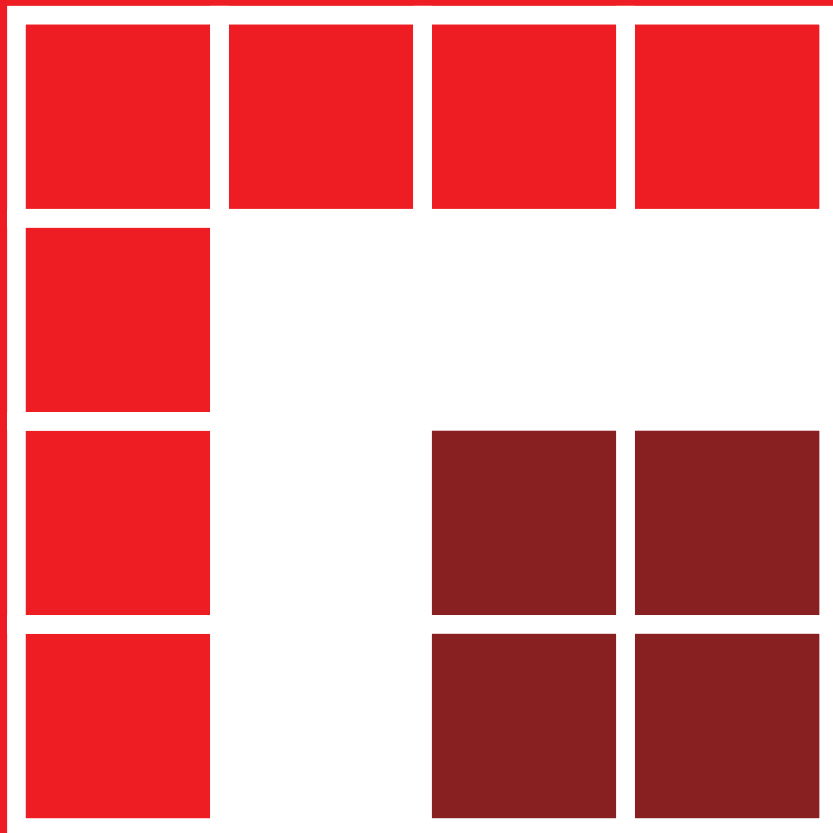# A NEW
"SQUARE DEAL"

FOR THE **"SOUL"** OF
EAST HARLEM'S SOCIAL
HOUSING PROJECTS

OSMAN URAL

C O N C L U S I O N

A CRITICISM OF SOCIAL HOUSING IN THE U.S.A.

Social housing started off as a good and logical way to help people who are in need of a proper place to live, but as macroeconomics shifted demographics of people away from cities and into suburbia, their maintenance structure could not hold itself up. This is because these projects relied on revenue from rent, as they were originally designed for low to middle income citizens. As people in poverty moved into them, the social housing degraded into a state of disrepair, and then politicians started blaming these poor and impoverished people for their own failure. Politicians need to take responsibility for the state in which inhabitants of the projects live in. They deserve better, and it is for this reason that a transformational framework to provide positive change is necessary. Threats of gentrification and speculation are rampant, and these inhabitants need protection.

A FRAMEWORK FOR FIXING NYCHA

The project incentivizes the development of various forms of program that will enhance self-awareness. This will, in turn, make the housing projects safer and healthier for all. It also protects the inhabitants right to access the city, which is also under threat, as rent prices climb and forcibly push locals outside their own neighborhood. The methods necessary to awaken the "soul" of public space involve the "New Three C's." Approaches to Palimpsest, Fractal Planning, and Power Projection all play key roles in enhancing the three design elements of the proposal, which are the new housing blocks, the preexisting towers, and the landscaping itself. Both the structure of the theoretical framework, and the interventions, are modular in both form and function, allowing the design proposal to be future-proof.

BENEFITS FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

The thesis proposal aims to fix the dysfunctional public space within the social housing projects. However, it needs to be financially viable, which means various stakeholders need to be involved. Creating a win-win situation for all involved can make this thesis proposal into an agent of change throughout the entire NYCHA system. Zoning is the fire underneath the stakeholders that motivates them to create change in our cities. With NYCHA selling off their land that does not include the towers, enough funds can be generated to make investments that rehabilitate the social housing projects, especially when it comes to maintenance. To make this project into a reality, it will need the cooperation of all stakeholders involved, and they must strictly follow the design brief set out by the transformational framework.

Social Housing and the Failure of America
Source: Created by Author.

R E F L E C T I O N

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

The work-flow of this thesis can be characterized by a constant struggle between finding new issues in the research, then trying to solve them using both architectural and urban design approaches. Then, after providing a designed solution, going back to the research to try and validate it, both practically and philosophically. The process could reverse as well. Multiple times I have had to learn about rules and regulations for zoning and parcel management in New York City just so I could design the development rules and phasing of this project.

Another important aspect I learned in this perpetual struggle is that one cannot go without the other. Too much research can leave you adrift in a sea of indecisiveness because there is a lack of an explicit goal that needs to be met, or a question that needs to be answered. Too much design work will do the opposite. You will get lost in the details of a project, which prevents you from looking at your work with perspective. The relationship between research and design is a delicate balance between producing a result, and giving that result meaning and purpose. Depending on the context of the research question, that meaning and purpose can be found in the history of said problem, as you can track and understand the twists and turns an idea took to get where it is today.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THEME OF THE GRADUATION LAB, THE URBAN-ISM TRACK, AND THE SUBJECT CHOSEN BY THE STUDENT WITHIN THIS FRAMEWORK (LOCATION/OBJECT)

The History and Hertitage Lab was a very useful perspective in which to look at the problem I wished to solve. Social housing in the United States is relatively unique in just how spectacularly it failed the way it did. In order to truly understand how it happened, it was critical to go back in history and attempt to understand the populist and progressivist political and economic landscape that shaped social housing as preferred policy to fight poverty and crime. In doing so, I had inadvertently found the manifesto on which I would base my design philosophy on. This approach ended up defining what needed to be designed in order to solve the research questions I created as a result of analyzing and observing the plight of the poverty stricken inhabitants of the social housing projects in New York City.

ELABORATION ON RESEARCH METHOD AND APPROACH CHOSEN BY THE STUDENT IN RELATION TO THE METHODICAL LINE OF INQUIRY, REFLECTING THEREBY UPON THE SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE OF THE WORK

The path on which I chose to take in order to answer my research question involved a two step approach. The first step involved analyzing the deficiencies and problems regarding the current situation that the social housing projects of East Harlem find themselves in. I then implemented an analytical framework that broke down these deficiencies into singular negative aspects that are rampant in these social housing projects. The framework then took these problems and turned them into goals that would provide the design motivations of the thesis project. For example, if there is no hierarchy or variety in public space, and their is no human scale quality to the spatiality to the said space, then the design motivation would be to add variety of spatial interventions in order to increase the human sense of connection to it's environment.

ON THE THESIS

The approach of taking observed problems and breaking them down to their elemental issues in order to create clearly defined design goals was a very interesting method for me to learn while working on my thesis project. I believe I learned this process in the methodology classes at the beginning of the thesis process, as the assignments and lectures forced me to implicitly create arguments and logics - in a way forcing me to see the truth. Sometimes when I am designing or researching in depth, I can get too caught up into what I am doing, and I will assume people around me know about the ideas behind the issues I am trying to solve. It is a difficult habit to shake off, but I am aware now that I sometimes take my thought processes for granted.

The "Soul" of Social Housing in America is Locked in Time
Source: Collage Created by the Author

R E F L E C T I O N

ELABORATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GRADUATION PROJECT AND THE WIDER SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK, TOUCHING UPON THE TRANSFERABILITY OF THE PROJECT RESULT.

When I was first looking for my thesis topic, I was primarily focused on trying to solve the macro scale issue of mass housing projects and how they negatively impact the socio-spatial urban fabric of our lives. It seemed lofty and significant at first, but then during a presentation in the History and Heritage Lab, I was forced with a heavy dose of truth - is the topic I am going after a "real" problem? Stuck in our bubbles of architecture and design, sometimes we lose touch with what an actual problem might be. This truth that I was faced with forced me to find a subject that would have a true and intrinsic social value.

When I discovered the social housing projects of New York City, I found them accidentally because I was doing research on the social housing projects of Turkey, and it was difficult to find negative criticism of them. I realized that the ones in Turkey do not have a real problem - they are just ugly and out of scale - and has no impact on the quality of life the inhabitants of the social housing projects in Turkey. Since their construction and maintenance is still a top priority for government officials as they continue to give adequate funding and support to their existence. However, this is not the case for the people living in the social housing projects of New York City, and then I realized I had found a real problem to try to solve.

I had no idea the housing crisis was as bad as it is publicized. People are hurting in these social housing projects in New York City, and it is shocking considering the city holds a vast amount of wealth, which can be observed by all the new construction projects going on in the city. This socio-spatial manifestation of the problems regarding our neo-liberal reality motivated me to really pursue this thesis. I wanted to produce something that could be used by others in a way that could help raise the quality of people's lives. Hopefully a transformational framework such as the one I propose can be used on other social housing projects around the United States. Social housing was never a bad idea, and it is not the reason why it failed. It just never evolved.

DISCUSS THE ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS YOU MAY HAVE ENCOUNTERED IN DOING THE RESEARCH, ELABORATION OF THE DESIGN AND THE POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS OF THE RESULT IN PRACTICE.

From the perspective as both an architect and an urban designer, a major ethical dilemma ensues when the land value of the site is eventually increased due to the designing of a better quality of socio-spatial life. I feel that regenerating these social housing projects will create a new level of attractiveness, and their identity will inherently evolve because of it. Even though the apartment towers will be protected in my proposed transformational framework, it is difficult to predict what will occur immediately around the project site area. Combine the overall lack of affordable housing with the fact that the location of the site is very close to Central Park, and it is not hard to use deductive logic to realize that East Harlem is a ripe target for gentrification.

ON THE THESIS

In addition to this dilemma, the developers who will help in regenerating these neighborhoods will need a large source of capital in order to not just purchase land, but also creating the buildings as well. This reliance upon wealthy stakeholders and public funding from the governmental structures of New York City creates a heavy top to bottom relationship between themselves and the residents of the projects. Such an endeavor will naturally have developers motivated for the largest profit margin possible, and the needs of local inhabitants could potentially be ignored. Providing a system of checks and balances, such as making requirements of developers to provide socio-cultural functions and apparatuses so that the community can continue to thrive while the developers are free to make their profits.

The "Soul" of Social Housing Brought Back to Life
Source: Collage Created by the Author