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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Governance of New York City's Slums: A History and Its Lessons

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Abstract

New York City is the commercial and financial capital of the United States, yet the other face of its prosperity is a set of slums—the Lower East Side, Harlem and Mott Haven among them—that are among the best known in the country. New York's record of slum governance is representative both in its duration and in its method. In duration, it was the first American city to address its slums, and it has been doing so continuously since the 1850s. In method, it moved from public housing construction to the urban renewal movement and then to neighbourhood preservation, and each of these approaches was once promoted by the federal government as a model for American cities. A close examination of New York's experience—its achievements and its failures—offers lessons of real value for urban development and management in China.

Keywords: slums; governance history; lessons and experience; New York City

1. The Formation of New York's Slums and Their Early Governance

The rapid industrialisation of the United States in the nineteenth century generated employment on an unprecedented scale. Large numbers of European immigrants and rural migrants arrived, and with them came the mass rise of cities and a swift urbanisation of the population. Over the course of the century the total population of the United States grew twelvefold, while its urban population grew eighty-sevenfold.[1] New York City held 312,000 residents in 1840; by 1900 the figure had surged to 3.437 million.[2]

To house the influx, the city's first tenement house was built in 1933. Such buildings were poorly appointed, and their sanitary and fire-safety conditions were dire; every year thousands of people lost their lives to infectious disease or to fire. To fit in more tenants, landlords habitually subdivided the cramped and rudimentary dwellings into further units for rent. In 1890 the average American dwelling housed 5.45 people; in New York City the figure reached 18.52.[3]

By 1901 New York's old tenement buildings numbered 82,000, housing 1.5 million people—nearly half the city's population.[4] Exploding poverty combined with wretched living conditions allowed the slums to spread unchecked. The New York journalist Jacob Riis observed in *How the Other Half Lives* that "either we must clear the slums, or the slums will clear us; it is one or the other."[5] Urban problems rose steadily into questions of national importance, and in the 1890s they finally produced a city reform movement of considerable force.

As early as 1867 New York City passed the first local housing statute, the Tenement House Act, which set out specific requirements for tenement construction; this marks the beginning of intervention in housing by an American local government. New York State in turn enacted Tenement House Acts in 1879 and again in 1901, requiring that newly built private tenements leave open space between buildings sufficient to meet at least the minimum standards of ventilation and daylight. Government corruption and weak enforcement in this period meant that the housing statutes were never effectively applied, however, and a great many substandard old tenements survived.

Faced with a steadily deteriorating inner-city living environment, voluntary organisations in New York launched a movement for social improvement and made bold attempts at slum governance. Reformers founded cultural and educational welfare institutions such as Greenwich House and Henry Street Settlement. Through them they hoped to raise the educational level of slum residents, strengthen their capacity to support themselves, and narrow the gulf between rich and poor. Measured against the polarisation of society as a whole, the reformers' work was little more than a drop in the ocean; what matters is that it opened an experiment in social improvement, informed and educated the public, and lent real impetus to social reform both then and later.

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2. Slum Governance under the New Deal

The construction of decent housing has always been regarded as the key to early slum governance. In the 1920s the clearing of New York's slums and the building of housing were carried mainly by the limited dividend corporations. In 1926 New York State led the way with the New York State Limited Dividend Housing Corporations Law of 1926, which provided that slum clearance and housing construction would be undertaken by private enterprise, with the return on investment capped at six per cent. The Housing Authority was made responsible for designating building sites and for controlling rents. When the Amalgamated House project was completed in 1927, *The New York Times* remarked that it was "the finest and largest low-rent housing project in New York City. The rents are low, and the surroundings are good."[6]

The severe economic crisis that broke in the United States in 1929 struck the New York housing market as hard as anywhere. Between October 1931 and June of the following year, 186,000 households were evicted for failing to meet rent and loan payments. The Depression left vast numbers homeless, yet the vacancy rate reached a historic high: in 1933 roughly twenty per cent of old apartments stood unlet.[7]

In response, American housing policy shifted decisively, moving from market leadership to direct government intervention. Under the New Deal the government began building public housing on a large scale. In January 1934 New York State passed a bill permitting the City of New York to take a direct part in housing construction. In the same year the state enacted the Municipal Housing Authorities Law, under which municipalities might expropriate private land for reasons of public interest. With federal funds and a legal mandate behind it, large-scale slum clearance and rebuilding in New York City entered a new phase.

In the 1930s the city carried out three major redevelopment projects aimed at its slums: Williamsburg Houses, Harlem River Houses and First Houses, all among the first public housing built in New York City. Williamsburg Houses was the largest, involving the relocation of 1,279 households and the demolition of more than 2,000 old apartments.[8] Harlem River Houses was built specifically for black residents under the segregated arrangements of the time. First Houses was the first public housing project financed by a local government from its own funds, and it was distinguished by new buildings whose scale and exterior design were kept in keeping with the older housing around them. *Pencil Points* reviewed Williamsburg Houses in these terms: "It is more agreeable than the expensive Park Avenue housing; the land has been put to sensible use; environment and dwellings set each other off; the community has created a harmonious atmosphere in which children can grow up happily, and it has brought new ideas of democracy and progress that no amount of money could buy."[9]

Between 1934 and 1941 New York City built 55,465 new dwellings, of which public housing accounted for 23.4 per cent. Between 1934 and 1938 new public housing made up fully 35 per cent of all new dwellings.[10] The public housing built in this period had four distinguishing features. First, its design standards and construction quality were high: both federal and local government set demanding requirements, and layouts and finishes followed those of private housing.[11] Second, community services and public facilities were complete, with supermarkets, kindergartens and sports grounds built alongside the housing. Third, because different groups held conflicting interests in urban renewal, site selection was often deeply contested. Property developers and property bankers argued for high-density public housing on the original sites, which would raise land values and tax receipts, while the Housing Authority and city planning officials argued for low-density development or siting on the urban fringe, so as to disperse and relieve inner-city population pressure and ease congestion. The two positions frequently delayed projects, and in some cases caused public housing schemes to be cancelled altogether. Fourth, tenant selection in New York City's public housing was marked by severe racial segregation and by the exclusion of the poor. The Red Hook Houses, with 2,545 dwellings, held only two black households; the Williamsburg Houses, with 1,622, held only one. The Housing Authority moreover required applicant households to have a monthly income of 100 dollars—the average monthly wage of full-time employees of local government and education authorities across the United States in 1935, and far above what manufacturing workers earned at the time.[12] Even so, public housing rents were considerably lower than those on the private market.

Another feature of New York's slums in the 1930s was the emergence of districts settled by black, Hispanic and other ethnic minority residents. Before 1900 the great majority of black Americans lived in the South. Between 1910 and 1930 some two million black people left the South for the great cities of the North in what is known as the First Great Migration. Beyond the search for work, the first problem they met was where to live. The racial segregation then in force meant that fewer and fewer areas would accept black residents, and this in turn produced the black enclaves of the American city.

3. The Urban Renewal Movement in New York City

After the Second World War, rapid suburbanisation drew large numbers of the urban middle class outwards and deepened the decay of the inner city. At the same time the demobilisation of large numbers of servicemen left the cities desperately short of housing. Together these pressures moved the federal government to issue in 1949 a housing act concerned with urban renewal, and to begin building public housing on a scale larger than before the war.

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Against the background of a national urban renewal movement, New York City began a further round of slum governance. In December 1948 the New York City Slum Clearance Committee completed a citywide survey and found that 9,000 acres of slums urgently required redevelopment. With public funds limited, the committee's chairman, Robert Moses, held that public-private partnership was the only solution. Moses was candid: "If this fails, we shall have to accept the conclusion that large-scale slum clearance must depend entirely on public housing and public funds."[13]

Slum clearance and redevelopment by the city government in this period usually began with a clearance plan put forward by the committee. Once the plan was approved, the city expropriated the land named in the proposal and sold it to a developer below its assessed cost, leaving the developer to carry out clearance, construction and the rehousing of the site's residents. Because of opposition from residents and from some political representatives, or because of funding problems, the process did not always run smoothly; many projects died at the stage of publicity and planning. One example is the Morningside-Manhattanville project of 1950. Covering six blocks and 12,000 residents, most of them black or Puerto Rican, the scheme was judged by local people to have ignored the housing needs of low-income residents, and they strongly doubted the fairness of the hearings. They formed the Committee to Save Our Homes to resist redevelopment, and the dispute eventually prompted a congressional inquiry. Although criticism of New York's urban renewal never ceased, by the late 1950s the city still had the most efficient and successful housing programme in the country: twenty-three slum renewal projects were begun in this period, producing 37,000 new apartments.[14]

In 1959 the federal government introduced the Community Renewal Program, intended to fund comprehensive planning for poor communities. The urban theory of the Chicago School held that the spatial layout of the city resembles an ecosystem: as large numbers of middle-class households move from the centre to the suburbs, inner-city space is left vacant, new migrants and disadvantaged groups congregate there, and even the most rapid housing renewal cannot arrest the decline of the inner city.

To achieve the integral revival of poor neighbourhoods, the New York city government drew up a new plan. The new plan directed revival action squarely at the disadvantaged groups living in the poorest districts. This marked a major turn in slum policy: it "signalled that the city government had reached a fundamental new understanding of urban renewal, and of whom the city's resources should first serve."[15] The plan recognised that slum residents needed not only decent housing but also education, job skills training, social services and health care.

The new plan also combined the large traditional spaces awaiting development with small-scale, staged development. Through planning and construction on a modest local scale, rehousing and rebuilding could proceed in an orderly way, and objectives be achieved by degrees. Previous large renewal projects in New York City had never covered fewer than twelve acres, and none had been completed in under eight years. A protracted rebuilding process easily destroys the confidence of local residents, whereas small-scale, incremental governance can be adjusted and refined in the light of local fiscal conditions, and residents need not wait years before returning. In carrying out the new plan the city also sought to avoid the damage that neighbourhood redevelopment does to social ties. In 1968, responding to the new conditions of urban governance, the federal government passed the Neighborhood Development Programs, which gave local authorities financial support to strengthen small-scale development.

Under the new plan low-rent housing was dispersed into middle-income districts already provided with relatively complete community facilities and municipal services, so that households rehoused from poor areas could quickly enjoy them. This practice too was later adopted by the federal government as an example for others. The civil disturbances of 1968 persuaded the federal government that it must actively encourage and assist members of ethnic minorities to disperse and settle within white communities, and the city government accordingly designated thirteen mixed-income districts.

A further key innovation of the new plan was the protective renewal of traditional neighbourhoods. In the view of the New York City Planning Commission, "neighbourhood conditions are in rapid decline; if the pace of change continues to quicken, traditional neighbourly relations and structures will be destroyed beyond recovery. The city's worst slums today were once neighbourhoods with stable social ties. Unless they are effectively governed, the same process will be repeated elsewhere in an accelerating cycle. Every building will fall into ruin, crime will rise, the nightmare will become real, maintenance will be neglected, old neighbourly relations will dissolve, and existing residents will flee for fear that the area is becoming a slum, before new occupants take root."[16] The Commission therefore proposed that a share of city housing and renewal funds be earmarked specifically for the protective renewal and revival of such areas.

The new plan also laid particular emphasis on design. A 1967 report, "The Mayor's Task Is to Attend to Urban Design", observed that the most fundamental problem in New York's subsidised and renewal housing was that, despite the sheer scale of construction and its unbroken runs of buildings, no neighbourhood had been created—the existing one had instead been stripped away. The original design of the buildings was graceful, but the result was unbearable.[17]

The most successful instance of attention to design is East Midtown Plaza in Manhattan. Following the ideas of Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, East Midtown Plaza mixes land uses, draws greater security from the "eyes on the street" of its ground-floor businesses, and builds the new structures around a church at mid-block, so that

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they harmonise with the existing buildings.

4. The Neighbourhood Preservation Programme in New York City

In 1974 the federal government created the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).[18] Local governments applying for funds were required to ensure that seventy per cent of the money went to projects serving low- and moderate-income households—creating new jobs for residents, repairing housing or pavements, building community centres and the like.

In the revival of New York's neighbourhoods the most notable actors were the community development corporations (CDCs). With the help of these non-profit organisations, New York City carried out the largest and most successful municipal housing rehabilitation programme in the United States; it ran for more than ten years and repaired over 125,000 dwellings. By the 1970s nearly 200 such corporations in the city were responsible for maintaining 100,000 dwellings, more than half the public housing stock.

Washington Heights offers an example of neighbourhood preservation. In 1970 the district held more than 187,000 people, of whom fifteen per cent were black and nine per cent Hispanic; eleven per cent lived on social welfare, and the poverty rate exceeded the city average. When Washington Heights was designated a neighbourhood preservation area, the city government provided community development funds for its revival. By 1978, 1,500 apartments had been repaired under various mortgage assistance schemes, 9,300 had been upgraded under landlord repair agreements, and 4,000 had benefited from tax relief under the J-51 programme. No neighbourhood revival programme in any American city had attracted so much private investment as Washington Heights.[20] The result transformed a dilapidated district. By 1993 the community development corporations and the city government had provided joint mortgage loans totalling 92.2 million dollars for the repair of 7,064 apartments, and 13,898 dwellings in more than 405 buildings had been rehabilitated under various public programmes.[21]

The city government had come to see that it could no longer simply move the poor elsewhere. Residents displaced from the slums faced the same problems wherever they went: serious deficits in education, skills and work experience left them uncompetitive in the labour market. Only the combined efforts of property owners, government policy and financial institutions could effectively maintain the existing housing stock and traditional neighbourhoods. What made New York's approach to neighbourhood preservation a success was that it reduced government action: repairs were carried out by existing owners or tenants, and the money came from bank loans and tax relief, with no direct government involvement, no elaborate rebuilding scheme—only stimulation and incentive. An American urban planning specialist assessed the programme thus: "New York City's success in neighbourhood preservation should become the basis of new federal housing legislation. It shows that the time has come for rehabilitation mortgage insurance to influence urban development as the Federal Housing Administration once influenced the suburbs, for tax incentives to follow the model of New York's J-51 programme, and for community legislation on preservation to be enacted in every urban district of the United States."[22]

5. The Present State and Governance of New York's Black Enclaves

After governance through neighbourhood renewal programmes, conditions in most of New York's slums improved markedly from the 1970s onwards. Today the core of the South Bronx has been rebuilt and its population has stabilised. Neighbourhood revival has drawn large numbers of middle-class residents, and the newcomers include white and Hispanic households as well as black ones; districts once in steep decline have become lively again.

Taken as a whole, however, the city's development remains unbalanced. Relative poverty persists and has grown worse. A quarter of the city's population lives below the poverty line—twice the figure for New York State as a whole. Racial segregation is a principal reason why the gap between rich and poor has widened further. Ninety per cent of the black population of the metropolitan region is concentrated in New York City; black and Hispanic residents make up roughly half the city's population and more than seventy per cent of its poor. Almost every black and Hispanic district has a higher poverty rate than the rest of the city. Block 129 in the heart of Harlem was once called "another America" by *The New York Times*, in reference to its poverty and isolation. In 1990 median household income there was 19,169 dollars, against a citywide median of 41,415.[22] Enduring racism has persistently prevented black and Hispanic migrants from moving out of their segregated districts.

To address this complex situation, the city government has taken the following measures in governing ethnic minority enclaves.

The first is to seek cooperation among multiple parties for joint development and governance, which requires government, developers and community organisations to work together. The redevelopment scheme for Block 129 in Harlem is an example. From 1994 the city government began selling "city-owned" buildings in the district to private buyers or developers at concessionary prices. Nearly two-thirds of the properties were sold at concessionary prices to low-income buyers, the remainder at market prices. Purchasing developers were required to repair and manage the buildings, and existing tenants could return once repairs were complete. Developers were further required to let three-quarters of the apartments to low-income households for fifteen years. The city government was thus relieved of the burden of maintenance, and

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developers and individuals were drawn into the redevelopment of the whole district.

The second is to emphasise integrated community governance rather than simple housing repair. Since the 1960s two positions have competed in American thinking on the urban slum: a place-based approach, which stresses improving living conditions and housing in the inner city and remote areas and advocates combining residence with work opportunities in the inner city and in areas of high poverty; and a people-based approach, which stresses direct assistance to individuals and encourages people to move to better places. Experience has shown that emphasising place or people alone both fail. Richard Daley, mayor of Chicago, put it this way: "City government must not only build better housing but provide supporting facilities. What people need is education, work and job training—that is the foundation of social reconstruction." Only the combination of the two is an effective way to resolve the problems of black enclaves.

The third is to give full play to the role of non-profit community organisations in neighbourhood redevelopment. Such organisations first appeared in the 1960s and by the 1980s numbered some 1,500 to 2,000 across the United States. Working with government and private foundations, they made an indispensable contribution to the redevelopment of poor inner-city communities, especially those of ethnic minorities: they repaired 125,000 dwellings for low-income families, developed 16.4 million square feet of land for commercial premises, offices and industrial parks, and created nearly 90,000 jobs. One example is the Abyssinian Development Corporation, founded in 1988 as a non-profit community organisation by the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a black religious body, with the aim of reviving Harlem and restoring it as the capital of black culture.

Most important is to promote racial and class integration within residential districts, for this is the key to breaking the closed character of ethnic minority enclaves. In the redevelopment of Harlem the city government used every means to attract middle-class residents. Middle-class households have practical reasons of their own for returning to the city centre—relatively low house prices, shorter commuting times and so forth. Race relations in American society have on the whole eased, and this is connected with the creation of multiracial, mixed-income environments within single neighbourhoods. In 1958 only fifty-five per cent of white Americans said they would not move away if a black family moved in next door; by 1978 the figure had risen to eighty-five per cent. Yet residential integration remains at an early stage, for entrenched habits die hard. The 2000 census shows that residential segregation, particularly between white and black Americans, remains high in both city and suburb, and has changed scarcely at all since the 1990 census.

6. Conclusion

Several factors in the history of New York's slum governance underwent fundamental change. The first is the change in the governing actor. The earliest slum governance was purely a market operation: both planning and construction were carried out by private enterprise, and the profit motive produced many abuses. The governing actor later became a government department, but fiscal constraints then became the binding limit on how far governance could proceed. To avoid the problems of both earlier arrangements, slum governance in New York after the 1970s has in general been a joint undertaking of government, enterprise, non-governmental organisations and local residents.

The second is the change in method. In early slum governance, building housing and moving the poor out were the principal means, and the pattern of "demolish and rebuild" was repeated again and again. New housing did to some extent solve the shelter problem of the poor, but it did nothing fundamental for their poverty, least of all in ethnic minority enclaves. Increasing the mobility of slum residents may even spread poverty to neighbouring areas, since poor households tend to move only short distances, to districts similar to the ones they leave. New York's government therefore moved from rebuilding and relocation to the protective renewal of traditional neighbourhoods: repairing housing where necessary, preserving existing neighbourly relations, protecting community culture, and strengthening education and skills training for slum residents.

Most important of all is the change in underlying approach. The problem of New York's slums is at bottom a problem of economic development and a problem of racism. Each percentage point of American economic growth lifts two million people out of poverty, while racism is the force that confines black, Hispanic and other minority residents to segregated districts. No single policy or measure can resolve the slum problem at its root. Only by advancing economic development while steadily promoting racial and class integration within residential districts can the condition of the slums be fundamentally reversed.

China is now entering the fast lane of urbanisation, and the urban-rural dual structure of its society is gradually changing. With the abolition of the household registration system, large numbers of agricultural residents will inevitably move into the cities. The housing problems of the new urban population, the management problems created by the concentration of low-income groups, and the problems of old-city redevelopment, urban-village redevelopment and shantytown governance will all continue to arise. Each will be a significant factor in the future management and development of Chinese cities, and each therefore warrants attention to the experience and the lessons of New York's urban governance.

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