

IFE VANABLE –

# Working the Middle: Harlem River Park Towers and Waterside Plaza

In 1973 President Richard Nixon placed a moratorium on all federal housing subsidies. [1] Despite this declared stoppage, researchers at NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, working through what came to be known as the Subsidized Housing Information Project (SHIP), have documented how "more privately owned, publicly subsidized affordable housing was developed in New York during the 1970s than any other decade." [2] These projects were hybrids—physical instantiations of the close relationship between the government and the private sector. Seemingly divorced from the apparatus of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the developments erected in these years were very large properties mostly funded by what has come to be known as the Mitchell-Lama program, a New York State law designed to promote private development of urban low- and middle-income housing. [3]

Established by the Johnson Administration on September 9, 1965, HUD was only briefly a builder. More centrally, it has operated as a financier, lending money and guaranteeing loans as an insurer. While the widespread sense of HUD is that it focuses on housing for impoverished, urban, so-called low-income populations (with all of the racial coding that those terms carry), this appearance serves to obscure the "real" work that HUD undertakes (from its founding to the present)—which is to work the middle. HUD institutionalizes the practice of defining rules for what constitutes the "middle" (whether it pertains to "middle income" or "normal" family composition), which also entails defining the nature of the opportunities made available to that middle by promoting particular goals, beliefs, and dreams of the so-called middle class. The formulations of "low" and "middle income," and by extension the mythical "middle class" so common to political rhetoric in the United States, are inventions—carefully constructed, furiously rehearsed fictions. HUD is part of an effort to craft and spur a sense of middle-class-ness that has to do foremost with outlining rules, behaviors, and norms that dictate family composition and modes of dwelling defined as decent, moral, and good.

Nixon's proclamation in 1973, then, represents not an endpoint so much as a modulation in HUD's strategies for pursuing this project of the middle, and its principles continued throughout the 1970s boom of publicly subsidized affordable housing in New York City. Mitchell-Lama (enacted in 1955) was one conduit through which the question of the middle was pursued in

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[1] In a June 8, 1973, speech to the Houston Convention of the National Association of Home Builders, outgoing HUD secretary George Romney confirmed speculations that President Richard Nixon was contemplating a moratorium on housing program activity. "As outlined by Romney, the freeze included: A moratorium on all new commitments for subsidized housing programs, including Section 235 and Section 236; A hold on new commitments for water and sewer grants, open space land programs and public facilities loans until Congress establishes a program of community development special revenue sharing of which these programs would become a part; A freeze beginning July 1 on all new commitments for urban renewal and Model Cities funding, also part of the administration's community development revenue sharing plan; A freeze on new commitments for similar, smaller Farmer's Home Administration programs in the Agriculture department." *CQ Weekly Report* 1973a, 40, as quoted in R. Allen Hays, *The Federal Government and Urban Housing: Ideology and Change in Public Policy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 135. See pages 135–138 for further discussion of the Nixon moratorium, as well as Charles J. Orlebeke, "The Evolution of Low-Income Housing Policy, 1949 to 1999," *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2010): 489–520. For a brief discussion of the moratorium's impact on the construction of units in New York City, particularly under the Section 236 program, see Jaclene Begley, Caitlyn Brazil, Vincent Reina, and Max Weselcouch, "State of New York City's Subsidized Housing: 2011" (New York: NYU Furman Center Institute for Affordable Housing Policy, 2011), 22.

[2] Begley et al., "State of New York City's Subsidized Housing: 2011," 17.

[3] "The Mitchell-Lama program is designed to encourage the private development of low- and middle-income housing in areas where such affordable housing cannot readily be provided by the ordinary unaided operation of private enterprise" (Private Housing Finance Law § 1). See also Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 281. Sponsored by New York State Senator MacNeil Mitchell and

the urban politics of the era, marked by a move to rationalize domestic programs, as the federal government, led by the Nixon White House, promoted the rhetoric of efficiency. HUD programs were swept into broader efforts to devolve responsibility for setting priorities to state and local governments, enabled by private enterprise, a decided move meant to equip individual households with tools to act autonomously in the market. In the case of HUD, this meant “allowing” those households that would previously have been eligible for public housing to decide where they would live by means of a government subsidy, namely through housing vouchers. [4] One of the largest of these Mitchell-Lama projects, an illuminating one to think through these questions with, is the nearly 1,700-unit Harlem River Park Houses or Harlem River Park Towers, known as River Park Towers, or more recently as River Park Residences. [5]

River Park Towers is situated on the western edge of the Bronx on a formerly industrial slice of land, sandwiched between a narrow stretch of the Harlem River and a thick infrastructural bundle that includes lines of Metro North Railroad trackage and the Major Deegan Expressway. Initiated in 1969, River Park Towers was sponsored by the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC), a public agency founded the year before under the New York State Urban Development Corporation Act. [6] Endowed with the authority to initiate a diverse body of developments that it would later sell to private investors or to the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) as “turn-key” projects, the UDC represented a model of grouping the responsibilities of financing, planning, and development, allowing it to condemn land, override local zoning and building codes, and issue its own bonds. [7] The “Statement of legislative findings and purposes” of the New York State Urban Development Corporation Act declared that persistent unemployment in “urban areas” was linked to the existence of obsolete, “outmoded design,” “substandard,” “slum,” or “blighted” industrial, manufacturing, and commercial facilities. Likewise, it was “found and declared that there is a serious need throughout the state for adequate education, recreational, cultural, and other community facilities, the lack of which threatens and adversely affects the health, safety, morals, and welfare of the people of the state.” With the flexibility to “package” a project from its inception to completion, the authority given to the UDC was not only the financing and construction of buildings themselves but the construction of carefully crafted narratives aligning spatial concerns with morality to spur development. [8] Within this ideological framework, River Park Towers was completed in 1974, developed and conceptualized as part of a sixty-five-acre master plan that included the development of a school, also sponsored by the UDC, and the first New York State Park established in New York City by the State Park Commission. [9] M. Paul Friedberg and Associates developed the master plan for the entire sixty-five-acre site and was responsible for the design of the Harlem River State park, a twenty-two-acre “sub-parcel” opened in 1973, renamed Roberto Clemente State Park the following year.” [10]

While the UDC was given the authority to issue its own bonds, it was also “astutely designed,” as Eleanor Brilliant’s history of the Urban Development Corporation puts it, to “tap all existing funding sources.” [11] In the case of River Park Towers, the UDC secured financing under the Mitchell-Lama program, a New York State creation, wherein the slice of industrial land occupied by the Towers was acquired at nearly no cost, property taxes were abated, and a

Assemblyman Alfred Lama, the legislation was signed into law in 1955 as *The Limited-Profit Housing Companies Act*, authorized under Article II of the New York State Private Housing Finance Law. N.Y. Priv. Hous. Fin. Law §§ 23, 33.

[4] Jill Khadduri discusses this in her chapter, “The Founding and Evolution of HUD: 50 Years, 1965–2015” in *HUD at 50: Creating Pathways to Opportunity* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, October 2015), 19. The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program was created under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. The “HCV Program is a nationwide program that provides rental assistance and a homeownership option to low-income households. Under the program, assisted households are not confined to units located in subsidized housing developments, but have the option to use vouchers to find suitable housing in the private rental market.” See the NYU Furman Center “Directory of New York City Affordable Housing Programs” for a brief description of the program, [link](#).

[5] The move by new management to eliminate “Towers” from its name has been of interest to me, as well as the overall ongoing practice of naming and renaming the development. The name change at once signals a desire to disassociate from a perceived negative connotation that “Towers” may afford while also seeking to more closely align the units offered with an image of domestic stability, actually seems to instead convey the image of temporariness. While residence connotes a person’s home, it also suggests a certain degree of precariousness, that where one currently resides, or stays, is not guaranteed.

[6] Eleanor L. Brilliant, *Urban Development Corporation: Private Interests and Public Authority* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975), 14.

[7] The original language of the 1968 New York State Urban Development Corporation Act states that the Act “Establishes a public benefit corporation to undertake large-scale development projects (residential, industrial, commercial and urban renewal projects and educational, recreational and other civic facilities). It will enlist the participation of private enterprise.” New York State, *Urban Development Corporation Act, as Amended through June 1973* (Chapter 174, Section 1, Laws of 1968, McKinney’s Unconsolidated Laws, Sections 6,251–6,285). For a discussion of the mission and purpose of the HUD as envisioned by Governor Nelson Rockefeller, see Homer Bigart, “Rockefeller Asks Creation of Units to Rebuild Slums,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1967. See Brilliant, *Urban Development Corporation: Private Interests and Public Authority*, 128, for a discussion of a NYCHA “turn-key” project intended for Harlem.

[8] The term “urban areas” was used rather than cities. Brilliant, *Urban Development Corporation*, 14.

[9] “NYC’s Harlem River to Get Parks, Housing,” *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 52 (June 1971): 44.

[10] Barbara Allen Guilfoyle, “Room for a View,” *Industrial Design*, vol. 17 (November 1970): 24–25. See also “Life along the Harlem,” *Architectural Forum* (March 1970): 13.

subsidized mortgage was secured for up to 95 percent of the project expense. In exchange, developers were obliged to meet regulations regarding rent and tenant selection and limit the annual return on their investment to 6 percent.

[12] Twenty percent of the project's apartment units were to be designated for the elderly, with usually one elevator-adjacent studio apartment on every floor dedicated to senior living, and of the total 1,654 apartments, 464 were also to be designated Section 8 assisted-living units. [13] Participation in the Mitchell-Lama program and agreement to these terms, however, could be terminated after a given period of time, affording property owners the right to "opt out" of the program—a right expressly connected to the way River Park Towers was conceptualized and designed. In this context, designers were authorized to pursue the uncommon—to experiment, defy, and expand the norms and building traditions of the urban domains into which they intervened.

River Park Towers was designed by Davis Brody & Associates (DBA) and is marked by a pair of nearly identical, vertically articulated conjoined towers of thirty-eight and forty-two stories; the sets differentiated by mirrored plans and offset positioning. [14] In contrast to the horizontally articulated, red-brown brick of NYCHA "projects," River Park Towers is adorned in eight-inch-square, rusty-brown "super bricks" designed by DBA, though laced with traces of that distinct "project" red. [15] The towers seem to soar out and upward from their thin perch on the Harlem River, which at this point narrowly divides the area of northern Manhattan known as Fort George from the area of the western Bronx known as Morris Heights or University Heights. From this location, River Park Towers looks over the river at the leafy Harlem River Park, fronted by a stretch of Harlem River Drive that becomes Franklin D. Roosevelt East River Drive (FDR) south of the Triborough Bridge (officially known as the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge). Growing wider as they get taller, the Towers command views of the George Washington Bridge, Yankee Stadium, and the Whitestone and Throgs Neck Bridges in the distance. Their muscular geometry and looming presence—at four hundred feet, they are the tallest buildings in the Bronx—are anomalies in the surrounding context of modest apartment houses and detached homes set into the hills of Morris Heights. But despite its apparent singularity, this hulking development bears a strong resemblance to a development just down the river, where the narrow Harlem River widens to become the East River. This development was Waterside Housing, long since known as Waterside Plaza, or solely Waterside. Taken together, these objects are prime targets for investigating the machinations of the middle, particularly due to their hybridity, their "not-quite" status. As not quite public housing and not quite market rate, these projects, similarly conceived and adorned, are architectural cousins of sorts or perhaps siblings that stand together as proclamations of the middle. Despite their kinship, the differences in how they are socially perceived and received betray the insecurity of the bold proclamation of each object, revealing the desperate hope in the fiction of the middle, highlighting the deep contradictions and liminality of the conception of the middle itself.

In 1975 Paul Goldberger described Waterside Plaza as the "brain-child" of Richard Ravitch, an early chairman of the UDC. [16] Waterside was imagined by Ravitch and his company HRH Construction nearly twelve years before it was finally completed in 1973—one year before River Park Towers was occupied. Also designed by Davis Brody & Associates, Waterside Plaza

[11] Brilliant, *Urban Development Corporation*, 14.

[12] Begley et al., "State of New York City's Subsidized Housing: 2011," 7–8. Additionally, compliance with these regulations would be supervised by either the state or the city of New York.

[13] Steven Goodstein, "40-Year Anniversary for River Park Towers," *Bronx Times*, May 16, 2015, [link](#).

[14] A third originally envisioned conjoined tower was never built. See, among others, "Life along the Harlem," *Architectural Forum* (March 1970): 13.

[15] The Davis Brody & Associates custom brick was similarly deployed at its earlier, 1968 Riverbend Houses, a Mitchell-Lama co-op located in Manhattan. The custom 5.5-by-8-inch bricks were first referred to as "super bricks" in reference to Riverbend Houses. Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Mathen Gordon Lasner, eds., *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies that Transformed a City* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 218.

[16] Paul Goldberger, "Waterside Design Builds Reputation," *New York Times*, March 12, 1975.

is similarly adorned in square brown super bricks and is an assembly of four slightly more stout towers, three at thirty-six and the northernmost at thirty-one stories. Like sentinels, the four towers preside over a wide, two-acre elevated public plaza that includes shops, recreation space, and educational facilities. The development rests on a triangular swath of reclaimed land tethered to FDR Drive—a precast concrete deck set on pilings—which juts out into the East River from Twenty-Fifth to Thirtieth Streets. A slender pedestrian bridge traverses the FDR, where the towers of Waterside are fronted by a low-slung bar building that contains parking, amenities, and a group of twenty townhouses—two stories each, with balconies and their own separate entrances—that shields the riverfront public plaza. Vehicular traffic snakes under the FDR, where it peels up from the ground at East Twenty-Third Street at the northern tip of Stuyvesant Town, revealing an adjacent service road, the water, and an attendant promenade maintained by Waterside Plaza. The main lobbies for each of the four towers are located at the level of the elevated public plaza, but there are additional lower-level lobbies that front a dedicated series of private access roads.

For all of the appearance of connectivity, given the site’s abundance of infrastructure, there is a fortified quality to Waterside Plaza. Though the river is wide at this point, which could make the buildings appear taller, they instead appear squat and hunkered down. There are many points of approach, each carefully guarded, regulated, and monitored—each evinces authority, projecting a sense of protected freedom of choice and movement to residents while delimiting and selectively authorizing access to outsiders. Waterside Plaza’s four towers spread out across the site, commanding their territory. The buildings at River Park Towers, on the other hand, huddle together, nestled against one another, perhaps in recognition of their own foreignness, closely holding the bodies they house. Roads do not snake through or under these towers; instead they remain at a distance. All building lobbies are entered from the same plaza level. There is one guarded point of entry into River Park Towers, located at this main upper level—which sits above the river and aligns with the neighborhood to the east. It manufactures at times a highly disorderly traffic queue, which, rather than asserting exclusivity, acts as a tourniquet, stopping the flow. The other entry is located below the complex at the termination of a curving road that leads vehicles down to the level of the river, where parking and loading take place and garbage is collected; it is dark, quiet, and still. While like Waterside Plaza, River Park Towers is similarly possessed of a series of lower limbs that meet at varying grounds, at River Park the meeting is even more tenuous. When standing close to the limbs at either the plaza side or the river side (whose flow at this point is incredibly narrow), a distinct compression takes place. Looking up from the base of the towers, which by design are, according to Goldberger, “more majestic” than those at Waterside, the buildings look as though they might detach themselves from the ground and lift off along with all the bodies within. [17]

### “Anybody Home?” [18]

It took nearly twelve years from the time it was conceived for Waterside Plaza to formally open its doors in the fall of 1973. Delayed by

[17] Goldberger, “Waterside Design Builds Reputation.”

[18] See Alec MacGillis, “Is Anybody Home at HUD?,” *New York Magazine*, August 22, 2017, [link](#).



Harlem River Park Towers with vehicular and pedestrian bridges over the Major Deegan Expressway; Public School 230/Intermediate School 229 in the foreground; and steps to the Metro North Railroad, Morris Heights stop; looking West toward the George Washington Bridge in the distance. Courtesy of Davis Brody Bond.



Waterside Plaza from the air, looking across Manhattan. Courtesy of Davis Brody Bond.

bureaucratic, political, and financial wrangling, the proposal was nearly brought to its end in 1967 before the New York Board of Estimate in a dispute over the mix of “high-rent” and “low-rent” apartments. Over the course of those twelve years, developers insisted that one consequence of the delayed construction was a significant increase in the rents, listed sharply above what was originally envisioned. As designed, of the 1,470 total apartments, 1,100 would be considered “middle-income,” 335 “moderate income,” and a paltry 35 “low-income” (a mix that points to how mistaken the notion that HUD promoted primarily

low-income housing is). While following the guidelines set forth by HUD based on “area median income,” the apartments designated middle income by developers were considered “high-rent” by activists and the Board of Estimate. Located in the three thirty-seven-story towers and twenty duplex townhouses, these middle-income apartments were financed by the city’s Mitchell-Lama program, and the 370 low- and moderate-income apartments were designated for the fourth, thirty-one-story tower, interspersed among each other, financed by federal subsidies added to the city assistance making the lower rents possible. Though the Board of Estimate dispute, framed in terms of high and low rent, was motivated by the opposition of civil rights groups and planners to a project they said “subsidized the rich,” the dispute was fundamentally over what constituted the middle. [19]

While the term “federal subsidies” was used unsparingly in reference to how the low- and moderate-income apartments would be financed, little overt mention of HUD can be found. The low-moderate-income apartments located in the northernmost tower, known as 40 Waterside Plaza, were made possible in part by a mortgage interest reduction subsidy through the Section 236 program, enacted by Congress as part of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act. [20] This mortgage interest rate reduction effectively reduces the cost of the project and thus the rent levels needed to support it. The terms of the program stipulate that occupants must meet the income restrictions deemed “low-income,” a status determined by HUD through its “area median income” designations. The refusal to name HUD while willingly taking part in its financial schemes reveals a desire to distance the project’s development from issues of poverty and inequity that undergird the lack of affordability in urban housing.

### Tall Tales

Both Waterside Plaza and River Park Towers were Mitchell-Lama–sponsored developments built to provide low- to moderate-income housing. [21] And yet despite their similarities in both design and development, the towers’ architecture constructed distinct reputations. Nearly forty years

[19] Joseph P. Fried, “After Nearly 12 Years of Obstacles, Waterside Housing Opens on River,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1973.

[20] See NYU Furman Center “Directory of New York City Affordable Housing Programs” for a clear and succinct discussion of the Section 236 program, [link](#). As it specifically relates to Waterside Plaza, see New York Supreme Court Case: *Norma T. DAVIS et al., Individually and as Officers of Waterside Tenants Association, for and on Behalf of the Residents of Waterside Plaza, Plaintiffs, v. Waterside Housing Company, Inc., et al., Defendants*.

[21] Waterside Plaza also received federal subsidies from the Department of Housing and Urban Development for its shorter thirty-one-story tower, which was meant to house low-income tenants solely.



Harlem River Park Towers view from Manhattan shore of the Harlem River looking northeast. Courtesy Davis Brody Bond.



Waterside Plaza, with the shorter, thirty-one-story northernmost tower clearly shown on the far right; via StreetEasy.

after River Park Towers' construction, a *New York Times* "Living In" article, highlighting the Morris Heights section of the Bronx, quoted a young couple who recently purchased a home in the area: "The block is beautiful," said the husband. "You also have views of those giant project towers, but you know, that's OK." The buildings, the article goes on in attempt to clarify, are "River Park Towers, among the area's many public housing projects." [22] The following Sunday, the *New York Times* issued a correction of what they referred to as a "misstatement" that had misrepresented this "residential complex" as "public housing." [23] That it was mistakenly represented as such in the first place is indicative of a particular imaginary at work, one with certain assumptions about both the area within which the development is sited and the bodies it contains. Similarly, a 2016 Reddit thread included "Harlem River Park Towers, Bronx, NY" in a discussion titled "evil buildings" for those buildings that "could be home to a super villain or evil corporation" or for any "villainous/evil/creepy buildings." [24] By contrast, in 2001, Herbert Muschamp included Waterside Plaza in his selection of inspirational projects that "embody the city's progressive tradition." By his estimation, Waterside Plaza "recalls the towers of San Gimignano," the "stark geometry" and "dark brick cladding" are "picturesque" and "historically informed," and, he gushes, "if you drive along the F.D.R., the curve beneath the towers is awesome." [25] Thus, while both developments are instances of the intersection of state policy and architectural design for the provision of affordable housing, both developments also operate as artifacts of social and cultural perception. They are highly aesthetic acts, configurations of experience in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. [26]

Both River Park Towers and Waterside Plaza bear the marks of distinct design features credited with constructing an imitable "new style for high-rise housing," as Goldberger put it in 1975. [27] Marked by chamfered corners and recessed notches that give way to protruding overhangs, Waterside Plaza and River Park Towers are striped vertically with interrupted bands of windows—pivoting glazed units at Waterside, and what were originally sliding and sash at River Park Towers—set in black aluminum casings, contiguous

[22] Katherine Bindley, "The View Is Auspicious from Here," *New York Times*, September 19, 2010.

[23] "Corrections," *New York Times*, September 26, 2010.

[24] Bufudyne42, "Harlem River Park Towers, Bronx, NY," evil buildings, Reddit, 2016, [link](#).

[25] Herbert Muschamp, "Critics Notebook: For Builders, Inspiration All Around," *New York Times*, October 5, 2010.

[26] This notion of "aesthetic acts" as "configurations of experience" is a formulation by Jacques Rancière, found in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3; and the notion of human bodies and social structures being represented and organized is a formulation borrowed here from sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant referring to what they call "racial formations," "historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized," in Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 55–56.

[27] Goldberger, "Waterside Design Builds Reputation."

with the spandrel panels. These bands of windows and attendant panels sit in contrast to the towers' swaths of blank façade, which from afar render the expression of the thinly mortared brick seamless and smooth. From certain angles, the windows are imperceptible as such (more often at Waterside) or the buildings appear totally awash with windows (more often at River Park Towers). The widening of the towers as they rise accommodates three-bedroom units at Waterside Plaza and up to four-bedroom units at River Park Towers. Despite this widening, there is a compactness to the design of both, a certain order and rigidity, which is perhaps what also makes each complex so striking. The buildings are a bit too tightly defined; they seem to hold in, divulging very little, allowing little room to maneuver. Their reticence undergirds a certain invisibility or invisibilizing tendency, a sort of disciplining at work, although this perception is one achieved from a distance, held at bay, both sequestered and protected from those on the outside. In both cases, the little they communicate from their exteriors should not motivate assumptions about the complex, perhaps seemingly contradictory, frustrating, or pleasurable nature of the lives lived within them, inside the intimate domestic space they provide.

Around the year 2000, when both Waterside Plaza and River Park Towers were nearing the end of their obligations to the terms of the Mitchell-Lama housing program and embarking on their right to "opt out" and join the market, signs of distress and unease, already long present, were mounting. Regarding River Park Towers, a brief article ran in the *New York Times* under the heading "Gunshots and Flying Debris Replace Residents' High Hopes." [28] Tales of household trash consistently raining down from the windows above exposed the towers as artifacts containing the bodily; the corporeal; the carnal, untidy, and unkempt; unruly bodies, mostly poor and black, responding to the threat of total erasure. In addition, these stories flew in the face of the narrative of a safe, modern, "good home" for low-moderate income families in the form of these high-rise, hybrid developments that avoided the "stigma associated with publicly assisted housing" and created "viable, active neighborhoods" carefully propagated by the Urban Development Corporation. [29] In truth, this form of "acting out" at River Park Towers, a form of action aligned with the

[28] Andrew Friedman, "Gunshots and Flying Debris Replace Residents' High Hopes," *New York Times*, October 8, 2000.

[29] "Annual Report of the New York State Urban Development Corporation," (New York 1973), 36.



Harlem River Park Towers looking west from Sedgwick Avenue. © Michael Schwartz; Originally published in the *New York Daily News*, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/feds-bust-bronx-gang-controlled-housing-complex-article-1.1911566>.



Waterside Plaza looking across FDR Drive at the low bar building, containing parking and entrances at the base and townhouse units at top; photograph taken February 13, 2011. © Teri Tynes.

theatrical civil disobedience of organizations like ACT UP—by residents whose “households” were deemed eligible for inhabitation only through the imposed limitations of the “area median income”—represented a form of activism. [30] The expressive function of hurling trash from one’s window can be regarded as a crucial resource for responding to trauma, in this case in response to the threat of erasure, to being neatly concealed behind orderly façades and managed by highly organized apartments. This form of activism is a response to “psychic needs, ones that emerge from a desire to project the internal externally.” [31]

At Waterside Plaza in 1994, the over five thousand tenants of the development’s nearly 1,500 apartments were described as “up in arms” over a move to raise rents by 55 percent to offset the costs of structural repairs, including mending the façade’s “distinctive square brown bricks.” By 1994, it had been a decade since longtime residents had experienced a rent increase. The threat of instability, housing insecurity, and lack of affordability challenged the inviolability of the “self-contained community.” Confronted with mounting tenant unrest, Waterside’s managing director attributed the need to increase rents to “a serious deficiency” in the state’s Mitchell-Lama housing law, a law that incentivized the construction of the structurally novel middle-income housing development but afforded no reserve fund to pay for eventual repairs. [32] Developers operating within the Mitchell-Lama housing program took advantage of the financing scheme, tax incentives, and nearly free land in order to promote the construction of urban middle-income housing—which neither the public housing program nor unsubsidized private developers were producing—and in effect invented the middle they were meant to provide for. [33] At Waterside, outrage over the rent increase was a response to the threat of exposure, the threat of their station being exposed as illusory, a response to the revelation of the tenuousness of the middle, despite its seeming comfort.

[30] Ann Cvetkovich, “AIDS Activism and Public Feelings, Documenting ACT UP’s Lesbians,” in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 187.

[31] Cvetkovich, “AIDS Activism and Public Feelings, Documenting ACT UP’s Lesbians,” 164–165.

[32] Bruce Lambert, “Worries at Waterside,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1994.

[33] Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 281.

Dr. Benjamin S. Carson Sr.

Nearly one year ago, Dr. Benjamin S. Carson Sr. assumed the position of secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The transcripts of his January 12, 2017, confirmation hearing reveal that in the absence of any government or public policy experience, Dr. Carson's preparedness for this cabinet position accrued primarily through his "life story"—a series of experiences, repeatedly rehearsed, neatly packaged, and broadly disseminated, perhaps most famously through his 1992 autobiography, *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story*. Considering that his public persona is built primarily on narrative, Ben Carson himself seems hardly present within this construction. More than a year before Carson's appointment to HUD, the comedian, actor, activist, and 1968 Freedom and Peace Party presidential candidate Dick Gregory observed this elusive nature and openly challenged the veracity of the event in Carson's life most credited with igniting his fame and thus pointing to the significance of elevating Carson's "personal story" over his person:

"SO, WHEN I LOOK AT BEN, THE BLACK DOCTOR FROM JOHNS HOPKINS, I KNOW 'BOUT THE OPERATION...THEY TELL YOU THIS. TELL YOU THAT...HOW COME WE AIN'T HEARD NBC, OR CBS OR NONE OF 'EM GO IN DEPTH TO TALK ABOUT THE OPERATION? HE SUPPOSEDLY SEPARATED SIAMESE TWINS FROM THE HEAD. HUMPH? LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING AND I'LL TALK TO YA, 'CAUSE TRUTH AIN'T NEVER HAVE TO BE VALIDATED BY YOUR IGNORANCE. HE WASN'T EVEN IN THE ROOM WHEN THAT OPERATION TOOK PLACE...HE WASN'T EVEN IN THE ROOM." [34]

Whether or not Carson was in fact "in the room"—and the number of in-depth articles about the surgery that include mention of Carson's integral role in the surgery are plentiful, confirmed by interviews with other doctors also in the room—Gregory's questioning of Dr. Carson's bodily presence makes explicit something that his life story occludes: his blackness. The idea that Ben Carson is a "model" and that his story is "remarkable" is a coded reminder of the unspoken common knowledge that poor black people are not supposed or expected to attend Yale, become neurosurgeons, head a department of such specialists, or lead them in groundbreaking work. By insisting on recognizing him as "Ben, the black doctor from Johns Hopkins," Gregory reveals that Dr. Carson's blackness, a conception disguised rhetorically throughout the confirmation hearing, is a flat, paltry rendering, ultimately revelatory of its own fiction—so wholly present and so generally accepted as to be beyond question. Whether Carson was, in fact, absent from the operating room is less important than the critical posing of the question. The audacity of his possible absence masquerading as presence is a fitting parallel for the absurdity of his selection to lead HUD, a selection and a process of confirmation plagued by a similar set of delusions, myths, assumptions, misrepresentations, and avoidances, many of them rooted in that sly invention: race.

[34] The operation that Gregory appears to have been referring to was a 1987 surgery for which Dr. Carson was said to be the lead neurosurgeon, directing a seventy-member surgical team that separated conjoined twins, Patrick and Benjamin Binder, who had been joined at the back of the head. Unlike Dr. Carson, who speaks in a measured whisper, Dick Gregory spoke with an intensity that had no interest in whether or not his listeners were able to keep up. As such, one could dispute whether he was indeed referring to the Binder surgery at all. What is clear is his declaration that Dr. Ben Carson was not in the room, that he was not physically present as an active, participating body, actually doing the work his "gifted hands" have been credited with doing. Included portion of Gregory interview transcribed by Ife Vanable from a recorded interview: "Dick Gregory on Donald Trump, Ben Carson, Bad KKKops, #BlackLivesMatter, #JusticeOrElse," YouTube, November 10, 2015, [link](#).

The “middle,” much like race, is a contrivance continuously working and being worked. The middle, can be described in much the same way that Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields describe race in their work *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, as “a statistically defined population not held to be visible to the naked eye, or knowable in advance of disciplined investigation”—where, particularly as it relates to the “middle,” that which is under scrutiny is invented as the inquiry is carried out. [35] The middle is conjured, and once called upon must be shaped, hammered, and kneaded into being—work that has occupied HUD since its founding and continues to absorb it, dictating where to look and how that looking is to be enacted. Unlike the seeming ubiquity of race, the middle is constantly being sought, its absence fueling an ongoing search. And despite this absence, being imagined and sought after, the middle is endlessly acted upon and re-imagined, the acting and imagining inextricably intertwined. [36]

While Waterside is represented and even celebrated, Harlem River Park Towers is not listed on the current incarnation of the now Davis Brody Bond website, its nonappearance signaling a sort of architecture not in evidence, its seeming unavailability at odds with its impressive, massive, affective, and sensuous material presence. [37] Its omission may betray the firm’s desire to distance itself from a development perceived and imagined as “evil” and more broadly mirrors a national uncertainty and insecurity about its own makeup. The notion of the “middle,” as shorthand to designate a particular world of experience, value, behavior, and level of material comfort, is an essential fiction, continuously working and being worked to concoct a national image of equitable access.<sup>38</sup> Harlem River Park Towers and Waterside Plaza are instances of the middle being acted upon, being tirelessly worked, and despite or perhaps as a result of the variations in their perception and reception, testaments to the vitality of the imaginary.

[35] Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields and their formulation of race in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 5.

[36] Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 19.

[37] This notion of “architecture not in evidence” is indebted to the work of Sylvia Lavin presented as a lecture held at the Princeton University School of Architecture, April 27, 2016, [link](#).