Unmaking the Ghetto: Community Development in Bedford-Stuyvesant during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements

By Brian Purnell

Assistant Professor, Africana Studies and History
Bowdoin College
Brunswick, Maine

bpurnell@bowdoin.edu

"If men do not build," asked the poet, T.S. Elliot, "how shall they live?" In December 1966, Robert F. Kennedy, junior U.S. Senator from New York State, posed this question to a public school auditorium packed with 1,000 of north-central Brooklyn's community organizers. Stretched before him in aluminum folding chairs were men and women who had formed civic associations to improve their communities' schools, sanitation collection, housing, and health care. When they were not working at jobs, or caring for their families, they organized block association meetings, staffed parish councils, ran parent teacher association conferences, initiated voter registration campaigns, attended police precinct committees, administered youth employment drives, and led neighborhood cleanups. Described by social scientists and journalists as embodying a debilitating "culture of poverty," these attendees were actually the organizational heart-and-soul of a place commonly associated with what Kenneth Clark called the "dark ghetto." Rather than the "institutionalized pathology" that Clark described in his landmark text, the Brooklyn organizers' efforts proved daily, to anyone who cared to notice, that America's inner-cities were not devoid of social organization and ridden with crime and hopelessness, but instead were places that contained reservoirs of civic vibrancy, which only needed political and economic support to match their residents' drive for community

improvement. Kennedy was there to announce his plans to give his constituents newfound

economic and political support. All of the attendees sat patiently, eagerly waiting to hear the

young Kennedy scion's vision for rehabilitating and redeveloping the economic and social life of

their city-within-a-city: the communities of north-central Brooklyn, New York, commonly

known as Bedford-Stuyvesant, home to over 300,000 people, of whom over ninety percent were

black, with many of them living at or below the poverty line.[1]

When Kennedy looked out at the gymnasium, he saw north-central Brooklyn's potential.

So did the dignitaries seated on stage with him that December afternoon. The other U.S. senator

from New York was present, along with the mayor, state senators, assemblymen, representatives

from the world's largest philanthropic organizations, and business titans from Wall Street and

Madison Avenue. For the past year, Kennedy, his power broker associates, and leaders from

Bedford-Stuyvesant had worked together to develop an organization that would channel financial

resources and political clout into north-central Brooklyn, and create dynamic economic and

cultural programs that endeavored to completely rehabilitate the social structures of Bedford-

Stuyvesant. From housing rehabilitation to health care, arts programs to architectural planning,

personal mortgage financing to financing new and existing businesses, Kennedy, the power

broker, and the community activists planned to lead an economic development initiative that

turned Bedford-Stuyvesant into a beacon of successful urban social transformation for all the

nation's cities to see, and emulate.

Two years after Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant had erupted in violence, and a year after

the flames in Watts had gripped the country's attention, Brooklyn would show the nation how

public-private investment in community-led action programs could dramatically alter the

nation's "ghettos" from cauldrons of social alienation and potential powder kegs of unrest into

model communities. The key to Bedford-Stuyvesant's success would be, in Kennedy's words, infusing the community with "the power to act." "The power to act," Kennedy exhorted, "is the power to command resources, of money and mind and skill: to build the housing, create the social and educational services and buy the goods which this community wants and needs and deserves." Through a new organizational form, the Community Development Corporation (CDC), Kennedy, the dignitaries, and the community organizers would bring that type of power to the people of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Less than two years later, Kennedy had been assassinated, but his dream of reconstructing Brooklyn's "ghetto," and the rest of America's predominantly black inner-cities, lived on in the economic development work of the CDC Kennedy helped start: the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (Restoration). This near-fifty year history of Restoration offers a window through which to view the accomplishments and failures, the missed opportunities and mangled experiments, the hopes and despairs of millions of citizens that were filtered through urban economic and social policy during the latter-half of the twentieth century, and the dawn of the twenty-first. One of the most important lessons that Restoration's history reveals is that economic growth in poor, black urban communities does not result solely from business expansion and job training opportunities. Improved nutrition and health; affordable, environmentally safe housing; and access to theater, music, visual arts, and news media programs are just as vital to a "ghetto's" economic stability as improved employment rates and commercial development. Restoration's history shows that post-World War II inner-cities achieved economic vitality when, with massive political and financial support, humanities-minded community activists teamed with entrepreneurially-driven power brokers to rehabilitate

the entire social composition—economic as well as cultural—of a supposedly "downtrodden" American "ghetto."

Since the 1960s, historians who have explored both U.S. urban history and the African American past have done a tremendous amount of research on how black ghettos came into existence. An early pioneer in this field, Gilbert Osofsky, developed two arguments that captured the way that first generation of historians approached the history of the African American ghetto. First, the American ghetto had history. It had not always existed. It was not timeless. Instead, for Osofsky, the black ghetto came into existence during the late-nineteenth century, after the end of the Civil War enabled people of African descent to form new lives in American cities. The cities those black citizens found, however, were socially inhospitable places that relegated black workers to menial positions and substandard housing. Both specific historical circumstances and social practices of racism made the American ghetto.[2]

However, while history and racism created the ghetto, Osofsky argued that an "unending and tragic sameness" defined black life therein. "The essential structure and nature of the Negro ghetto," Osofsky stated, "have remained remarkably durable since the demise of slavery in the North." Lines of residential segregation hardened over time, even as the geography of the ghetto expanded. Black ghettos increased in size and reproduced specific social and economic characteristics, namely poverty and crime. The "tragic sameness" thesis seemed to contradict Osofsky's first thesis, that specific historical circumstances and social practices *made* black ghettos. Apparently, once ghettos came into existence they became undesirable, tragic places where time stood still and generations of inhabitants suffered seemingly endless social ills.[3] Historians inevitably questioned Osofsky's argument. He based his claims on studies of New York and Philadelphia, referenced the cities interchangeably, and provided no comparative

evidence from black urban communities elsewhere in the country. Certainly, his assertions that racism played a powerful role in black urban life made historical sense, but racism, like ghettos, never stood outside of time and place. "Racial antagonism has varied in intensity over both place and time," noted Kenneth L. Kusmer; "its effects have been channeled in distinctive ways in different types of communities; and it has impacted upon various elements of the black community in different ways."[4] Simply put, neither black ghettos, nor the social practices, public policies, and economic conditions that created them, exist outside of history. Even as national and global economic forces and political trends tie individual American ghettos together in common historical processes, each black ghetto in America has specific characteristics and histories.

Subsequent generations of historians revised the work of Osofsky and his cohort, but their studies maintained clear focus on how large black urban communities in the United States came into existence during the mid- twentieth century, and how and why those communities suffered so many social problems. Noteworthy historians shifted attention to class dynamics of twentieth-century black urban communities, the tremendous influence of national-level housing policies, and the devastating impact of public policies that combined racial discrimination in housing with the economic restrictions of the post-industrial era.[5] Sociologists embarked on new studies of the urban "underclass," and historians contributed to those analyses with case studies that explained how and why America's "truly disadvantaged" came to dominate its urban populations during the latter half of the twentieth century. Academic debates about the influences of culture and social structures on the historic origins and social life of ghettos became intense and sometimes seeped into public life and public policy.[6] A new generation of social scientists and historians complicated debates further. Sociologists asked new questions about black

suburbs and middleclass black urban communities. Historians developed new approaches to African American urban activism and social movements.[7] Throughout these many scholarly revisions, the black ghetto, as a significant place in American urban life, remained constant. However, if historical circumstances *made* the black ghetto in U.S. cities, than what conditions, practices, and ideas would *unmake* those same ghettos? If black ghettos were made in the past, that is, if they came into existence through specific social, economic, and political processes that unfolded in time and space, then what efforts occurred, what attempts were made to unmake those same ghettos? As the twenty-first century unfolded, and long-standing ghetto communities presented undeniable signs of gentrification and rejuvenation, what histories influenced those changes? Those general questions shaped my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) during the summer of 2013, and they guide my approach to my current book project, "Unmaking the Ghetto: Community Development in Bedford-Stuyvesant during and beyond the Age of Civil Rights and Black Power."[8]

The policies and politics that created CDCs and the histories of CDCs such as the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, offer historians a chance to examine how local people, state and federal political figures, and power brokers from corporate and philanthropic sectors attempted to unmake American ghettos from the mid-1960s through the end of the twentieth century. Through a history of Restoration, and in particular through my research in the Ford Foundation Papers, which are housed at the RAC, I will address these central questions: how did a panoply of political actors—from unemployed black women on welfare, to U.S. Senators such as Robert Kennedy and Jacob Javits; from neighborhood-based Black Nationalists up to leaders of the Ford Foundation and IBM; from local politicians in Brooklyn to Mayor John Lindsay and Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller—come together and attempt to reverse the

economic and political processes that made one of America's largest black ghettos: the neighborhoods of north-central Brooklyn, commonly known as Bedford-Stuyvesant? When were their efforts most successful, and why did they inevitably fail to reverse trends of economic decline and disinvestment?

The Ford Foundation Papers contain eighteen grant reports, dating from 1967 to 1999, which include tremendous details on the types of projects the Ford Foundation funded at Restoration. They also serve as a comprehensive history of the organization. From Restoration's origins in 1967, when it received its first Ford Foundation grant totaling roughly $750,000, up through the late-1990s, when the Ford Foundation continued to disperse money to support Restoration's youth and cultural programs, for over thirty years, the Ford Foundation provided a major source of financial support to community development initiatives in Brooklyn.

Restoration received its initial funding from the federal government, private philanthropies, such as the Ford Foundation, the Astor Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), as well as its own fundraising and investment initiatives. The Department of Labor paid for Restoration's beginning stages with money allocated for Special Impact Programs. The Ford Foundation matched many of these funds and provided grants for other individual projects, such as a housing renovation project and business development initiatives. The grant reports in the Ford Foundation Papers contain histories of Restoration, descriptions of its individual projects, annual reports of expenses and revenues, correspondences between the two organizations, and promotional materials Restoration produced. The grant reports in the Ford Foundation span Restoration's entire history during the twentieth century, which makes these indispensible records on the history of this CDC, and of community development in Brooklyn.[9]

Outside the Restoration grant reports, the Ford Foundation filed reports on specific

community development initiatives in Bedford-Stuyvesant, such as the manufacturing plant that

IBM opened in the area in 1968. Two reports, the "IBM in Bedford-Stuyvesant," and "IBM

Central City Plant Revisited," document the early years of IBM's first effort to locate a

manufacturing facility in "the central area of a major American city."[10] Over three years into

opening its Bedford-Stuyvesant Plant, "IBM's experience in Brooklyn, contrary to the

projections of many of its hesitant supporters, has been positive and profitable," the 1972 Ford

Foundation report said.

> Its remaining problems grow mostly out of its dealings with an unresponsive city
> bureaucracy not out of its location in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The success story of the plant
> suggests that we may need to reconsider some of the issues around Black capitalism,
> central city development, and the minority community labor pool. And to further refute
> any ideas that IBM opened the plant in Bedford-Stuyvesant as a sort of charity for the
> ghetto, the report's authors clearly stated that, contrary to what many expect, the
> atmosphere in the plant appears not unlike that in most other manufacturing plants—the
> plant is not being run as a social experiment. It is operated as any other plant in the IBM
> complex as a manufacturing facility with quality production being delivered according to
> a schedule. The Brooklyn plant supplies eight other plants with essential computer
> components. Meeting production schedules is critical to its survival in the IBM system.[11]

IBM even created an advertisement through the Advertising Council and Urban America, Inc.,

which it directed at business owners and major corporations. The headline read, "If you're

looking for a new plant site, try the nearest ghetto. IBM did." Below the words, the ad featured a

simple drawing of a dented metal garbage can that sat next to a street curb. "IBM is meeting its

own requirements and, at the same time, helping out with the problems of others," the

advertisement said. "Many other companies are doing the same. So can you." The Ford

Foundation's report concluded with an argument that summarized much of the spirit and purpose

for the philanthropy's involvement in community development in Brooklyn and many other

cities throughout the country: "The problems of Bedford-Stuyvesant's unemployed are neither too complex nor too extensive to be approached."[12]

These are just some of the primary sources with which I plan to write and analyze this history of community development in Brooklyn. In addition to the work of Restoration, the Ford Foundation Papers also had grant reports that pertained to The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History, a community-based, local history initiative that saved a few nineteenth and early twentieth century homes that had existed in the historic free black community of Brooklyn, Weeksville. The Weeksville Society preserved these homes, and, with support from the Ford Foundation, among other sources of funds, it eventually transformed them into a major public history and learning centers. Other collections at the RAC, such as the Rockefeller Foundation Archives, also documented Restoration projects. The RF investigated Restoration's work for roughly one year before it grated the fledging organization $350,000 in June 1968. Documents and grant records from those meetings provide clear insight into some of the early leadership at Restoration and its initial efforts to put together enough money to bring a major community development enterprise to serve close to 400,000 people.[13]

ENDNOTES:

[1] Statement by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at the One-Day Conference on Community Development in Bedford-Stuyvesant, December 10, 1966, in Thomas Russell Jones Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York [this collection was not arranged and described when the author wrote and filed this report with the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC)]. See also, "RFK will be Over Saturday." *Amsterdam News,* December 10, 1966, p. 25; and "Redevelopment Plan Set for Bedford-Stuyvesant." *New York Times,* December 11, 1966, p.1. On RFK and the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, see also, Edward Schmitt, *President of the Other America: Robert Kennedy and the Politics of Poverty.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 146-168; Jack Newfeld, *RFK: A Memoir.* New York: Dutton, 1969, pp. 87-109. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power.* New York: Harper & Row, 1965; Classic presentations of the "culture of poverty" include Oscar Lewis and Oliver La Farge, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, 1959, and Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York.* New York: Random House, 1966. See also, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965. Historians examined the "culture of poverty" and "the underclass" in Michael Katz, editor, *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993. See also, M.L. Small, D.J. Harding, and M. Lamont, "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 629: 1 (2010), pp. 6-27.

[2] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*. New York: Harper, 1968. For extensive discussion of this historiography see Kenneth Kusmer, "The Black Urban Experience in American History." In Darlene Clark Hine, editor, *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 91-122; Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945,* 2nd edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007, pp. 311-357; Timothy Gilfoyle, "Introduction: Urban History, Arnold Hirsch, and the Second Ghetto Thesis." *Journal of Urban History* 29: 3 (2003), pp. 233-237, and the remainder of the issue. Key texts published since these overviews include, Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto.* Illinois: The University Press of Chicago, 2002; Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggle Against Urban Inequality.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[3] Gilbert Osofsky, "The Enduring Ghetto." *Journal of American History* 55: 2 (September 1968), pp. 243-225.

[4] Kusmer, "The Black Urban Experience in American History." p. 99.

[5] See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

[6] See William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy.* Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[7] Mary Patillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class.* Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1999; Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998; Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North.* New York: Random House, 2008; Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, editors, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980.* New York: Palgrave, 2003.

[8] See also the photo essay book, Camilo Jose Vergara, *Harlem: The Unmaking of a Ghetto.* Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2013; another excellent examination of these questions is Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. See also, Brian Purnell, "'What We Need is Brick and Mortar:' Race, Gender and Early Leadership of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation." in Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, editors, *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America*. Rochester, New York: Rochester University Press, (2012), pp. 217-244; Tom Adam Davies, "Black Power in Action: The Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, Robert Kennedy and the Politics of the Urban Crisis." *Journal of American History* 100: 3 (December 2013), pp. 736-760.

[9] See for example, Ford Foundation, "Support of Private Business Involvement in Reconstructing the Bedford-Stuyvesant Area." Grant #06700354, April 1, 1967-November 30, 1967; "Partial Support for Youth and Cultural Programs." Grant #09851578, August 1998-July 31, 1999, Ford Foundation Papers, RAC.

[10] Robert Schrank and Susan Stein, "I.B.M. in Bedford-Stuyvesant." Report #001478, March 1969, p. 1, Ford Foundation Papers, RAC. This report was reprinted as Robert Schrank and Susan Stein, "Industry in the Black Community: IBM in Bedford-Stuyvesant." *The Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (September 1969), pp. 348-351.

[11] Robert Schrank and Susan Stein, "I.B.M. Central City Plant Revisited." Report #004991, February 10, 1972, pp. 1- 2, Ford Foundation Papers, RAC.

[12] Robert Schrank and Susan Stein, "I.B.M. in Bedford-Stuyvesant." Report #001478, March 1969, p. 12.

[13] Miscellaneous reports and meeting minutes dated June 27, 1967-July 22, 1968, Record Group (RG) 1.2, Series 200, Box 14, Folder 113, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), RAC.