

Thabit, Walter.*How East New York Became a Ghetto.*

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The strength of this book arises from the author's direct involvement in the East New York area as it became a ghetto. Starting in 1966, Walter Thabit's planning/consulting firm worked with the East New York community on housing projects, and as a result his insights are rooted in close-to-the-ground practical experience. What he makes clear is that the process of ghetto formation was anything but benign or accidental.

First, while many were the losers in the process, some profited, and in so doing significantly worsened the cycle of decline. The main culprits, according to Thabit, were the real estate companies and banks, plus local governments which in the face of destruction and human despair were guilty at best of inaction, at worst of collaboration.

Second, the entire process was permeated by racism, with Black and Puerto Rican families the targets of relentlessly ruthless and predatory actions. "Make no mistake," Thabit observes, "ghettoes are created by the apartheid policies of white society." Black families were barred from White neighbourhoods, and pushed into neighbourhoods like East New York, where they were subjected to "...an endless series of real estate swindles, speculations, and foreclosures, followed by an almost universal halt to normal maintenance and repair." Banks red-lined the area. Real estate firms engaged in blockbusting and other racially-based policies, squeezing out existing tenants to jack up rents. Slum landlords bought up ever more buildings, and 'milked' them, squeezing in tenants, especially welfare tenants, and simultaneously abandoning any attempt whatever at repair and maintenance. Governments stopped investing in schools, parks, and maintenance of all kinds. Black families who wanted to could not escape because White communities with their better housing were closed to them, the direct result of the deliberately segregationist policies and actions of realtors

and governments. As Thabit describes it, “the racist policies of real estate brokers and speculators, the redlining by the banks, and the almost total neglect of the situation by the City and its agencies brought the area to almost total collapse.”

To his credit, Thabit was committed to full community involvement in the attempted housing solutions headed up by his firm. His descriptions of attempts to mobilize the community, and the seemingly endless difficulties and community conflicts that followed, make for interesting and often insightful, if somewhat discouraging, reading. So too does his description of the long, hard slog through bureaucracies to accomplish the things that people needed and wanted. Citizens bumped heads with recalcitrant bureaucrats, and with each other, and eventually got worn down in the process.

Significantly, Thabit makes clear that the process of ghetto formation was in no way inevitable. Governments prepared to invest in East New York and its people, and to regulate the actions of banks and real estate firms, would have made a difference. But governments were not. On the contrary:

All levels of government were in thrall to the real estate industry, all too willing to ignore the industry’s criminal acts, its community-destroying activities, its undisguised racism, its enthusiasm for segregation, its lust for profits. In the East New York feeding frenzy, it was open season on Blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Strong though his description of the process of ghetto formation in East New York is, there are places where Thabit would have benefitted from a better editor. Some sections of the book are longer and more detailed than they need to be. In some parts, the book almost reads as if the author is trying to settle old scores in what were obviously very hard-fought, community-level battles. And Thabit might well have stood back more frequently from the detail to draw out more generalized observations based on his experience. Finally, the last three chapters of the book are much weaker than the first fourteen, largely because they are not based on the author’s personal involvement, but rather on secondary sources, interviews and conversations with selected informants thirty years after the experiences that are the basis for the core of the book.

That said, this is an interesting and worthwhile read, especially for its descriptions of the nefarious activities of slumlords and realtors in feeding the process by which East New York became a ghetto.

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