy Minneapolis and carry out his deportation agenda, the city was ready to fight back. The networks that had been active in 2020 were ready to spring back into action. During the summer of 2020, AIM (American Indian Movement), which was founded in Minneapolis in 1968, had created neighborhood patrols where volunteers in brightly colored vests monitored the streets for police brutality. In 2026, the patrols returned to watch for ICE raids and alert neighbors of danger.

"All of these groups [activist networks created in 2020] shifted their focus over to protecting families and neighborhoods and raising money for families to be

able to pay rent and pay for groceries during Metro Surge. You have groups like AIM and the Indigenous Protectors Movement that have been in Minneapolis for a long time. You also have the Black Collective Foundation of Minnesota that was started in 2020, that fundraised and organized during Metro Surge. But what really was helping the effort was Instagram. Instagram stories were used as a way to broadcast everything that was happening. You have the account Defend 612 [Minneapolis' area code] that was amazing for signing up for volunteering positions and getting food out to people. You also have independent journalists like Unicorn Riots flying into Minneapolis during Metro Surge and really opening people's eyes to what was happening on the ground. 2020 was a study packet for what was to come in 2026."

Resisting Metro Surge was a monumental collective effort. The people of Minneapolis were quick to rally and fight back against this



Memorial for Alex Pretti.

new occupation. Through art, marches, checkpoints, neighborhood watches, food and supply drives, and escorting at-risk people to and from work, residents were able to push back against the ICE siege and defend their community. The bright orange "ICE alert" whistle became a symbol of this resistance and the power of ordinary people coming together to fight fascism. Every moment became an opportunity to fight back, and the resistance felt all-consuming.

Minneapolis residents had been watching the nearby ICE occupation in Chicago in September 2025, preparing for the inevitable arrival in their own city. The slow trickle of ICE agents into Minneapolis reached a boiling point when Renee Good was killed by an ICE agent on January 7th in the front seat of her car. Her tragic death on the south side of Minneapolis supercharged the resistance efforts, and what was already a bleak situation became a full-blown emergency.

"Immediately action was taken, MIRAC [Minnesota Immigrant Rights Action Committee] organized a vigil for her and there was a protest that day. At the spot she was murdered, there was protesting all day. Everybody swarmed to that street and protested against ICE. That was the moment for most people when resistance really started. People woke up, stepped outside, and started buying whistles."

The main vessel for organizing and resistance efforts was Signal, the encrypted chat platform, where neighborhood-specific group chats

buzzed with activity. The Minneapolis street grid enabled the creation of distinct coverage zones for each neighborhood Signal chat. In these chats, participants planned daily ICE watches and actions in response to the frenzy of ICE activity. It was in her neighborhood Signal chat where Kat first learned that a Minneapolis resident had been shot just a few blocks from her home. She remembers this morning vividly, and it was



Stop signs seen across Minneapolis 2025-2026.

emotional for her to recount.

"After Renee Good was murdered, two and a half weeks passed, and then Alex Pretti was murdered. But within those two and a half weeks, there was so much organizing happening, so much so that it felt like things might be okay. I got out of the shower at 8:30 in the morning and I saw a Signal message that said someone was shot at 26th and Nicollet. That was in my Signal group zone, the area that we patrol, and it's very close to

where I live. I saw that and thought, oh my God, I hope they live. I hope to God they live. And then within minutes, there's a video on Reddit and you can see that it is an execution. That moment was the most terrifying. Another person dead, killed in the street. It makes you sick to your stomach knowing that is what's happening on the street. It is on a recording and we're still being lied to about it, because without four different people standing there recording it would have been completely covered up. And so in that moment things became even more devastating and it felt like this was never going to be okay."

I asked Kat why the days after the deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti didn't throw the city into disarray, as the murder of George Floyd led to several days of looting and unrest in 2020. I remember texting her the day of Pretti's murder; we both expressed concern about what the coming night would bring. We knew that Trump was fishing for a riot as a pretext to crack down on Minneapolis even harder. But that is not what happened.

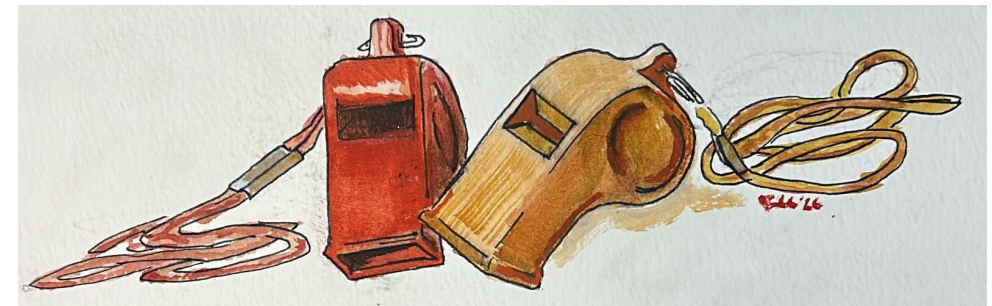
"The murder of George Floyd, and what ensued after, was an incredibly deep wound that had been open for so long and in the past few years had finally started to heal. Then Metro Surge happened, and I think that people were so determined to not let that wound open back up that everyone came together and protected the community in the best way possible. We were not going to let the city burn this time. We were going to protect the small businesses. We were going to

protect our neighbors and make sure nothing was going to happen to them and that the city would come out on top. It was one of those moments where we were like, we can't have more violence that comes from this. We can't bring more pain to ourselves and to the community. We need to come together."

I asked Kat what it means to love your city through turmoil.

"It was heartbreaking to watch a city that you have seen at a moment where it is so beautiful, bustling, and happy to be burned down in 2020. That summer, I literally watched ash fall down from the sky. However, I think it means turning to those people that you grew up around, turning to your neighbor that you see everyday, turning to the person that you walk by on the way to the bus, and knowing that you're not alone, and that this person cares just as much as you do .... So to love a city through turmoil is to uplift and love the people

Protestors in Bryant Square Park in winter 2025.



ICE alert whistles carried by Minneapolisians. Illustration by Benjamin Cornwell.

around you."

While watching the news unfold in January, I was terrified for this city that I love. Throughout the duration of Operation Metro Surge, several of my friends were detained, while ICE agents were deploying nerve gas just steps away from the front doors of my loved ones. I watched in horror as the Trump administration turned this beautiful city of art, lakes, community, and big leafy elms into a war zone. A different emotion began to build within me as I watched my friends, family, and people of all walks of life in Minneapolis stand up to this occupying force with immense courage. It was pride. I was so

proud of the people of Minneapolis for standing up to autocracy through the collective action of ordinary people and delivering a seismic defeat to the Trump regime.

As someone who thinks about cities every day, I began thinking about this conflict through the lens of urban life and the opportunities it provides for grassroots resistance. The citizens of Minneapolis showed the world how everyday people can resist the new mutation of fascism by communicating and collaborating with each other in urban space. Through the daily ICE patrols and watches, Minneapolisians created their own system and framework of



Protest artwork on Lake Harriet.

community protection, filling in the gaps created by the police and actually protecting the people of the city from this occupying force. The organizers and activists took advantage of the orderly layout of Minneapolis's grid to create an effective network of coverage which was able to make sure no block or corner of the city wasn't watched over and no community member was forgotten. This approach can serve as a blueprint for other American cities as we continue through the Trump regime. Through organized community care, ordinary Americans can successfully resist and stop this existential threat to the welfare of our cities.

These conversations also made me think about the nature of South Minneapolis. It's common in many cities that immigrant neighborhoods are enclaves far

from the center of the city and often pretty isolated. South Minneapolis is a majority immigrant neighborhood and is at the center of the city. It is also a neighborhood full of people who are very politically engaged and politically educated, people who have been through this before and who are actively organizing for their community. There are people with the ability to do ICE watches and daily actions living in the same neighborhoods as the people who are being targeted by ICE and are unable to leave their homes out of fear. It's this community integration and strength that made Operation Metro Surge seem like an embarrassing miscalculation by the Trump administration. Our cities are their strongest when they are diverse and interconnected.

On May 3rd 2026, South Minneapolis celebrated the coming

of springtime with their annual Mayday parade. The parade and gathering, which is a community-run expression of art and music, took on new importance this year. The massive puppets and parade floats now proclaimed resistance and the city's victory over ICE. People dressed in oversized paper mache whistle costumes, and large floats built to resemble a snow plow pushing away the black vehicles used by ICE officers paraded down the streets in a triumphant procession through the Powderhorn neighborhood. Community members lining the route cheering on the revelers, holding signs of solidarity. The parade culminated in Powderhorn Park, just blocks away from where Renee Good was murdered, in a celebratory dance around the big Mayday Tree of Life effigy to the tune of "You Are My Sunshine". Minnesotans are no stranger to the ecstasy that comes with the return of spring. After the horrors of the ICE winter, Minneapolitans are embracing the spring with a new fervor. Flowers bloom and the city has emerged stronger, more resilient, and more full of love than ever before. **UR**

#### Author's Note

Thank you Kat for talking to me about Minneapolis and those dark weeks in January. I met Kat during our undergraduate stint at the University of Minnesota Duluth and I am grateful to call her my friend. She is loving, fiery, creative, and powerful... much like the city of Minneapolis itself.

I also want to dedicate this article to Renee Good, Alex Pretti and the many people who were injured, abused, and abducted at the hands of ICE Agents in Minneapolis and across Minnesota.



Protestors crossing the Brooklyn Bridge June 9, 2020. Photo by author.

## PUBLIC SPACE IS PUBLIC POWER

### How NYC Took Control of Space During the George Floyd Uprising

By Mir Jivotovski

After months of living under lockdown, the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare structural inequalities that were further exacerbated by a viral video of the police brutally murdering a Black man named George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The video triggered a worldwide protest movement and upended the streets of New York City. Living through one unprecedented event to the next, I felt compelled to participate. From a reimagining of space to

slow viral spread, to a reclaiming of that space by the public in a groundswell of rage, pain, and collective transformation, to a violently enforced return-to-normal, people took over public space in a way that set the stage for a tumultuous decade to come.

At the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, the city that never sleeps stood still. The sole people who left their homes were those who had to because they were considered

essential workers, as well as those who were sick enough to go to the hospital. The only sounds in the streets were emergency vehicles and a nightly 7 p.m. cheer where folks would open their windows and bang pots and pans to applaud frontline workers who put their lives on the line to care for the sick. The public sphere was transformed. Federal ships, tennis stadiums, and convention centers took on hospital overflow while the public stayed home, leaving famously busy New York City streets empty.

The conditions that increased the spread of COVID were conditions of inequality: high-paid white-collar office workers were able to work from home or otherwise receive unemployment checks that totaled more than they made while employed due to federal subsidies, while essential workers who society relied on to function, like grocery store employees, delivery workers, mail people, and first responders, earned the least and lived in more crowded conditions, unable to avoid public transit or close contact with others. Racial minorities, including Black, Indigenous, and Latino groups, were more likely to die of COVID than their white counterparts.

By May 2020, the weather got warmer, COVID cases started to decline, and people emerged back into the NYC streets for the first time in months. Videos of NYPD officers using violence to enforce mask mandates in majority Black

neighborhoods, while standing idly by unmasked white parkgoers just miles away, went viral. Towards the end of the month, an even more devastating video would go viral: the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The video sent shockwaves through the United States and beyond, inspiring mass protests in NYC.

Police alarms replaced ambulance sirens as the city streets transformed once again. People who had been stuck in their homes for months suddenly had a reason to be outside, communing with others for a shared cause. Spontaneous actions sprang up all over the city, with Barclays Center, City Hall, and Washington Square Park serving as common points to rally crowds before or after marches. Thousands took over the streets, making them completely inaccessible to cars, while chanting the refrain “Whose streets?” “Our streets!”, verbally proclaiming that

the streets, bridges, and public squares belong to the people.

This was my first time engaging with political resistance. Mass education was done in real time. Posts circulated on Instagram and Twitter detailing how to prepare for a protest, what to bring, and how to act. Protesters from Hong Kong who had dealt with police violence months earlier shared tactics with advice on how to dress, avoid surveillance, and protect from tear gas and rubber bullets. The Black Lives Matter movement, founded in July 2013, as well as all the movements for Black liberation over the past century, passed along generational, ancestral knowledge using the Internet as a communication tool to get people into the streets safely. Once on the streets, I learned even more from people on the ground. In-person takeovers of public space acted as educational opportunities. From in-person conversations, speeches

given at rallies to rile up crowds, and zine handouts from various political groups and individuals, I was inspired by the reality of the past and new possibilities for a better future.

Even Pride had a new flair in 2020. While the parade was canceled, intersectional queer protests were still on. At the Queer Liberation March, we marched around the West Village advocating for Black and queer rights, reminded that the event that kicked off what we celebrate every year in June, Stonewall, was a riot. The march was joyous, filled with people in drag and bright colors, a deviation from the all-black protest attire folks wore to the many other actions that June. Despite the innocuous celebratory spirit, this was one of many protests to end in police violence. As folks poured into Washington Square Park, police senselessly pepper sprayed the crowd, causing chaos and stress, while also inadvertently pepper spraying themselves. Protestors were ready to care for each other as strangers poured water into victims’ eyes to help flush the chemicals out. The group was quick to point out the absolute incompetence of the police, who could hardly spray a toxic substance – one that is banned in international warfare – without getting themselves too. Our joy and reclamation of public space was seen as a threat to the state, which is why it was violently squashed. By preventing us from safely communing, the state strategically kept us separated and unempowered.

The George Floyd uprising felt like



Queer Liberation March at Stonewall, June 28, 2020. Photo by author.



New Yorkers camp in City Hall Park on June 25, 2020. Photo by author.

we were living through history, like change was not only possible, but inevitable. It felt like the public sphere was ours for the taking. After months of isolation and viewing others as possibly dangerous carriers of a deadly virus, these protests provided a release, a communal moment of empowerment. At protests, all of our needs were met. I could show

up empty-handed and expect to receive, at minimum, water, snacks, and masks, distributed by fellow protest attendees. Street medics took care of folks who had been injured by the police, while jail support groups went to 1 Police Plaza to await the release of those who had been arrested. They wielded cigarettes, pizza, and a friendly face ready to ease some of



Sunrise over the campers in City Hall Park on June 25, 2020. Photo by author.

the shock of being held captive by the state. This was different from the usual way we use public space, where it feels like we're guests who shouldn't overstay our welcome. Instead, since the space was ours, we felt empowered to show up with care.

In late June, a group began a movement to occupy the plaza by City Hall, demanding City Council reduce the NYPD's 2021 budget by \$1 billion. As the late summer sun set, my sister and I brought blankets and sweaters to use as



Protestors in front of City Hall on June 30, 2020. Photo by author.

pillows, giving up attempts to sleep on hard concrete and instead talking to others. Some were old hats, politically active for years, while others like us were starting their journeys with political action. It reminded me of the excitement of a slumber party, where you pitch a tent in your friend's backyard, or summer camp, and in doing so, suddenly you make a home in a new place. While many unhoused folks live like this year-round and face much more violence in doing so, experiencing it en masse as a method of protest felt exhilarating.

When I returned a few days later, the plaza had transformed. Posters and blankets were replaced by a sophisticated cardboard village. There was a medical tent and a constant flow of food donations: pad thai, samosas, sandwiches. There was a small library and a place where you could write letters to folks in prison. You could stay at City Hall all day and have not only your basic needs met, but higher-level ones met too. There was political education, arts, and spiritual programming. Occupy City Hall taught me that not only can

people take back our streets, but we can also reinvent our public spaces. In the face of state suppression, we built something beautiful and abundant, far beyond what the state is able or willing to "give" us.

While marked by very real violence and state repression, the uprising was also fun. In the sunny, bright, long days of June, people communed around the city. My friends and I bought margaritas to-go, as open container laws had been suspended, helping support businesses during the pandemic.

We'd take them to various parks, which became impromptu nightclubs. Groups brought massive speakers and blasted music while others smoked hookah and drank beers. Fireworks were popping off around the city at all hours, day and night, resulting in 80 times more complaints to 311 in June 2020 than in 2019. People felt empowered to use public space as if it truly were ours, in ways that felt wild, unregulated, and possibly chaotic, but also very freeing.

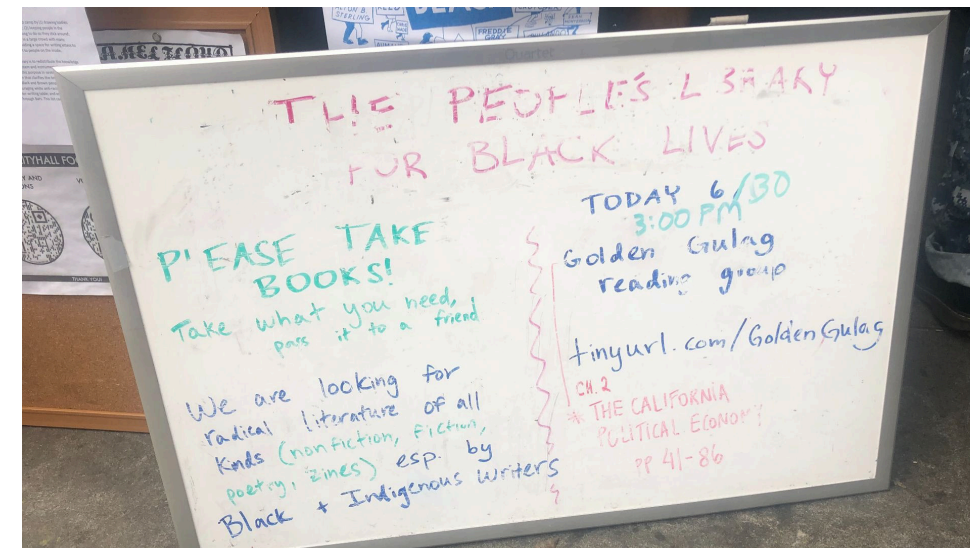
The government did all it could to curb this lawless energy. Hookah in Domino Park didn't last long. Within days, police blocked the park's entrances so folks could only get in via a checkpoint and we were no longer allowed to bring in alcohol despite lifted open container laws. Authorities knew that allowing us to congregate in that way for too long would make it harder to take it away. What happens when the rules are lifted and we have true freedom? This time showed how much people crave communing. Being able to drink in a park rather than doing so at an expensive restaurant meant everyone could be at the party, not just those who could afford it. It meant more mixing of color and class because barriers were lowered. When people take over public space, it empowers them to come together in new and exciting ways.

Life can be so delightful when the people take what's ours, but the state will do whatever it can to prevent us from doing so, choosing to use violence and fear to disempower us. Police showed up to marches fully decked in helmets, shields, and rubber bullets

inspiring the chant, "Why are you in riot gear? We don't see no riot here!" We were angry that our hard-earned tax dollars were going to these flashy tools meant to suppress us rather than provide for our communities.

The Summer of 2020 set the scene for a politically tumultuous decade to come, at least from where I'm sitting squarely in 2026, knowing I don't know what the rest of the 2020s will bring. Following the summer, I felt hopeless. The spaces we had laid claim to were pulled from our grasp as we got back to business as usual. In the coming months, the NYPD budget increased, and NYC elected Mayor Eric Adams, a former police officer who continued investing in policing NYC during his tenure, leading to more cops in the subways and more money to police.

Powerful institutions and governments know there is an existential danger in allowing people to claim space. In the Spring of 2024, Columbia University students inspired college campuses across the United States to set up encampments demanding their universities divest from the state of



Top right and above: Free book exchange in City Hall Park on June 30, 2020. Photos by author.

Israel and its genocide in Gaza. These actions carried the same abundant spirit as Occupy City Hall, with endless food donations, medical support, free book exchange and zine distributions, and political and spiritual programming. Students laid claim to space to flex their power and demand change. Each action was met with swift, violent repression from the state, with universities having police come to their campuses and deploy rubber bullets and tear gas on students.

While it may appear that the state has successfully squashed movements, I feel that with every protest, we are building a muscle. Every time we come together to take up space, we bring more people into the movement, we meet each other, we feel communal power.

And we build infrastructure. As Trump continues to deploy ICE to occupy cities across the United States, communities have mobilized to protect each other and fight back. Neighborhood-based groups patrol streets, coordinate communication networks to notify people of sightings, and share knowledge by



hosting know-your-rights trainings. It's hard to know if this strong response from communities would have been as robust without the groundswell of action in 2020: from COVID mutual aid to the George Floyd uprising, which drew people into political resistance work and showed the power of claiming space.

In the 2020s, reclaiming public space, even for a brief moment, is a practice of building the abundant, caring world we wish to see in our present, as well as an opportunity to educate and radicalize reactionary newcomers. Each time the state gives us a reason to oppose its actions brings an opportunity to come together and fight in collective resistance, as well as bring new people into the work. We learn what it takes to collaborate with each other and achieve something, even if small. Claiming space that is rightfully ours comes hand in hand with political resistance. The George Floyd uprising embodied this spirit, which will undoubtedly permeate through the 2020s and beyond. **UR**

# ANTHRO- POCENE CITY

## PARKS IN CURRENT FLOOD RISK (2020)

TODAY, 906 PARKS (38%) IN NEW YORK CITY ARE LOCATED IN OR ADJACENT TO STORMWATER OR STORM SURGE FLOOD ZONES.

- Rebuild analyzed 2,385 City and State Parks using a 100 ft buffer
- 99% of residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park

2020 Storm Surge  
2020 Stormwater  
Parks in Flood Zone

## PLAYING WITH WATER

### Parks' Role in Flood Resilience

Brooklyn's first "Bluebelt" is coming to Prospect Park, adding "flood resilience" to the list of ways the park serves local residents. Through a new \$68 million plan to tackle flooding, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is building a Bluebelt, or nature-based drainage system, featuring new ponds, rain gardens, and enhancements to existing infrastructure.

In December 2025, the DEP, NYC Parks and Recreation Department, and Prospect Park Alliance (PPA) announced the project at a press conference held at the park's nearly 160-year-old lake, the site of some of the plan's future improvements.

The 60-acre lake was one of the principal features included in the park's original design by Frederick

Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, pioneers of landscape architecture who also designed other major urban parks like Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace. Currently, the lake overflows during heavy rain events, straining the sewer system. With the planned upgrades from the Bluebelt, it will be upgraded to allow water to drain within thirty six hours ahead of major storms, rather than the current drainage time of three weeks, increasing its capacity to capture stormwater.

"The way that the park was designed, everything flows from the north end to the south end, and most of that water is collected by the existing water corridor that goes throughout the park," shared Sam Melton, Assistant Environmental Engineer at NYC

By Sonja Greenan-Neve

Environmental Protection Bureau of Water & Sewer Operations. "It's all one interconnected water system that was designed so that all of the water from the park could be collected within the park. What we see is that during these storms where we have more than four total inches of rainfall or an intensity of more than one and a half inches an hour, the Prospect Park Lake reaches its capacity and there's not enough storage in that lake for the volume of water that's coming in anymore."

Prospect Park and the surrounding Brooklyn neighborhoods have faced increasingly severe flooding in recent years. During Tropical Storm Ophelia in September 2023, rainfall reached 2.5 inches per hour, far exceeding the capacity of the area's sewer system. Flooding from the

storm forced the Prospect Park Zoo to close for eight months due to extensive water damage, resulting in millions of dollars in restoration costs.

The aftermath of Tropical Storm Ophelia made it clear that interventions were needed, both to protect the park and neighboring communities. With a commitment to expand the Bluebelts program in PlaNYC, DEP saw the challenges Prospect Park was facing as an opportunity to implement stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs) alongside existing infrastructure.

"Our Bluebelt program uses a hybrid approach that has a nature-based component but is connected to our storm sewer network. So it's a green and gray approach. The philosophy of the Bluebelts is to slow and shave the peak of a rainstorm," said Sangamithra Iyer, Chief of Bluebelts and UrbanStormwater Planning at the NYC Environmental Protection Bureau of Water and Sewer Operations.

"The 7,500 miles of sewer pipe [that the DEP operates and maintains] do a lot of work in the city when it's raining. But there's a point when they're at capacity and depending on where you are in the city [and] how old the pipe is, they can only capture a certain intensity of rainfall. What we've been seeing in the past several years is the increased frequency of high intensity rainstorms during a short duration," she elaborated.

These projects do not happen overnight. In fact, the Prospect Park Bluebelt – still in the design

phase – took more than three years to develop, including a year-long feasibility study conducted by DEP.

Using hydrologic modeling and field-based analysis to evaluate stormwater movement through the park, along with hyper-local knowledge from Parks and Recreation and the PPA, the study identified areas where the park's natural water systems and surrounding sewer infrastructure become overwhelmed. The findings informed several major interventions, including expanded rain gardens, ponds, and wetlands to capture runoff and manage

drawdown into the lake, and upgrades to the lake's drainage infrastructure, designed to improve the park's stormwater storage capacity and reduce flooding in surrounding neighborhoods.

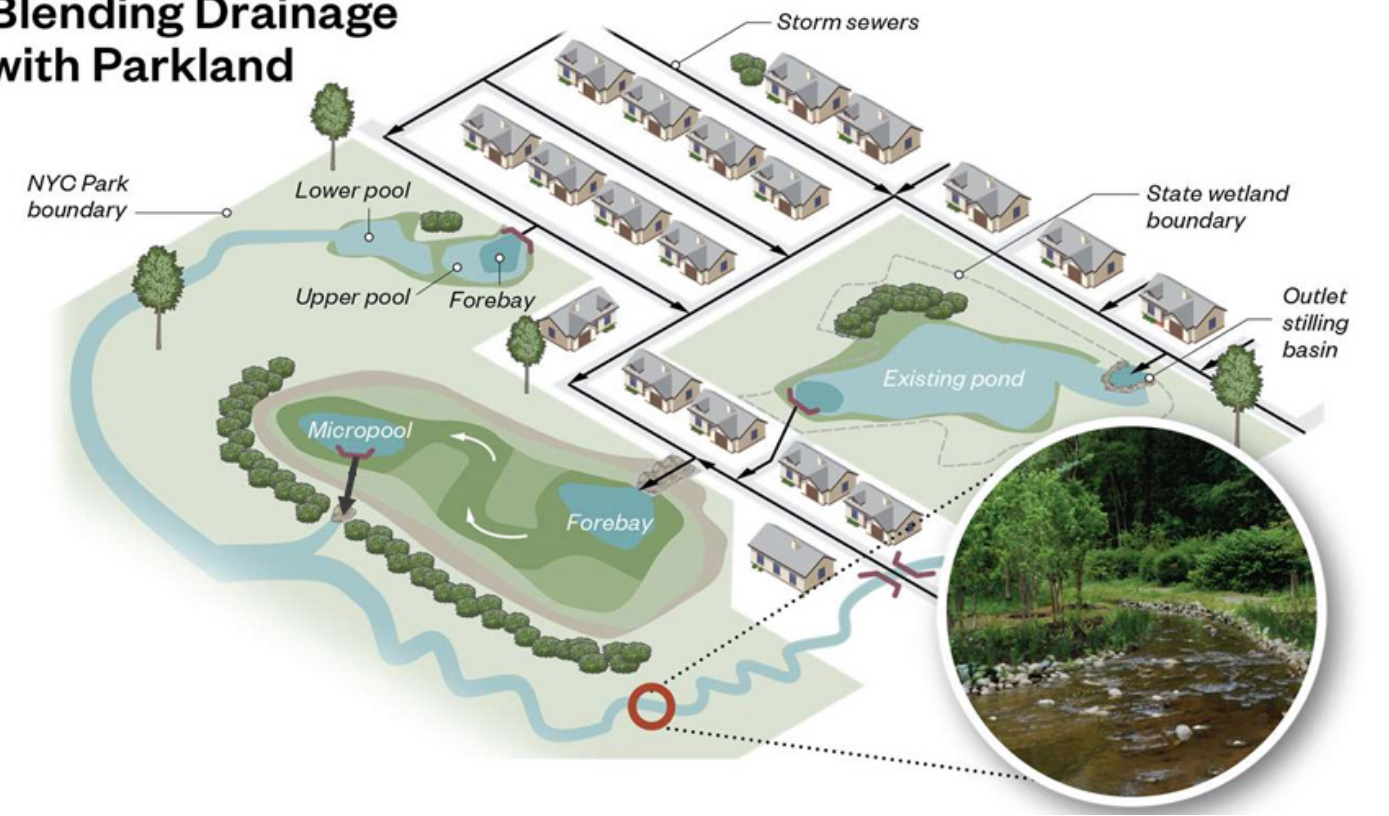
The project relies on joint funding from the City and Prospect Park Alliance. DEP has allocated \$50 million for the Bluebelt, complementing the \$20 million already allocated for PPA's lakeshore restoration plan. Construction won't begin until 2029, with completion expected in 2032.

"It's great the city is trying to utilize green infrastructure like a park to



Prospect Park Intervention Map. Courtesy of DEP.

## Blending Drainage with Parkland



hold water when needed, along with gray infrastructure like sewer upgrades and retention systems." said Nick Nyah, a Gowanus resident and co-founder of FloodLine, an organization helping South Brooklyn community members find local flood solutions. He sees the Prospect Park Bluebelt as one piece of the multi-faceted resilience strategy his neighborhood needs.

The Prospect Park Bluebelt builds on the successful pilot Bluebelt system on Staten Island, which began in the 1990s in response to a lack of adequate storm drainage and sanitary sewer infrastructure in the rapidly developing borough. Today, the Staten Island Bluebelt spans more than 400 acres and consists of a network of wetlands designed for flood control.

As Sangamithra Iyer explains, the approach seeks to work with nature rather than against it. "We're really looking to work with water and incorporate natural and engineered

water features, mimicking streams, ponds, and wetlands to store, convey, filter stormwater, and attenuate that flow," she said. "The bonus of having this ecological approach is that we also can create habitat and open space opportunities and return for wildlife."

The DEP pursued this approach because it was considered to be the most cost-effective solution to Staten Island's stormwater management challenges at the time. It also received broad public support due to its co-benefits, including flood protection, expanded natural areas for both wildlife and people, increased property values, and improved quality of life.

Flooding has always been a reality for NYC, which is surrounded by water and was built on top of wetlands and ponds. However, in 2020, NOAA reclassified NYC from a coastal temperate zone to a humid

subtropical climate zone. In addition to hotter summers and warmer winters, flood risks and conditions continue to worsen as tidal flooding, storm surges, and extreme rainfall all increase due to climate change, impacting residents across all five boroughs and beyond.

Hurricane Sandy's destruction in 2012, which resulted in widespread damage, displacement, and the deaths of 44 New Yorkers, was a paradigm shift, laying bare what's at risk if New York and other cities in the region don't work to better prepare for the increasing threat of flooding.

"Sandy disrupted everything," shared Tyler Taba, Director of Policy and Government Affairs at Waterfront Alliance, an organization focused on the waterfront of the New York and New Jersey harbor. Since 2012, Waterfront Alliance's mission has shifted more and more towards

climate resilience in response to sea level rise and coastal storms like Sandy.

“The climate conversation is heavily skewed toward mitigation and decarbonization, which is critical, but resilience and adaptation are often left out of the big picture,” he said. “We want to make sure that resilience and adaptation are getting that same love, attention, and funding, and it's simply just not in the current landscape.”

In response to Hurricane Sandy, the Federal Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force and US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched Rebuild by Design, an innovative design competition that brought together interdisciplinary teams to develop regional projects aimed not only at rebuilding after the disaster, but also at strengthening resilience against future storms.

One of the projects born from the Rebuild by Design competition is the Hudson River Project, a series of interconnected resiliency parks, all of which are designed to resist rising tides and storm surges, delay stormwater runoff, store stormwater through green and gray infrastructure, and discharge stormwater safely to reduce combined sewage overflows (appropriately named “Resist, Delay, Store, Discharge,” by the Dutch architectural firm OMA).

Across the water from New York City in Hoboken, New Jersey, five member parks in this system have already opened, including the Hoboken ResilienCity Park, a leading example of how parks can be redesigned to mitigate flooding

while continuing to serve the community. The park functions as both climate infrastructure and a vibrant public space, featuring a 2-million-gallon underground storage tank, a basketball court with an integrated drainage system, and aboveground green infrastructure, such as rain gardens, that capture an additional 750,000 gallons of stormwater.

In part due to the impact of the Hudson River Project, Hoboken is now prepared to manage nine out of ten rain events without significant flooding.

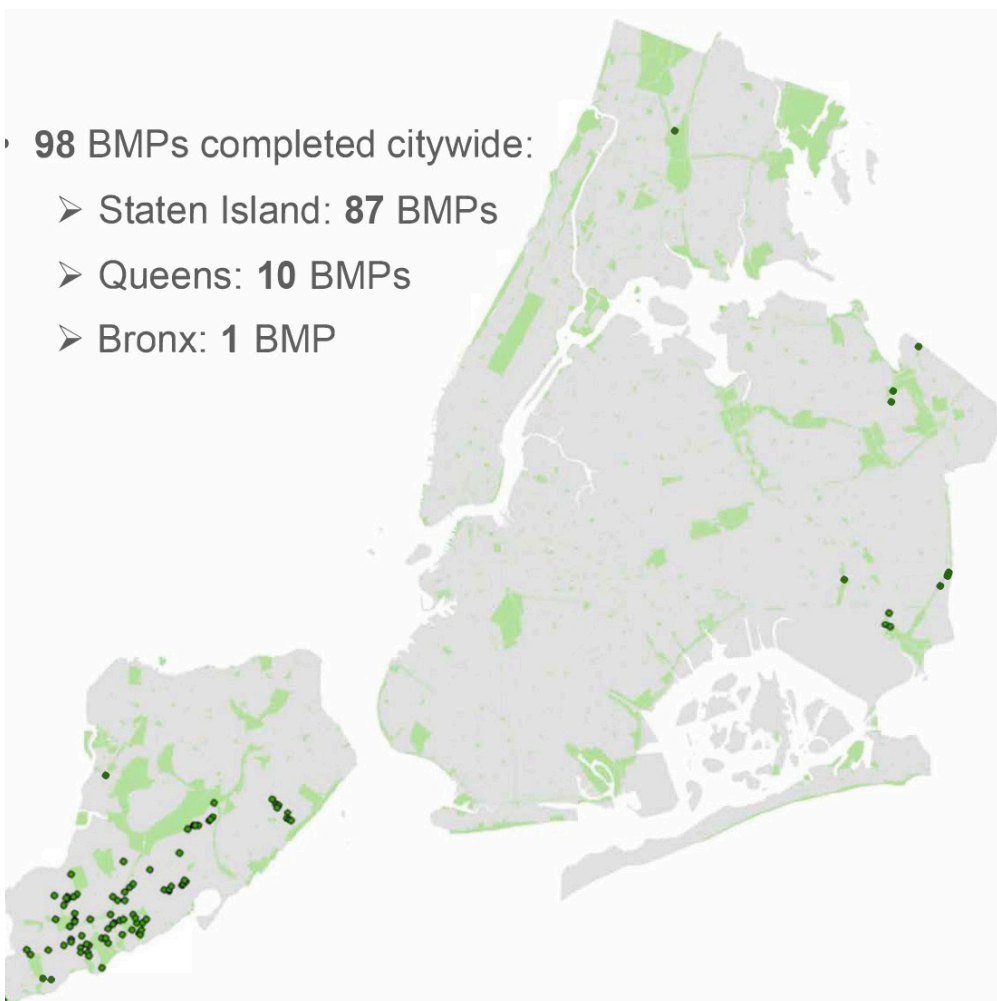
“After a rain event like tropical storm Ophelia in September, 2023, Hoboken was dry in a couple of hours while New Yorkers were still pumping water out of their basements,” recalls Judy Huynh, a

Data Analyst and Project Manager at Rebuild by Design. “Residents can walk around without storm water runoff up to their knees, whereas in New York we are starting to see that happening more and more after extreme weather events.”

While other major post-Hurricane Sandy projects like Living Breakwaters on the south shore of Staten Island and the East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR) Project focus on rising sea levels and coastal flooding along the city’s waterfront, the Prospect Park Bluebelt and Hoboken ResilienCity Park are designed to address New York’s increasingly intense rainfall, an equally devastating effect of climate change that can overwhelm the sewer system and cause

98 BMPs completed citywide:

- Staten Island: 87 BMPs
- Queens: 10 BMPs
- Bronx: 1 BMP



Map of Completed BMPs Citywide. Courtesy of DEP.

## Hoboken’s ResilienCity Park

A national model for flood resilience and climate change adaptation

**1,000,000**  
gallons of rainwater held through underground storage tank

**750,000 +**  
gallons of rainwater held through above ground green infrastructure

**50,000**  
gallons of rainwater held in an underground cistern, which will help irrigate the park

Combating heavy flooding events through the Northwest Resiliency Park, by the numbers:

**8**  
drainage areas designed into the park to collect thousands of gallons of rainwater

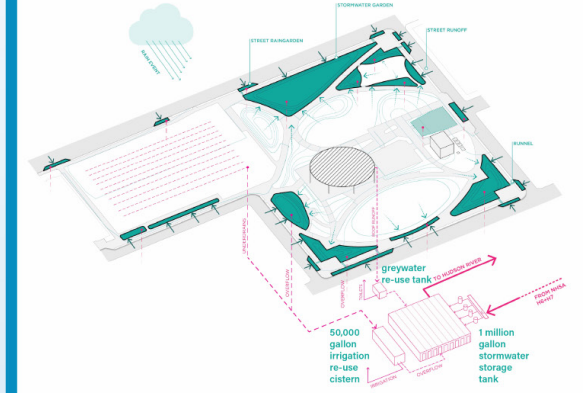
**19**  
rain gardens to collect and treat rainwater during heavy storms

**287**  
trees to be planted in the park to help collect and absorb rainwater

**90%**  
reduction in combined sewer overflow events in Northwest Hoboken



STORMWATER DELAY - STORE - DISCHARGE



ResilienCity Park infographic. Courtesy of the City of Hoboken.

flooding into streets, basements, and subway stations.

“We know today’s risk, that 38% of New York City parks are on a floodplain,” said Judy Huynh, looking at the NYC Parks in Flood Risk Map, created by Rebuild by Design to show the intersection between parks and flood zones. “So they’re already in harm’s way. And by 2100, that increases to 70%. More water is coming, the question is, are we prepared for it? Are we prepared for the next big storm? I don’t think so.”

Parks are on the frontlines, because they are both at extreme risk of flooding, but also play an important role in protecting their surrounding communities. By reframing them as essential climate infrastructure, parks could receive further investment and provide multiple benefits to their communities.

Flooding isn’t just dangerous, it can set off long-term financial consequences like damaged credit, rising debt, and increased risk of

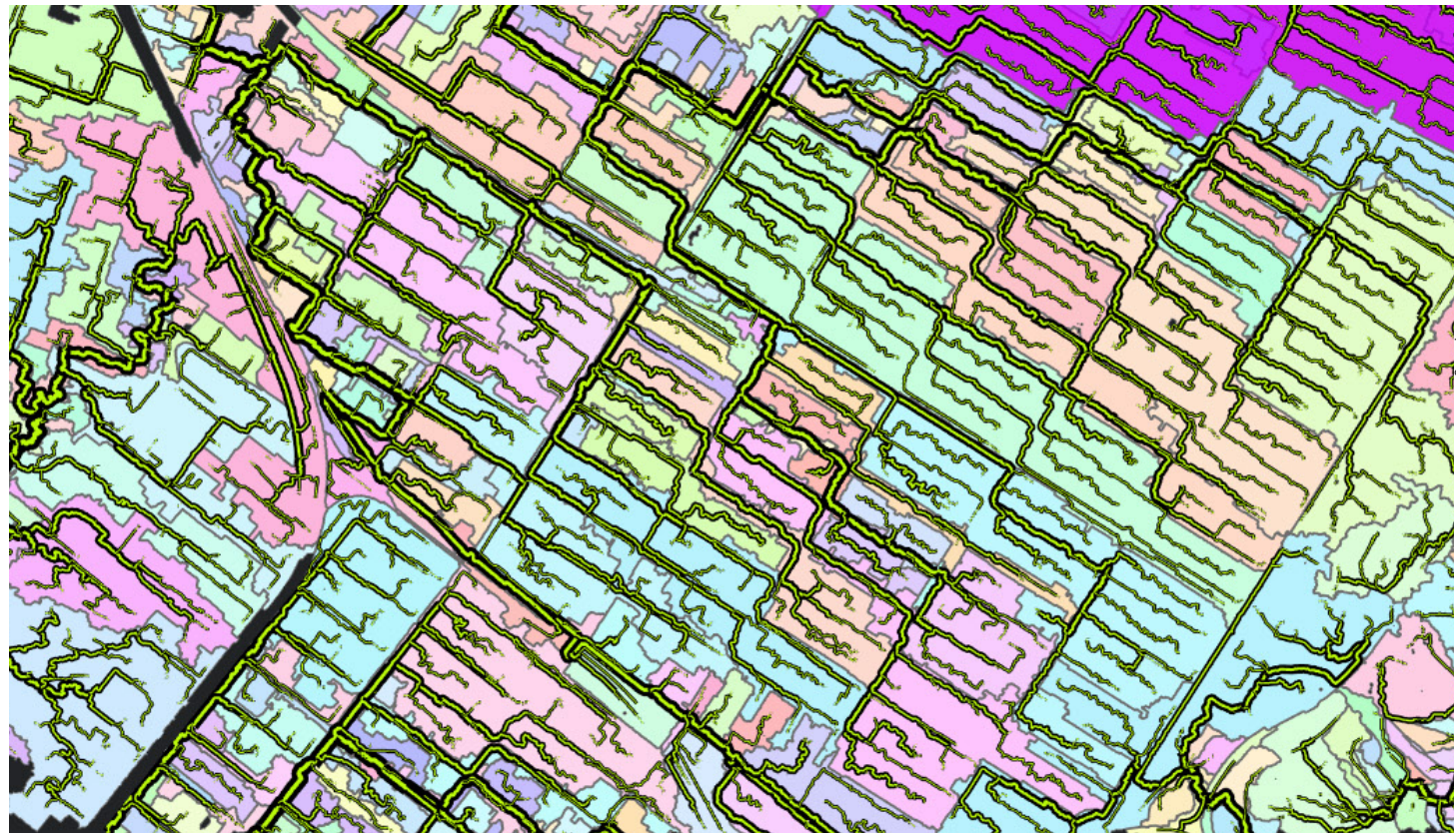
foreclosure, worsening existing inequality. Blue-green infrastructure improvements, like the ones embedded in Hoboken ResilienCity Park and planned for Prospect Park, can create a two to one return on every dollar invested because they reduce damages and recovery costs from disasters while increasing livability for communities every day.

Parks are already providing numerous environmental benefits to the communities they serve. Tree canopy in city parks can help improve air quality and capture carbon while also offering cool shaded areas used by residents looking for a reprieve on hot days (the number of which are increasing each year). Parks across the NYC Parks system divert 4.49 billion gallons of storm water annually, saving the city nearly \$9 million annually in avoided water treatment costs. Projects like the Prospect Park Bluebelt can take this a step further, offering green infrastructure solutions that make

an even bigger dent in the stormwater challenges we are facing.

According to the NYC Department of City Planning, by the 2050s, nearly one in ten New Yorkers will live within the floodplain. The cost of building the infrastructure needed to protect residents from future flooding is immense – after Hurricane Ida, DEP Commissioner Rohit Aggarwala estimated that over \$250 billion would be required to overhaul New York City’s aging stormwater management system in order to protect against similar storms in the future. Such an investment would be both costly and time-intensive, making large-scale implementation unlikely in the near term.

It’s clear that creative alternative approaches are needed. Coupling investment and upgrades in our parks with necessary flood protection measures may be one way to finance climate resiliency while improving public spaces for everyone to use. **UR**



Latent streams in Gowanus, Map by author.

## SOCIAL WATERSHEDS

By Kiron Roy

When NYC’s planners and environmental activists talk about nature in the city, it’s hard to see what they mean. The city’s concrete lays thick over soil, and greenery can feel like an afterthought, glued on to satisfy zoning rules. The wildlife that thrives here seems like it thrives in spite of conditions, rather than because of them. As climate change threatens to unlace the city’s delicate network of life-sustaining systems, it’s tempting to mourn Gotham’s lost paradise of teeming fish and functioning wetlands.

There’s no going back to that paradise-lost, but there could be a way forward which echoes our city’s pre-Columbian past. The land our city sits on had been inhabited by people, and therefore sculpted by them, for a long time before European colonizers encountered an endless hoard of natural bounty

here. The indigenous inhabitants of this place had different relationships to nature than we do, but they did not simply submit to it either. They were active stewards of the land, and understood its needs. This was necessary to sustain life then, just as it is now in an era of environmental breakdown.

Flooding, especially from extreme rain events, is one of the most pressing climate threats to our city. As *The Onion* puts it: “every place on earth has wrong amount of water,” and New York is no exception. Extreme rain events have been noticeably increasing in frequency and intensity in the city, a fact that has prompted the NYC Panel on Climate Change to include sections on heavy downpours lasting hours (rather than days) since their 3rd annual report. Hurricane Ida in 2021 brought more than 3 inches per hour of rainfall

on some parts of NYC, an extraordinary clobbering that resulted in at least 13 deaths. Ida came one week after Hurricane Henri, which dumped 2 inches per hour on the city. 2023’s Tropical Storm Ophelia shut down large parts of the subway with around 1.8 inches per hour. These moments of extreme rainfall are happening over shorter periods too, ejecting moisture from a warming atmosphere in concentrated deluges almost designed to overwhelm the city’s infrastructure.

Moving water tends to remind people that the planet is a living, breathing system. Sometimes this is through a sense of dread or helplessness at the power of nature. Water moving inexorably over land, effortlessly sweeping away trees and cars is a terrible thing to behold. Sometimes though, water is a reminder of the vitality coursing

through our planet. Life blooms where there’s water. Rain on a hot day, washing dirt and sweat into runnels on our skin, flowing to the ground to collect into puddles to splash through. It runs off of streets, seeking hidden creeks beneath the asphalt, pulled by gravity and inscribing an intricate topography.

Most New Yorkers are probably aware of spots in their neighborhoods where puddles form after a rain storm, or where a crosswalk becomes impassable during heavy rains; some may have seen streets turn into a network of rivers when catch basins clog or fail. In these moments of heavy rainfall, it becomes clear that our city is more than concrete layered over earth. It’s a natural system whose puddles we know, whose ephemeral river network is the streets engineered for car traffic. It is a natural environment that has been shaped by human hands, just as it has been for millenia.

### Social Watersheds

Planners and neighborhood organizers might define social watersheds, or small areas of the city where rain collects to a common point in the network of ephemeral streams that flow through the built environment, and which form a geographic basis for community organizing around a specific set of problems

Think about this example: a drop of rain falling on someone’s front stoop collects into a little waterfall cascading down their steps, rolling onto the sidewalk, falling off the curb into the street, and flowing down the street to the intersection.

The intersection, the street, curb, and stoop all form a latent stream network which is invisible to most observers. Surrounding those latent streams is their watershed, or the land area which channels water to these latent streams. Layered on top of these latent streams and their watershed is the set of social concerns that tie together (or bring into conflict) the people that live nearby. These are things like:

“Every time it rains, my basement apartment floods. What’s up with that?”

“Where do I go and who do I call for help during extreme rain?”

“Who is responsible for unclogging catch basins?”

“Why has the intersection of 4th ave and Carroll St in Gowanus consistently flooded for over a century?”

A social watershed is defined by connecting neighbors’ concerns to a latent stream network in order to illuminate everyone or everything implicated in a given issue.

Once neighbors have established a rough geography for the social watershed, they can begin organizing together to improve conditions. This could look like:

Organizing regular catchbasin and Green Infrastructure cleanups in the watershed. This could happen in coordination with DEP, under their rain garden stewardship program.

Working to reduce impermeable surfaces on land in the watershed,

including on private property.

Identifying basement apartments and sub-grade spaces that are susceptible to flooding, and matching residents who live in these spaces with neighbors who can shelter them in an emergency.

Siting streetscape improvements in the watershed, pulling from DEP’s Green Infrastructure design guidelines.

Forming bonds with neighbors who live up- or downstream of them, either in the same watershed or another. These relationships might form the basis for resiliency plans, such as establishing evacuation routes to higher ground or planning for mutual-aid provision between upstream and downstream neighbors. Or, some portion of a watershed collective’s effort could be spent working on projects in downstream watersheds to reflect the connection between their water systems.

By synthesizing hydrological analysis and social organizing, social watersheds can bring communities together to understand how water flows through their neighborhood, and what tools they have for altering those flows through infrastructure or intervention. A community which understands where the water goes after it falls on their apartment buildings or front stoops will see that they are physically connected to other people and places in the city. This is a small but meaningful step towards establishing relationships of mutual aid and responsibility between and within communities. Social watersheds

help people learn to read how water flows over the roadways, concrete, and built-in-quirks of their physical environment. They will develop a sensitivity to the tiny, day-to-day changes in the environment, and how those add up over time in the water system. Many New Yorkers already possess a deep understanding of their neighborhood dynamics; social watersheds help extend this knowledge to water systems.

### Existing Resources & Precedents

The increasing risks of pluvial flooding—flooding caused by extreme rain events—has prompted a flurry of activity amongst planners, policy makers, and citizen scientists. Organizers of social watersheds could tap into this growing body of work which synthesizes technical analysis and social organizing. There is also a growing sentiment that planning should leave space for nature, and work with nature to address some of our city’s most pressing problems.

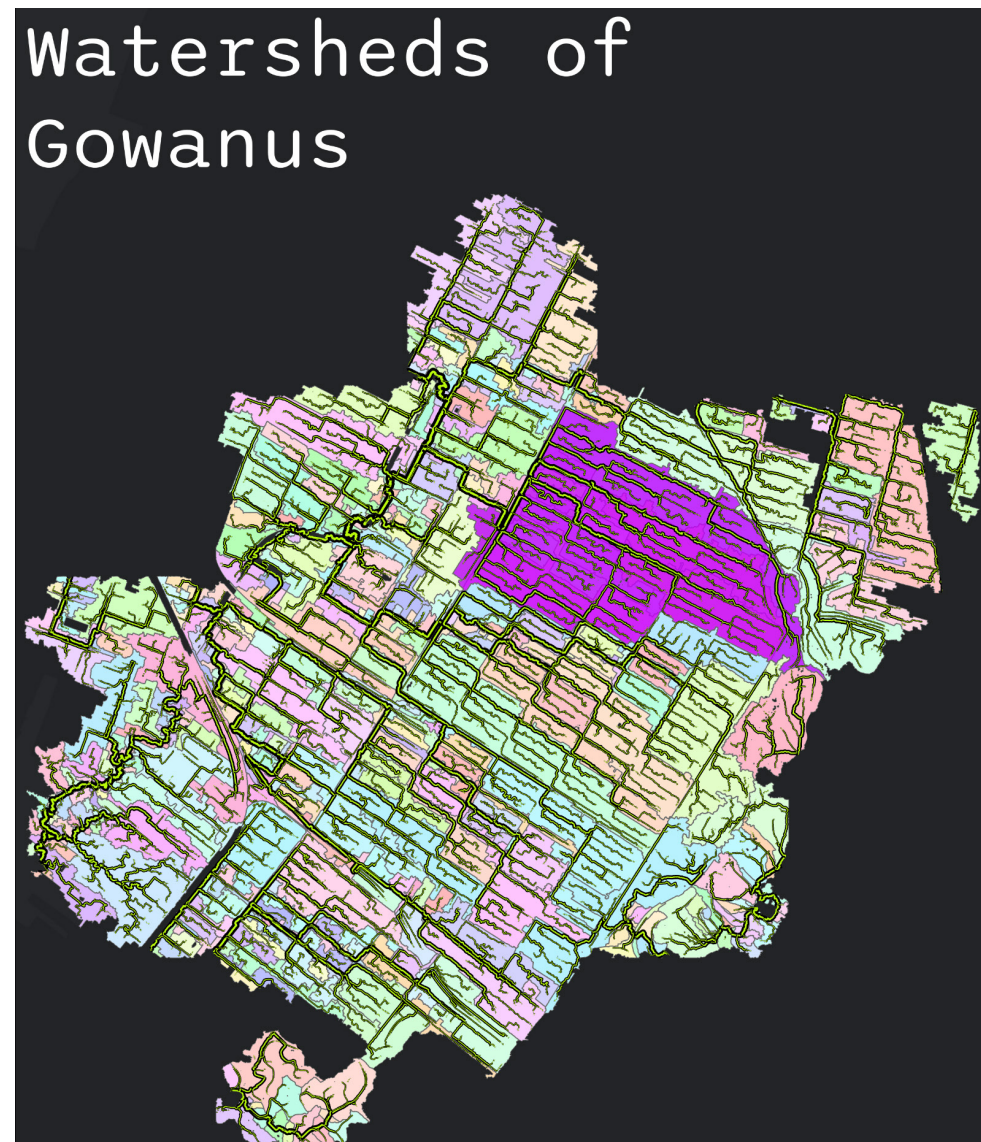
After Hurricane Ida, Comptroller Brad Lander and the Mayor’s Office of Climate and Environmental Justice convened an innovative community planning process called Rainproof NYC. Rainproof’s three working groups focused on ways to manage increasing rainfall, help people move out of heavily flood-impacted areas, and deeply involve community members in efforts to adapt to extreme rainfall. Rather than focusing purely on physical infrastructure or strategies to keep rainwater controlled and contained, the working groups recommended that the city “adapt to living with water.” Factors of

social resilience like community ties, economic justice, and housing security are key pieces of the working groups’ recommendations. There was also a clear desire to incorporate nature into any notion of managed retreat, either through nature-based solutions like blue belts and green infrastructure, or by seeing “land returned back to nature.”

Rainproof’s recommendations have built on more than a decade of work by NYC’s Department of Environmental Protection to study approaches to cloudburst resiliency. The agency produced a stormwater flood map which identifies areas where flooding is likely during

various levels of rainfall intensity. DEP’s Bluebelt system collects rainwater from 15 watersheds covering 10,000 acres of land on Staten Island, and funnels it into constructed wetland and stream systems. These systems help remove sediment and pollutants from runoff before it hits the bay, as well as redirecting water away from the combined sewer system.

These local efforts reflect a broader synthesis of social and technical approaches to climate science. In 2021, the International Panel on Climate Change began categorizing climate change scenarios by Shared Socio-economic Pathways. These are “narratives describing possible



Watershed of the frequently flooded intersection at 4th Avenue and Carroll Street in purple.



Latent streams in Kensington and Ditmas Park with catchbasins highlighted in green. Mapped by author.

future development pathways for human society... [that] explore a range of technological, socioeconomic and policy futures as well as consider challenges to mitigation and adaptation.”

The field of socio-hydrology emerged in 2012 to help “understand the dynamics and co-evolution of coupled human-water systems.” Socio-hydrology recognizes that the science of hydrology cannot treat water systems as self-contained, purely physical phenomena. Rather, socio-hydrologists recognize that social factors are deeply implicated in water system dynamics. For instance, socio-hydrology has been used to understand the so-called “levee effect.” The levee effect is an apparent paradox wherein the decision to build levees in order to facilitate development in a river’s floodplain can lead to greater overall flood vulnerability. When floods are less frequent, more people might settle in the floodplain, leading to more devastating (in terms of human impact) floods. This is the sort of feedback between social and hydrological factors that socio-hydrology seeks to model.

The coming decades of climate degradation are not the simple outcome of everyone equally emitting too much carbon into the atmosphere. Patterns of extractive land use, biodiversity collapse, unequal flows of nutrients and wealth, and carbon emissions help exhaust the socio-environmental cycles that sustain life. Abstracting this crisis to one of carbon emissions is useful for scientific modelling or negotiating environmental policy, but misses something more fundamental. A society whose most powerful actors are able to treat the majority of humanity and the nature we depend on with equal amounts of contempt will not make it through the next century intact. An economic system that treats our neighbors and nature as a source of untapped wealth, as infinitely replaceable, as something to be dominated is doomed to succumb to the wounds it inflicts on its own body, like Ozymandias hacking off his own legs.

Planners in New York City need to help nurture a different relationship between neighbors and nature. Neighbors who understand each other and the natural systems that flow around them will fare

better in extreme events. Local knowledge, cultivated over years of daily experience and observation, can be used to build both biodiversity and social cohesion. A deep, specific understanding of the natural systems in your neighborhood implies understanding how those systems connect to the city as a whole; no neighborhood exists in isolation. New relationships between neighbors and nature, based on reciprocity, deep understanding, and respect, will help to untangle the knotted crises of the next century.

This subjectivity will evolve; it will be built up over time and effort. It will not be implemented. Planners can coax it into existence and cultivate it with their power and expertise. But, for these relationships to truly take root, planners will need to cede some control over the built environment to residents with little or no formal education. Planners will have to be vigilant to ensure that existing power dynamics are not simply reproduced with a shiny new name under whatever new subjectivity evolves. This change will not come only from the top-down, nor solely from the bottom-up. **UR**



View of the Freedom Tower from Chinatown. Photo by Simon Willson.

## NYC IS ABOUT TO BE TRANSFORMED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

### Addressing the contradictions of buildings in a changing climate

By Jilly Edgar

New York City as we experience it has been gradually constructed over the last four centuries, beginning with Dutch colonization in 1608.

Walking the streets, attentive strollers are transported by the myriad architectural styles, materials, and shapes of the surrounding buildings. Their diversity is evidence of the city's longevity, each one making up the palimpsest of eras and stories that have unfolded on a few islands west of the Atlantic.

Buildings record each layer of the

urban fabric, from the art-deco mid-century and boxy post-modern skyscrapers of the financial district, to the once-torturous, now-coveted, fire-escape-bedecked brick and stone of the Lower East Side and East Village tenement neighborhoods. From the slender, glass finger-like skyscrapers that sway on windy days characteristic of midtown, to the repetitive towers-in-the-park dotting every borough since World War II. The scenery, industrial remnants of Bushwick and Ridgewood, the single-family mini-castles in Riverdale, and the elevated, wood-paneled cottages of Far

Rockaway were all erected by people in the spirit of immortality, leaving one's mark on the face of the Earth.

Across the five boroughs, there are over one million of these essential structures, without which there would be no five boroughs as we understand them. Without which, there would have been no New York City history unfolding within and around them. No 9/11, no Triangle Shirtwaist Factory tragedy, no Broadway, no Chelsea Hotel.

Buildings occupy the focal point of NYC's identity, its contradictions, its

exploitation and prosperity, its joy and tragedy, its life and its death. This dynamic is clearer than ever, living in a changing climate, where sea level rise, hurricanes, and heat waves put New York City in a position of daunting risk.

Knowing buildings account for over two thirds of the City's contribution to climate change due to their energy intensiveness, we must continue relying on them for protection, comfort, livelihoods, and sociability.

These buildings and the lifestyle they perpetuate has created one of the most famous and magnetic places in the world, at the same time as they hum towards its fall.

#### Possible Futures

If it weren't for the buildings, the City would not be what it is. At the same time, they cause its existential

vulnerability. What does it mean for the City's future if they are threatened? What will the City become if they are radically transformed?

Hurricane Sandy revealed one answer to these questions.

#### The Risk

The City's first test responding to a 21st century climate disaster on October 29, 2012 made it starkly clear that the City's history-teeming and heterogeneous built environment is not equipped to handle similar disasters likely to become more frequent in the future.

According to the Department of Buildings, over 800 buildings were deemed structurally unsound or entirely destroyed after the hurricane, while FEMA identified around 23,000 buildings with over

70,000 housing units to be damaged.

Much of damage came from the storm surge, which could be minimized with better coastal resiliency infrastructure, but physical characteristics of buildings such as age, height, and construction type were also factors in whether or not they were able to withstand the storm.

Around 85% of buildings in FEMA's 100-year floodplain were constructed prior to 1983 when the City began requiring flood protection and resiliency standards in its construction codes for new and substantially renovated buildings.

Sandy not only damaged buildings' facades and envelopes, but also the underground mess of metallic internal organs supplying them



Building facade destroyed in Hurricane sandy, 2012. Credit: The New York Times.



Buildings in the Lower East Side. Photo by author.

with heating, cooling, water, light, gas, and general electricity. Together, these functions and equipment make up the operational output of a given building, but during the storm, many flooded and stopped working. Because the operational output of each building is where two thirds of citywide emissions originate, the same systems that were destroyed by the storm also helped cause it.

Since then, the City has been creating another possible answer to the above questions that seeks to eliminate our built up socio-environmental contradictions through new laws, plans, and resources.

### Regulating Transformation

The combination of New York City's

coastal geography, built density, and high concentration of climate-change causing emissions spewing from one million buildings day and night means it's time to start investing in physical transformation, stat. Buildings need new energy sources, to be electrified, to be fortified for efficiency, and to be protected from potential flood damage, but the energy, building, and land use regulations we've relied on for the last century are not designed for the kind of problems we now must solve.

That does not mean we haven't tried.

Zone Green, passed in 2012, was one of the earliest attempts to enact climate-focused zoning changes.

Focused on solar, wind, and EV charging infrastructure, new regulations allowed home and building owners to improve efficiency through interventions like insulation and sun shades.

Two years later, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio called climate change an existential threat. He noted that "acting now is nothing short of a moral imperative."

Increased political will led to 80x50, Local Law 24, and the Paris Climate Agreement, all enacted in 2016. Through 80x50, NYC released its plan to reduce GHG emissions 80% by 2050 and passed the solar readiness law for city buildings, while the country joined the international climate agreement.

By 2019, the Climate Mobilization Act and Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act was passed by New York State, mandating 40% emissions reduction by 2030 and 85% by 2050. In the City, Local Laws 92, 94, and 97 allowed for green roofs and solar photovoltaic system on rooftops and mandated building emission reductions

Local Law 154, passed by NYC in 2021, sought to prohibit the use of fossil fuels for heating, hot water, or cooking in new buildings. At the same time, the City undertook plans to build a climate research, education, and jobs hub on Governors Island called the Climate Exchange.

Finally, in 2022 and 2023, voters across New York State passed the Environmental Bond Act, investing \$4.2 billion for environmental and

community projects around the state. The City's PlaNYC: Getting Sustainability Done, laid out a sustainability implementation plan, which has built the city's green regulation up to be more complex each year.

It's easier to mandate change than to execute it, given the complexity of turning half a millennium of history constructed into bedrock upside down and inside out through GHG-eradicating retrofits. But aside from the Build Public Renewables Act—which directs the New York Power Authority to build 15 MW of renewable energy—the State and therefore City have been slower to meaningfully invest in achieving their legal targets. Instead, keystone laws like Local Law 97 place the responsibility on property owners.

Local Law 97 directs all buildings



Left: ABC No Rio. Middle: East Village Cooperative Housing. Right: 10th Street residential building. All three projects underwent green retrofits. Credit: Paul Castrucci Architects.

larger than 25,000 square feet to gradually eliminate their emissions or face steep fines. The first deadline was scheduled for May 1, 2025, but the process has not been totally smooth as many buildings believe the regulations are too much of a stretch to achieve.

The law is demanding, as it requires building owners to undergo costly physical upgrades, learn about wholly new technological systems, and navigate a burgeoning economic space rife with unfamiliar players, while minimally disturbing their tenants or be punished financially. At the same time, because the City is not able to provide enough support for the investments to be feasible in many cases, its demands do not meet the urgency of the moment.

Each building has allowed us to thrive and to fail, and must now be radically altered to avoid abandoning them altogether. With unique characteristics, problems, and protectors, their costs have been growing as capacity to maintain them has shrunk. They



are the flesh and bone of our city, while energy is the blood that flows through them, and they must continue to function while undergoing emergency surgery.

### Beyond Regulations

So far, the City has chosen to prioritize mandates for large buildings through Local Law 97 and new buildings through zoning and the construction and energy codes. If the City seeks to meet its targets, as well as those set through the State's CLCPA—to even begin to do what it takes to avoid the worst of climate change—it will have to take on a more supportive role. NYC is about to be transformed from the inside out on a scale and pace never attempted in its half a millennium of history, and there will need to be collectivized understanding and momentum.



The City needs a deep and up-to-date understanding of its buildings. Understanding trends by City Council district could help city leaders effectively strategize for and allocate resources to the buildings in their own districts. In addition to working around the miles of electrical lines, pipes, stormwater infrastructure, transportation tunnels underneath each building, the City must build trust with the people who are furthering history inside of each one, cultivating their incalculable social value. This will take time, but it must start as soon as possible and be done on a level where real-world relationships can form, without leaving city-dwellers to fend for themselves and navigate complex programs.

The knowledge of where is currently most and least efficient, looked at with social characteristics, helps us understand the gaps and potential of neighborhoods to come up with strategic and comprehensive plans, rather than unleashing property owners to take on the challenge with little support.

Older structures, those with less money to invest, or with lower-income tenants who may have to leave if rents rise to cover the investment, for example, should be identified.

Honing in on districts and understanding where the lower income, older, and less energy efficient buildings are can help the City allocate resources like discretionary funding to climate projects. If there is a cluster of these buildings together, community financing like



Building reflection near Astor Place. Photo by Simón Willson.

community solar or thermal energy networks can be explored.

Looking beyond covered buildings, some have been able to go above and beyond, achieving high energy efficiency and low GHG emissions, all while preserving the original architectural character of some of the most iconic NYC building types and ensuring existing residents can stay put.

Partnerships with New York City has been key to their success, like the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Department of Cultural Affairs. When buildings are able to seek out and rely on these resources, they can achieve incredible results, which is why expanding them is critical.

### The New NYC

Unevenness across buildings often reflects deep-rooted inequities across ownership and neighborhoods. NYC can ensure these dynamics are not repeated by studying their buildings and providing resources accordingly for early planning.

Eventually, there must be detailed information on every building and certain buildings will fall noticeably behind others. Without a coordinated, strategic approach, the results could be highly inequitable, with some paying the cost of century-old, energy-guzzling buildings and others for state-of-the-art, highly-efficient

ones.

At the same time, the nature of the City will change as it is transformed lot by lot. Air quality will be superior, our spaces will be more safe and comfortable. But most importantly, the City will have undergone a human project more historic than perhaps any other in its entire development by recognizing the contradictions between its history, to which it owes both its prosperity and its vulnerability, and its future, which is at risk on account of its history.

The kind of bold thinking New York City would be undertaking if its own climate laws are carried out properly is not impossible; it is

reminiscent of the City's record of major public works projects last century and post-fiscal crisis investments. With the proper information, for which we now have the technological capacity to organize and analyze, it ought to be executed justly this time, as the laws also dictate. The CLCPA calls for disadvantaged communities to receive at least 35%, with the goal of at least 40%, of overall benefits of investments or direct resources from the State.

The stakes are higher than ever, as the planet's capacity to sustain our cities as they currently exist is reaching its tipping point. **UR**



Still from a New York City CGI time lapse video rewinding from 2016 to 1811.



says Ms. Reyes, who herself has a background in the arts. “You’re getting the opportunity to have really interesting conversations with all different kinds of people who are doing all different things.”

Hyperlocal issues can also unite people with different motivations in pursuit of a common goal. Alana Wilson, a transportation activist, spoke about how her neighbor advocated for bike lanes, not for reasons of sustainability, but out of concern for the safety of their spouse and child that frequently cycled the city. Or, she noted, her landlord, who is supportive of the cycling infrastructure, “because he can ride his power wheelchair in the bike lanes.”

### Strategy 2: Environmentalism as a Value

A central tenet of the emotional

resilience displayed by activists was cultivating an inherent, lifelong value of environmentalism.

An approach driven by values can lend meaning to acts that don’t have a perceptible impact on the planetary scale of climate change, but that are still essential to a larger societal shift towards reducing emissions. Individual and local environmental actions are necessary to create wider political pressure for large scale climate mobilization.

“At the end of the day, it was symbolic,” says Ms. Bringas, reflecting on Sunrise NYU’s successful campaign to divest the school’s endowment from fossil fuels. “These universities hold academic legitimacy and if they are denouncing the fossil fuel industry, then the fossil fuel industry

becomes illegitimized.”

In moments of doubt, she focuses on the idea that every degree of warming prevented was worth the effort, and that “everything we can save is worth saving.”

Some activists view climate advocacy as a lifelong practice. Ms. Reyes compared her long-held environmental values to a practice of meditation or spirituality.

“There’s like a mindset shift when you’re like, this is a long term thing. I know that I can spend a lifetime working on this. And there will always be something to work on.” Taking a long-term view of organizing work can be emotionally sustaining in the face of short-term defeats.

### Strategy 3: The Next Best Thing

The activists I interviewed stressed the need to be flexible and to pivot

when faced with failure. Large cities can provide opportunities for this adaptability through larger municipal budgets to fund projects, as well as a density of community-based organizations.

With a shifting regulatory and legislative environment in the federal government, a wide range of policies and projects related to climate have seen rollbacks and slashed funding.

In response, organizers have shifted tactics and priorities. Ms. Reyes recalled the tenacity displayed by her peers at the start of the second Trump administration. Projects found alternative sources of funding and often turned to the municipal level for climate resilience solutions. “Well, our funding fell through. What’s the next source of funding? The federal government doesn’t recognize emissions as a source of human harm anymore. Well, we have to install these huge sewers anyway,” she said, referencing citywide sewer expansion projects that increased capacity, in some cases, up to 850%, to prevent flooding during intensified storms.

“It’s so mundane and practical, but it is often the next best thing.”

Climate frustration can also arise from politicians who pay lip service to climate concerns but fail to act effectively. Professor Menser, a professor at Brooklyn College and an experienced organizer, described how environmental and labor justice organizations such as the Alliance for a Just Rebuilding struggled to gain support from the Bloomberg

administration post-Hurricane Sandy.

“We weren’t getting the federal money and not getting the city to really pay attention to creating programs to protect the people who were displaced.”

“It was an immense failure at the time. But you pause. You reassess.”

“And then from these community organizations you’ve got the climate march that happened that influenced a lot on the climate laws and the [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act] in New York.”

### *Metropolitan areas can act as a fertile medium for activist communities to persist despite institutional inaction and climate denial.*

“There was a lot of configuration that happened in the 2010s, which did create a pathway to really address this in a much more meaningful and extensive way.”

### The City as a Stage for Organizing

The urban landscape has shaped emotional frameworks and experiences of activist movements throughout history, including the current climate justice movement. Cities, with their cultural symbolism and centralized governing structures, also can serve as more direct tools for enacting political change.

Ms. Bringas reflected on organizing in her hometown of Sacramento, California and her current activism in New York. “We would protest in Sacramento and no one would be able to see us. Protesting down Fifth Avenue and iconic streets...that is such a big difference compared to in California.”

The unified political organization of certain cities like New York can be an effective lever for climate organizers to put pressure on politicians.

“[Outside New York] you’ve got the car culture, you don’t even know who your elected officials are because of the political fragmentation,” notes Professor Menser.

“Whereas in the city, it’s all unified under the mayor, the city council. So, I think that New York City is very unusual in the United States, in terms of political jurisdictions, the way that things get organized and opportunities to do things.”

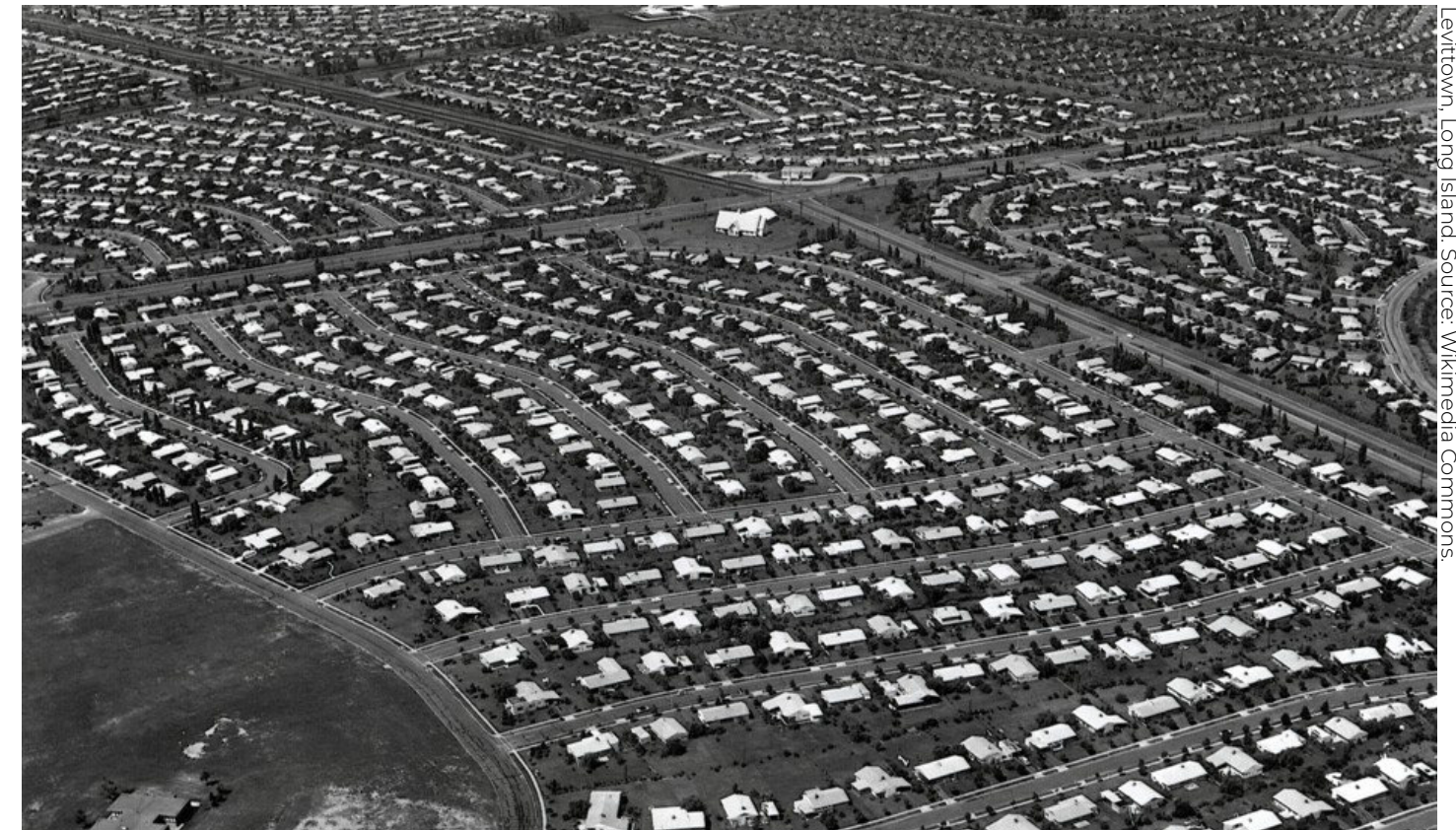
### Emotional Resilience

The interconnectedness of the urban environment nurtures activist communities that enable long-term political activism and, ultimately, hope for a better future. As an increasing portion of the public grows alarmed by climate change and frustrated by an administration undoing years of climate regulations and infrastructure investments, we can, as a whole, adopt the resilient thinking of lifelong activists to prevent paralysis and pursue sustained action. **UR**



Members of Sunrise NYU hold a banner as part of their divest campaign. Photo courtesy of @jesserydarling.

# PLANNING PAST AND PRESENT



## SEGREGATION, SUBURBANIZATION, AND POLARIZATION How Historic Planning Has Fueled Modern Division

By Raga Maddela

The 2026 Super Bowl half-time show, headlined by Puerto Rican artist Bad Bunny, was an extremely divisive topic among Super Bowl watchers as it was the first Spanish-language Super Bowl performance. Petra Rivera-Rideau, an associate professor of American studies at Wellesley College who specializes in Latin music and U.S.-Latinx pop cultures, told CBS News: “To have a Spanish language artist headlining this stage...in the context where Spanish speakers, including Puerto Ricans, are getting racially profiled, are being harassed, to have someone like that on the stage is important.”

While it was loved and positively received by many, it was also

controversial, receiving backlash from the President and influencers, and resulting in the conservative Turning Point USA halftime show as pushback. The New York Times described the show as “a showcase of some of the most ecstatic and celebratory aspects of Latin culture.” Donald Trump, however, said the show was “absolutely terrible,” and that it “doesn’t represent our standards.” He called the show “an affront to the Greatness of America” and a “slap in the face” to the country.”

Many past Superbowl performers were not American—including Rihanna, Shakira, Coldplay, and Enrique Iglesias in 2000. Superbowl performers have had a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and native

languages for decades—so how, in 2026, did the country react so divisively over a Puerto Rican headliner? While there are multiple reasons, including misinformation and a lack of education on Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory and Hispanic influence in North America, systemic segregation and sprawl in planning have perpetuated ethnic and racial divides in the U.S., affecting politics and causing polarization at the local level. This narrative emerges through the data on how rural, suburban, and urban people view each other.

The U.S. is now under 60% White and roughly 20% Hispanic, with approximately two-thirds of Hispanic people born in the U.S. Given the diversity of the country

and the influence of Hispanic and Latino culture, how were many Americans shocked by a Puerto Rican singer headlining the Super Bowl? It's important to look at American diversity at a local level, and see if neighborhoods and communities reflect the diversity of the nation.

According to Urban Institute, “A typical white person lives in a neighborhood that is 75% white and only 8% African American, whereas a typical African American person lives in a neighborhood that is only 35% white and 45% African American.”

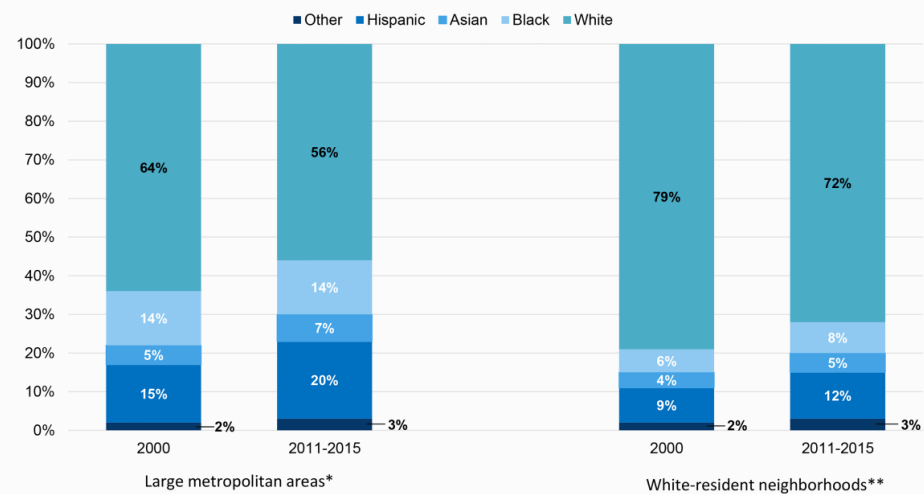
Segregation is prevalent today and affects everyone, but White Americans specifically have the least amount of exposure to other

more disproportionately same-race communities than they do now. In the 2020-2021 school year, one-third of students in the U.S. attended majority (over 75%) same-race schools. There is a significant portion of the U.S. population that does not see or experience the cultural and ethnic diversity of the nation,

This segregation is a result of decades of intentional planning and behavior, and has resulted in a modern suburban landscape that further restricts movement and contact between communities, promoting social isolation and discouraging community. Suburban living has historically been reserved for white U.S.-Americans.

As explained in *Cities and Suburbs*:

Figure 1. Neighborhood racial make-up: Large metropolitan areas and white-resident neighborhoods  
2000 and 2011-2015



\*Metropolitan racial make-up of the 100 largest metropolitan areas  
\*\*Neighborhood racial make-up of average white resident in these metropolitan areas  
Source: William H. Frey analysis of 2010 Census and 2011-2015 American Community Survey

**B** Metropolitan Policy Program  
at BROOKINGS

metropolitan areas, despite being under 60% of the U.S. population. The White American population is expected to be under 50% of the total population in under 20 years, in 2045. If the current levels of racial segregation continue to exist, White-Americans might live in even

New Metropolitan Realities in the US: the suburb was created in the 19th century. People sought exclusion from ‘others’, so suburbs became exclusive, and had explicit exclusion of Black people, Jewish people, and poor Asian and European immigrants. Loans for single family homes excluded Black

people—between 1945 and 1959, less than 2% of mortgages went to Black Americans. These systemically racist practices helped grow segregation and increase White flight to suburbia. By post-WWII, the U.S. had become majority suburban. Furthermore, among backlash around integration in 1960, white Americans suburbanized and self-segregated even further. By the second half of the 20th century, the suburbs were the American Dream of home ownership, good schools, and low crime, but only white people benefitted.

However, explicit discrimination then became implicit discrimination through ‘race-neutral’ methods:

“Exclusionary zoning policies—such as large lot-size requirements and large square footage per dwelling unit mandates—make it difficult for low- and even moderate-income households to live in many well-resourced communities. Federal and local subsidized housing programs also continue to prioritize building affordable housing in already distressed neighborhoods. Moreover, discrimination in housing and lending markets persists and continues to evolve in ways that can be harder to detect and combat, such as agents showing fewer units to well-qualified homeseekers of color or screening applicants using algorithms with built-in biases.”

Still today, people of color are overrepresented in neighborhoods with high poverty rates, where essential services are lacking, and over 50% of the U.S.-American population lives in the suburbs.

While the census defines the U.S. as 80% urban, there is no federal definition of “suburban”, and only 27% identify as living in an urban neighborhood.

American suburbs today are more diverse than before, with every racial group now more likely to live in a suburb than in a city, and the biggest U.S. suburbs being some of the most diverse communities in the nation. With the added diversity but sprawling nature of the American suburb, have political views of residents of various communities changed?

As of 2018, urban residents had the “coldest” views towards Donald Trump (62%), followed by suburban residents (51%) and then rural residents (40%). Additionally, rural residents most felt like newcomers from other countries threaten “American” values (57%), followed by suburban residents (42%) and then urban residents (35%). All of these views are more divisive among Democratic-Republican parties across all regions, with rural regions leaning more Republican, urban regions being more Democrat, and suburbs being divided 50-50.

People are divided racially across all communities, especially around racial issues. 39% of white rural residents say white people benefit from extra advantages over others. In suburban communities, 50% agree with this statement. White people in urban communities were the only white group where the majority, 57%, stated that white people have societal advantages. Across many political questions, this general trend shows, where urban residents have the most

progressive views around diversity, with suburban and rural residents having more divisive views.

Cultural criticism of the American suburb emerged as early as the 1950s, particularly related to “superconformity.” American historian Lewis Mumford criticized Levittown, Long Island, stating that it is “inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.”

Writer James Howard Kunstler critiqued suburbanization in 1993, stating “We [have] nothing left but our private life in our private homes and private car, we wonder what happened to the spirit of community. We created a landscape of scary places and became a nation of scary people.”

The suburbs now look different from the suburbs of post-WWII. The nonwhite population of the U.S.-American suburbs jumped from 10% in 1970 to 45% in 2010. In Los Angeles, in 2010, the nonwhite Suburban population was 70%.

Despite the increased diversity in the U.S.-American suburbs of today, suburban dwellers are united over a unique set of politics. These politics still center around property values and protecting resources. The non-white residents of the Los Angeles suburbs share goals with their white neighbors, centering safety and property values. Despite increased diversity, anti-immigrant backlash has grown, including

outlawing pushcart vending, soccer games in parks, and foreign language business signage. A Latino suburb even attempted to outlaw bright paint colors favored by Latino businesses. This anti-immigrant sentiment was shared among diverse suburbs of wealthy and working class people. An LA suburb which flipped from mostly-white to mostly-Latino targeted informal housing to target undocumented immigrants, which had been acceptable for white residents prior. The reasoning behind these targeting, exclusionary policies always came back to property value protection and safeguarding resources, despite corporate disinvestment and government cutbacks being the bigger culprits.

Historian and suburb-expert Becky Nicolaides puts it best: the suburban politics cannot be simply categorized by liberal or conservative, but rather as protectionist, and even with increased diversity, protecting property values and resources come first—even if that comes with scapegoating immigrants.

The U.S. suburbs, through historical exclusion and self-isolating behaviors, can promote uniformity and harm community through exclusion. This exclusion and fear of others showed itself with the announcement of Bad Bunny’s Super Bowl show, revealing that many U.S. Americans are fearful of the encroachment of the “other,” even if the “other” is Latin American culture, which is influential to the United States and many factors of American life. **UR**

# PORTRAIT OF JANNO LIEBER UNVEILING THE FINAL CONGESTION PRICING TABLET

By Ben Cornwell

This 18" x 36" oil on canvas portrait of MTA CEO Janno Lieber depicts the moment of midnight, January 5th, 2025, when the final tablet warning drives of the new congestion pricing toll was unveiled.

This captures the pinnacle of decades of effort to toll the densest and most transit-connected thirteen square miles in the western world. The process first started under economist Willima Vickrey, who first proposed a congestion tolling program for lower Manhattan in 1952. Mayor John Lindsey (elected 1966) was next to have his congestion pricing program hopes dashed. Mayor Ed Koch tried to revive it in the eighties and failed. Mayor Bloomberg tried as well, in 2007, and failed too. Traffic Engineer Sam Schwartz tried it in 2015, but it was in 2017 when the program finally passed. From there, it took almost a decade to get it actually running, and just a couple weeks before the state date, it was "indefinitely paused" by Governor Kathy Hochul, which would see its implementation delayed by half a year and the toll itself nearly halved. But after almost 75 years of trying, Manhattan finally got its congestion pricing, and Janno Lieber was the one who had the honor of removing the final cover.



Proposal Name	Neighborhood	Sponsor	Consultants	TDC	Gross Sq Ft
<b>Metropolitan Park</b>	Queens, Flushing / Corona	Steve Cohen, Hard Rock Entertainment	SHoP Architects, Field Operations, VHB	\$8.1 billion	5.0 million
<b>Resorts World NYC</b>	Queens, South Ozone Park	Genting Group	Perkins Eastman, VHB	\$5.5 billion	5.6 million
<b>Bally's Bronx</b>	Bronx, Ferry Point Park	Bally's Corporation	HKS, Gensler, Langan	\$4.0 billion	3.0 million
Freedom Plaza	Manhattan, Midtown East	Soloviev Group, Mohegan	Bjorke Ingels Group, Langan	\$11.1 billion	4.1 million
The Avenir	Manhattan, Hudson Yards	Silverstein Properties, Rush Gaming	CentraRuddy Architecture, AKRF	\$7.0 billion	1.6 million
Caesars Palace	Manhattan, Times Square	Caesars, SL Green, Roc Nation	KPF Architects, AKRF	\$5.4 billion	1.8 million
The Coney	Brooklyn, Coney Island	Thor Equities, Saratoga Casino Holdings	FX Collaborative, Sam Schwartz, T.Y. Lin	\$3.4 billion	1.5 million
MGM Empire City	Yonkers	MGM Resorts	JCJ Architecture, Marvel, WSP, Langan	\$2.3 billion	860,000

Casino proposal information. Source: NY Gaming Facility Location Board.

(continued from page 22) Bronx, one of the remaining proposals, received a license. Whether or not the President put his fingers on the scale, three licenses were up for grabs and three proposals remained. Final deliberations occurred behind closed doors and on December 1st, the GFLB recommended all three remaining applicants.

More than a decade after voters approved them, Vegas-style casinos are coming to New York (as of April 28, they're already here). Construction that's promised to heal Robert Moses's legacy is underway, and within the next few years, there will be three casinos in the outer boroughs. Moses's Grand Central Parkway and Whitestone Bridge will become the city's casino corridor, connecting Ozone Park, Flushing Meadows, and Ferry Point. An estimated \$20b will be spent to build them, investments guided and implemented by the planning field. To some of the firms and practitioners, there may be something refreshing in planning

on behalf of a client with seemingly limitless resources, on large tracts of underdeveloped land. They may even be willing to accept the argument that, in the final accounting, communities will benefit more than they're harmed. All will grapple with these questions, few will come to any satisfying conclusions, but planners will continue to play an active role in these projects until the ribbons are cut and the developers begin recouping their investments.

Whether we speak of individual practitioners or of planning as a field, it is futile to moralize. 57% of New York State voters cast their ballots to approve these projects. They were guided by the promise of better transit, smaller class sizes, lower property taxes, or perhaps even an in-state option to play a round of poker. Planning firms are just that—commercial enterprises, motivated to compete for work, and this licensing created much work indeed.

Still, that's not how planners like

to think of ourselves. The AICP Code of Ethics demands that we "have special concern for the long-range consequences of past and present actions", and that we "work to achieve economic, social and racial equity." As this saga revealed, the language of progressive planning is subject to capture and manipulation if it can be wielded on behalf of a development built to extract wealth from the working class. Despite our preference to focus on the immediately tangible issues of the municipal scale, our work is often downstream of decisions made in state capitals, during opaque budget processes and scarcely-attended committee hearings. What begins in 2013 as draft legislation can turn into billions of dollars in capital investment in 2026, and into projects which will define the careers of many planning professionals. If we do not wish to see planning reduced to an exercise in site design for engines of wealth extraction, then we must engage earlier, louder, and in rooms where we're not invited. **UR**

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