Lessons from *El Barrio*—The East Harlem Real Great Society/Urban Planning Studio: A Puerto Rican Chapter in the Fight for Urban Self-Determination*

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Abstract During the 1960s, the Lower East Side and East Harlem were among the principal contested terrains in New York City, and the emerging Puerto Rican community was being challenged on many fronts. As contested terrains, they were the arenas where transforming forces in American society were being articulated. Responses to these forces varied from neighborhood to neighborhood. Among the responses were groups organized around community development, particularly to fight urban renewal projects. In this essay, I examine a year in the life of the East Harlem Real Great Society/Urban Planning Studio (RGS/UPS). RGS/UPS emerged in a transition period in the development of Puerto Rican institutions. It combined several characteristics of groups organized during those years. It was founded by grassroots community youth; it was also a professionally staffed organization; it was structured around an advocacy model; and it valued its ethnic-specificity, its Puertoricanness. Its staff's eagerness to speak for the needs and aspirations of Puerto Ricans was a clear example of ethnicity-based struggle.

During the 1960s, the Lower East Side and East Harlem were among the principal contested terrains in New York City, and the emerging Puerto Rican community was being challenged on many fronts. Both neighborhoods had become key "homelands" to the Puerto Rican community as well as the theaters where much of their history had been recorded. As contested terrains, they were the arenas where transforming forces in American society, the economic, urban, and cultural spheres, were being articulated during the period. Responses to these forces varied from neighborhood to neighborhood. Among the responses were groups organized around community development, particularly to fight urban renewal projects. One such group that had emerged in 1964 in the Lower

^{*} I would like to thank former RGS/UPS staff that provided me with their insights and most of the historical background on the organization: Willie Vázquez, Harry Quintana, Victor Feliciano (founding members of RGS/UPS), RGS staff members Bruce Young Candelaria, Carmen Gloria Baba, Sara Myrta Cruz, and Jaime Suárez. I would also like to thank Bruce Dale who worked with the East Harlem Studio of Columbia University and with RGS/UPS as a consultant. This essay is built around the personal recollections of those actors contacted and those of the author. It is also based on two proposals submitted by RGS/UPS to the Ford Foundation and other foundations. In the proposals the philosophy of the organization is expounded and projects are discussed. The essay does not represent the opinions of those interviewed, nor is it the final work on RGS/UPS. I would also like to thank Professor Betty Woody of CPCS/U.MASS Boston for her critical suggestions on the manuscript.

East Side, Loisaida, and had expanded north to East Harlem, el Barrio, by 1967 was the Real Great Society.

In this essay, I examine a year (1969–1970) in the life of the East Harlem Real Great Society/Urban Planning Studio (RGS/UPS). In 1969 RGS/UPS completed assembling its professional team with people recruited from NYC, several other US cities, as well as Puerto Rico. During that year the organization was involved in key issues and key institutions that would shape East Harlem for years. I also review the organization's goals and strategies. Finally, I comment on some of the events that led to the demise of the organization which also took place that year.

I set the development of RGS/UPS within the Puerto Rican community's institutional history, and the *politics of place*, the struggle Puerto Ricans became involved in to resist their total displacement from key districts in the city. I also frame the analysis within the discourse of advocacy architecture/planning, a paradigm that challenged the underlying premises of traditional planning and was at the core of RGS/UPS tenets.

From Bodegas to Urban Renewal

From Colonia to Community by Virginia Sánchez-Korrol tells the story of Puerto Ricans in New York City. Thus, the story of Puerto Ricans in NYC follows the story of the young city early in its development through its industrial (1850s–1920s) and corporate (1920s–present) stages. During each period there were push–pull factors which triggered the migration of different sectors of Puerto Rican society. During each migratory period Puerto Ricans created cultural, political, social, and/or action/advocacy organizations reflecting the complex composition of the community, i.e. class, political orientation, geography, gender, etc., as well as the severity of the challenge posed to them by problems emerging during each period. Settlement patterns differed responding to local conditions, employment opportunities, history of the neighborhood, and the quality of the neighborhood's support systems and institutional infrastructure.

Antonia Pantoja specifies three post-WWII eras in institution building in the Puerto Rican community. The First Era (1945–1960) is the end of the Hispanic organizing period and the early stages of Puerto Rican-centered organizing, a period during which "we called ourselves Puerto Ricans, and effectively challenged and replaced the non-Puerto Rican leadership who had elected themselves spokes people for Puerto Ricans in the larger society." During this same period Puerto Ricans began to "form community consciousness" and began "representing" themselves on the built environment in earnest. Through the deliberate naming, decoration and signage of bodegas, social clubs, political clubs and restaurants, for example, Puerto Ricans, like other ethnic groups before them, began reshaping and appropriating the otherwise ordinary industrial city landscapes by building and claiming enclaves that looked like them, what Lefebvre calls representational spaces. Thus, las colonias were the essential build-

¹ Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City from WWII to 1983 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

² Antonia Pantoja, "Puerto Ricans in New York: A Historical and Community Development Perspective," Centro 11:5 (Spring, 1989) (New York: Center for Puerto Rican Studies), p. 24

³ Henri Lefebvre, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 33.

ing blocks for the development of the community: the places where they could build identity in the urban milieu; the places where people made primary "life spaces," i.e. the areas people occupied in which their "dreams were made, and their lives unfolded"4 and where historical events could be recorded and then remembered.

Pantoja associates the Second Era (1960-1974) with the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, the War in Vietnam, etc., and identifies it as one of "growth and stabilization."5 It was during the early part of this period (1955-1965) that settlement patterns changed from colonias into barrios or neighborhood enclaves, where Puerto Ricans continued to "build community" by shaping further the many small enclaves of earlier periods. However, this "growth and stabilization" was marred by the onslaught of these enclaves by the restructuring forces of the period. While Puerto Ricans were knitting a community in the ghetto, slum clearance and urban renewal were unweaving the work of a generation: the deterritorialization of a whole community. This period was marked by the emergence of professionally staffed service institutions, and institutionalized movements for advocacy.6 Key to this period, furthermore, was the awakening of Nuyoricanness, and with it the airing of the "unspoken grievance that Puerto Rican New Yorkers held against the island Puerto Rican elite."⁷ In addition, the "young turks," as Pantoja calls them, were represented by youth that had become immersed in the Civil Rights Movement, and in the movement for the independence of Puerto Rico framed by third-world revolutionary struggles.

Anti-poverty programs that emerge during this period had a profound effect on the character of Puerto Rican organizations. While providing funds for needed social services, they also fostered the bureaucratization of these institutions. The end result was that "voluntary work was replaced by paid work."8 José Sánchez is less charitable about those who took over the struggle: "They usurped for themselves an empty language of resistance as well as the very real pain of Puerto Rican suffering in the interest of funding proposals and service delivery quotas."9 Sánchez further argues that with the establishment of key agencies during the 1950s and 1960s the stage was set for the "instrumentalist and therapeutic approach to community development that proved significant to Puerto Rican community history."¹⁰ The Third Era (1975 to the present) is characterized by Pantoja as one of great advancement. 11

Intersections and Transformations: The Politics of Place and Identity

Since the founding of the earliest of colonias, Puerto Rican settlement has been a

⁴ John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff, "World City Formation: An Agenda for Research and Action," International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 6:3 (1992), p. 326.

⁵ Pantoja, op. cit., p. 25.

⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Carlos Rodríguez-Fraticelli and Amilcar Tirado, "Notes Towards a History of Puerto Rican Community Organizations in New York City," *Centro* IV:1 (1991), p. 42.

José Sánchez, Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1945 to 1984: A Study in Class Powerlessness, PhD dissertation (New York: New York University, 1990), p. 339.

¹¹ The Puerto Rican community's recent history is one of uneven development. In the next section we examine some of the barriers encountered by the community.

struggle between opposing economic, social, cultural and political forces. The will to settle and shape a community has been tempered by forces against these attempts. Underlying these forces are the contradictions between what Lefebvre calls "abstract space that arises from economic and political practices, and social space that arises from the use values produced by the residents in their pursuits of everyday life."¹²

As early as the 1920s, settlement in New York City by Puerto Ricans was marred with the politics of place: who controlled the underlying structure supporting the community, i.e. the housing, the stores, the street corners—the places of everyday life. When Puerto Ricans were moving to New York City in great numbers during the early postwar period, there were momentous transformations taking place in the city. The emerging post-industrial city had no need for housing structures built for industrial workers of earlier periods: Puerto Ricans lived in neighborhoods where a large number of these buildings were deemed to be surplus. A poor community like them generally lacked the institutional infrastructure or framework to devise strategies to stop their displacement.

Until the late 1950s the majority of Puerto Ricans lived in Manhattan close to manufacturing jobs, and in neighborhoods that had been previously home to other ethnic groups then moving to suburbia. In fact, in the 1930s more than 75% of Puerto Ricans lived in Manhattan, their numbers dropping slowly throughout the 1950s to 60% and finally less than 50% by 1960. This was the period when the federal government engaged in full in the project or restructuring cities, and the beginning of displacement and dispersal period for the Puerto Rican community in New York City. It was during this period when what had been the early stage of ethnic enclaves, with some semblance of community with a myriad of "life spaces," became redundant. Residents of these neighborhoods were being pushed to the "outer boroughs," to the "neverland" of the "projects" in places like Far Rockaway, the South Bronx, etc. The move to the Bronx and Brooklyn in many cases provided cause for celebration since Puerto Ricans were moving to better quality housing than the older slums of Manhattan; however, as Sánchez puts it, "these moves also helped to undermine a major source of their survival as workers—their kinship ties."14

Between 1960 and 1990, while there was a net increase of Puerto Ricans in New York City, there was a loss of 70,661 Puerto Ricans living in Manhattan. More than half of the loss occurred between 1960 and 1970, when 40,316 Puerto Ricans left the borough, the largest loss in the last three decades. The loss between 1970 and 1980 was close to half the previous decade, and between 1980 and 1990, again half as many moved away from Manhattan. It should be noted that during the 1970s there was reversed migration to Puerto Rico. Furthermore, dispersal to other boroughs like Queens, the Bronx and Brooklyn may account for some of those who left Manhattan, signaling a residential divergence and economic stratification of the Puerto Rican community. However, it could be argued that

¹² Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 241.

¹³ Jesús Colón, "Un Puertorriqueño en Nueva York," in Juan Flores (ed.), Divided Arrival. Narratives of the Puerto Rican Migration (New York: Hunter College/Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, undated).

¹⁴ José Sánchez, op. cit., p. 451.

the bulk of the loss was due to the displacement produced by the loss of affordable housing units in Manhattan and the inability of Puerto Ricans to gain full access to public housing and other subsidized projects. It should also be noted that, even though Manhattan gained population between 1980 and 1990 and a significant number of Dominicans and Mexicans moved to Northern Manhattan, the loss of Puerto Rican and Latino population in Manhattan has continued.

Location of the Struggle: Contested Territory

By the 1960s East Harlem and the Lower East Side had become two major "homelands" for Puerto Ricans in the US. Although both neighborhoods were in Manhattan and there were other Puerto Rican neighborhoods in Brooklyn (like Red Hook) that were as old, East Harlem and the Lower East Side had gained symbolic significance and were considered by many the "centers" of Puerto Rican culture in the city. Both neighborhoods represented two sides of the postwar spatial restructuring of New York City in housing—that is, a decline in the needs of traditional industrial workers' residential districts (East Harlem) and the reconfiguring of the traditional slum to attract the new "baby boom" generation (Lower East Side). In East Harlem it took the form of massive disinvestment by the abandonment of major housing tracts, with selective redevelopment through government-sponsored housing (public housing projects and middle-income enclaves). The Lower East Side, although experiencing similar restructuring earlier, remained more attractive for reinvestment due to its location between downtown and midtown. In geographical terms, East Harlem became part of the lumpengeography of capital, 16 while the Lower East Side experienced gentrification articulated by a "frontier motif," i.e. neighborhoods where "hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility" and where the new "settlers," brave pioneers, go "where no (white) man has gone before."17

El Barrio

La calle 116 es una calle puertorriqueña. ¡Vivimos alli tantos y tantos! Se oye a veces más español que inglés. Pase usted por la calle, y nada de extraño tiene que oiga una danza de Puerto Rico.¹⁸

East Harlem has been home to almost all ethnic groups that had succeeded each other from the late 19th century through the 1940s. Beginning in the 1930s and through the 1960s Greater Harlem, the "homeland" for New York City's African Americans, was re-articulated to include Puerto Ricans in "Spanish Harlem," or

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Richard Walker, "Two Sources of Uneven Development Under Advanced Capitalism: Spatial Differentiation and Capital Mobility," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 10:3 (1978).

¹⁷ Neil Smith, "New City, New Frontier: The Lower East Side as Wild, Wild West," in Michael Sorkin (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the end of Public Space* (New York: Noonday Press, 1992), p. 70.

¹⁸ Juan Huyke, "En Nueva York. Para Francisco Vizcarrondo," in Juan Flores (ed.), Divided Arrival. Narratives of the Puerto Rican Migration (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, 1984), p. 31.

el Barrio Latino. By the 1950s, 116th Street became a Puerto Rican shopping district with an agglomeration of bodegas, cuchifritos, record and music shops, bakeries, travel agencies, and a whole assortment of other urban amenities to be found in any urban neighborhood. La Marqueta, which spanned between 111th and 116th Streets on Park Avenue, was a Puerto Rican shopper's Mecca. La 116 was also home to El Ponce de León and San Juan, the closest to Puerto Rican white-tablecloth restaurants in Manhattan.

However, by the 1960s East Harlem was contested terrain, between Puerto Ricans and African Americans to the north, east, and west, and between Puerto Ricans and powerful development forces south of 106th Street, particularly the 96th Street corridor, the traditional "DMZ Zone" between East Harlem and Yorkville, a working-class Irish neighborhood. By 1969 much of the history of Puerto Ricans in el Barrio, and Loisaida as well as other parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn had been erased. East Harlem's built environment had been mutilated by countless slum clearance projects that crisscrossed from east to west, and north to south. Los Proyectos were the few places at the time where African Americans and Puerto Ricans shared common ground. East Harlem also had middle-income cooperative enclaves, and in general most Puerto Ricans could not afford to pay the cost of buying them, even though they were choice projects with moderate prices. Thus, African Americans were tenant majorities in the middle-income enclaves.

It has been argued that the purpose of urban renewal centered on complementary strategies for achieving two closely related ends: to buffer city centers and their commercial and cultural institutions from the tide of African American and Puerto Rican migration, and at the same time to reinforce territorial segregation through zoning and carefully coordinated location of schools, etc. ¹⁹ The eventual result of urban renewal was the destruction of four units of low-income housing for each one built, with a net decrease of low-income housing stock of 90% during the 1950s. ²⁰ In some neighborhoods it entailed a fight between two groups attempting to retain the limited control they could have over their environment: who would do the development and who would move to it once the project was finished. Given the relatively weaker institutional base of Puerto Ricans in New York City, as compared to African Americans, ²¹ Jews, and whites in general, the fight was usually lost by Puerto Ricans, particularly in Manhattan.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, land in East Harlem, as well as other similar neighborhoods throughout New York City, was "deeded" to a number of housing *caciques*, who in turn ruled small fiefdoms. By 1969, there had been an impasse around the issue of land development between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, and a truce had been "signed" between them, particularly between the Central Harlem and East Harlem politicos.²² This truce implied the

¹⁹ Susan S. Fainstein and Norman I. Fainstein, "Neighborhood Enfranchisement and Urban Redevelopment," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 2 (1982), pp. 67–81.

²⁰ Scott A. Greer, Urban Renewal and American Cities. The Dilemma of Democratic Intervention (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 56.

²¹ Andrés Torres, Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

²² The ongoing fight in East Harlem around the 125th Street commercial project, also known as the "Pathmark Site," is centered around an age old issue: who has the "right" to

Table 1. Puerto Rican displacement from Manhattan: 1960-1990

Borough	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Manhattan	34,715	54,000	138,507	225,639	185,323	166,328	154,978
Gain/loss		+ 29,315	+ 133,107	+ 87,132	- 40,316	- 18,995	- 11,300

Source: Census.

understanding that "you don't get in my turf, and I don't get into yours." The displacement of Puerto Ricans from Manhattan had accelerated during the 1960s (Table 1), and East Harlem's Puerto Rican population was at risk of new and massive displacement. In the midst of these territorial fights, RGS/East Harlem comes into the picture.

The Real Great Society: The East Harlem Branch

The Real Great Society (RGS) was founded in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1964 by former gang leaders who teamed up to "fight poverty instead of each other." The East Harlem branch (RGS/UPS) was organized in 1967 also by former gang leaders who along with young professionals wanted to be "at the center of the struggle for total environmental control." RGS was founded during Pantoja's Second Period marked by professionally staffed organizations and by "young turks."

In three short years RGS became three different organizations. One was made up of the original founders which included former gang members and white "visionaries." The founders group lost control of RGS around 1968 after a protracted struggle between those who wanted an organization open to all persons regardless of racial or national origin (RGS), and those supporting the view that Puerto Ricans had to make it on their own (RGS/UPS). The second organization, which emerged around 1967, was centered around the University of the Streets project, a concoction closer to the "typical" anti-poverty agency that emerged during the period, controlled at the beginning by the original group, but which had, in fact, turned into an African American and white organization. The third was the East Harlem branch established by Angelo

⁽Footnote continued)

develop land in East Harlem? The two opposing groups represent, on one side a coalition of some Puerto Ricans with an African American consortium and developer, Abyssinian Church and the East Harlem Triangle, the domain of Alice Kornegay, a long-time resident and developer of the northern end of East Harlem. This group is supported by Charles Rangel, the ranking African American in the US Congress, Guillermo Linares, the only elected official of Dominican descent, Frank Díaz, the former Assemblyman for East Harlem, and an assortment of white politicians like former Borough President Ruth Messinger. The other side gathers mostly Dominicans (National Supermarket Association, the owner of Bravo and Associated) and some Puerto Ricans, representing *bodegueros*, who are mostly Dominicans. The latter group is supported by Adam Clayton Powell IV. This fight is not new.

²³ Roger Vaughan, "The Real Great Society," Life Magazine 63:11 (1967), p. 76.

²⁴ Proposal submitted by RGS/UPS to the Ford and Astor Foundations, 1969, p. 4.
²⁵ "Located as it was across the street from Tompkins Square Park, a hangout for the East Village hippie colony, the University of the Streets was virtually swamped by this transient middle-class population. Probably eighty percent or more of the university's enrollment that

(Papo) Giordani in 1967 on 1673 Madison Avenue at 111th Street that began a remedial education center for high school dropouts. Papo and a few of his East Harlem friends recruited two dozen dropouts, and several East Harlem college students volunteered as summer instructors. Papo then became RGS vice-president for East Harlem. Thus, the enlarged inner-core group included a half-dozen more members in an uptown wing which came to be referred to as RGS/Uptown, or RGS/East Harlem.²⁶

With the founding of RGS/Uptown, RGS entered its second phase into its development. This founding marked the end of the original scheme, and the emergence of a new vision. The East Harlem branch was started by youth who had grown up in the streets the same as the gang leaders on the Lower East Side. By adding skills from conventional society to the raw skills of survival learned in the streets, the uptown leaders developed a "potent brand of sophistication, and RGS/East Harlem took on a very different pattern of development from that which characterized the original wing of the organization." As one observer put it, "the uptown group was much more intense, more deliberate, more hard line, and more structured. But in terms of method and style and purpose, it was far more revolutionary, more conscious of race and Puerto Rican nationalism, and much more attuned to the militancy of current minority revolt." ²⁸

Within weeks of its founding a three-day riot broke out in East Harlem. The riot was triggered by the killing of a young Boricua by a policeman, perceived by many East Harlem residents as another example of police brutality. Angelo (Papo) Giordani and others in RGS/East Harlem went out to calm the riots but found that attempts to take a few kids out of the neighborhood to the suburbs or elsewhere for a cooling off period was met with resistance. In a final attempt to find relief, Angelo went to Columbia University. In August 1967, barely a month after the East Harlem riots, at the request of Angelo Giordani the Division of Urban Planning of Columbia University sponsored a two-day conference called "The First East Harlem Youth Conference." RGS/East Harlem cosponsored the event and Angelo Giordani chaired the conference. Scores of teens were brought to Columbia to attend the conference, and the University provided room and board in its dormitories for them.

The list of dignitaries and important invitees included the Chief Executives of Metropolitan Life and Equitable Life Insurance companies. Also included were high ranking officials of several banks, faculty members from Columbia, as well as Columbia scholars/dignitaries like Hank Bell and Charles Abrams. Willie Vázquez recalls the conference as, "one that a who's who in New York City came to. Además de los blancos riquitos, there were people like Pedro Pietri and Piñero. It was very cool. Although the first day they tried to control the

⁽Footnote continued)

summer was made up of young people who had come in from outside the neighborhood, largely from suburbia, searching for adventure and stimulation": Richard Poston, *The Gang and the Establishment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 77–78.

²⁶ Interview with Willie Vázquez, July 1995.

²⁷ Richard Poston, *The Gang and the Establishment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 106.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Willie Vázquez.

³⁰ Ibid.

conference we were able to set the agenda, and by the second day we were in charge."

The result of the conference was a new and rebuilt image for RGS, one that would shift the power within the organization to the uptown branch. Two organizations were re-energized as a result of the conference: Young Citizens for Progress, headed by Angelo Giordani, and the East Harlem College Society, headed by Micky Meléndez.³¹ Young citizens brought together high school dropouts, while the College Society was a mentoring and tutoring program to help young people to obtain a college education, who would then return to the neighborhood and apply their talents to its improvements. The effect of establishing these two organizations was that during a very short period (1967–1969), some of the "sharpest young people" in East Harlem joined forces with the East Harlem wing of RGS.³²

The idea to bring together the youth and their mentors together under a single umbrella followed. The East Harlem Education Center, a.k.a. the East Harlem Prep School, became the dream of Papo, Bruce Young Candelaria, and others.³³ Finding a suitable environment and a place of their own became necessary. The idea finally evolved into the RGS/Town House Project. Project requirements called for ample spaces to house an ambitious program, and RGS/East Harlem was able to identify two five-story tenements on 110th Street between Madison and Park Avenues.³⁴ The Prep School became the place where "things were happening." As Young-Candelaria puts it,

I remember that painting the Puerto Rican flag on the storefront made residents focus on our activities. They would come in and browse, and finally join the rest of us. The most important thing that happened was that community residents began to flow naturally to the prep school, thus providing RGS with a real direct connection to the neighborhood and the community, while providing residents of the area with an alternative space, a "genuine" community-controlled institution. We started teaching GED, art classes, Spanish, English, and an array of other skills we never dreamt before opening the school.

The other major result of the conference was the establishment of a planning studio. During 1968 the School of Architecture at Columbia brought together a group of students, a studio professor and RGS/Uptown. Under the leadership of Willie Vázquez, the studio engaged in a year-long study of projects in East Harlem. However, the results of its operation were mixed. The studio had been envisioned as a joint effort, an "experiment" bringing together the technical

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interview with Bruce Young-Candelaria, summer 1996. Bruce had joined RGS as a Vista volunteer. During our interview he believed that what attracted him to RGS was the "fit" RGS had with the community.

³⁴ The two lower floors were to be for institutional use, while the upper three floors were to have six two-bedroom and six three-bedroom apartments. The second story of the Town House was to be home to a library, classroom spaces, and individual and group areas. The ground floor was to have a meeting room, a recreation room, an art workshop, and a cafe. The cafe was to open to an adjacent empty lot which was to be developed into a "vest-pocket park." Vest-pocket parks became a common development alternative to the increasing empty lots produced by the disinvestment process going on in East Harlem. Although RGS/UPS was involved in the design and development of five vest-pocket parks with community participation, most went into disrepair within a short period of time.

knowledge of architecture and planning students at Columbia, and the know-how and community knowledge of RGS, "to encourage architectural students to work with the realistic physical environmental problems of the community." ³⁵ It was a difficult and uneasy partnership. Willie Vázquez recalls, "Eran unos blancos con ideas progresistas. Pero no querían oir nuestras opiniones. Ellos querían experimentar y no les gustaba que nosotros cuestionaremos sus ideas. It was during this time that Harry Quintana comes into the scene, and he really had a fit. He felt that the Columbia kids would not stay long enough for any of the projects to come through, thus leaving the community hanging."

It was the view that empowerment required that those in charge of development had to have a vested interest in it that drove RGS/Uptown in establishing the RGS/Urban Planning Studio as a follow up to the East Harlem Studio from Columbia University. In a 1969 funding proposal submitted to the Ford and Astor Foundations, RGS stated that, "The result of those two projects was the realization by the Real Great Society that East Harlem needed an architectural and planning resource completely controlled by the community. As long as the technical resources necessary for physical development were controlled by forces outside the community," it was reasoned, "the development itself would not be completely for the community." ³⁶ By the summer of 1968 Harry Quintana, Willie Vázquez, Angelo Giordani, Victor Feliciano, and others embarked into the second phase of the RGS/East Harlem branch and founded the Urban Planning Studio.

The Urban Planning Studio: 1968-1970

In 1968 Harry Quintana went to Yale University to complete his architectural education. Quintana had been close to Columbia University's East Harlem Planning Studio directed by Willie Vázquez, but believed that in the end the "white kids" were going to tire and leave behind unfinished projects. ³⁷ Although some of the young architects like Richard Rinzler and Bruce Dale remained in RGS and were essential in the early development of RGS/UPS during that same year, Harry decided to build a new team that would provide the leadership in East Harlem. He recruited some of the most vocal and committed young professionals in *el Barrio* and elsewhere in NYC in the areas of health, education, and community planning. Assembling the team also took him to Puerto Rico and Washington, DC in 1969.

In Puerto Rico, Harry recruited three women: Carmen Gloria Baba, Myrta Cruz, and Iris Concepción, who were finishing their graduate degrees in planning at the University of Puerto Rico and were considering continuing their studies, possibly towards a PhD.³⁸ Getting architects took Harry to Princeton

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁸ Of the three, Iris was the most comfortable with the idea. Having grown up in New York City, Iris was fluent in both Spanish and English, and her parents lived in Queens. Her

father was a super in a building in Queens and had a good union job.

³⁵ RGS/UPS proposal, p. 7.

³⁷ Interview with Harry Quintana, July 1995. His account differs from Bruce Dale's, who thought that the underlying problem was that the architecture students were not interested in planning projects and the East Harlem Studio was more of a planning than an urban design studio.

and Washington, DC. At Princeton he recruited Mauricio Gastón, a young architecture student. In Washington he went to Catholic University where he met three Puerto Ricans architecture students from the School of Architecture at Catholic University. They had been involved in radical politics at Catholic University, in particular in the School of Architecture. Like elsewhere in architecture schools throughout the nation they had spent the best part of a year and a half in a fight against the school's conservative faculty on issues centered around the role of the architect in the inner city. Jaime Suárez, Luis Aponte-Parés, and Manuel (Neco) Otero accepted the offer to join RGS/UPS and in early June of 1969 arrived in East Harlem. There, they met another group of professionals, whites, Latinos, and African Americans that were being assembled by Harry, Willie, and Angelo: the team was completed.

Ideology: Advocacy and Self-determination

Two visions guided the founding of RGS/UPS: a critical view of the architecture and planning professions, and the goal of community self-determination.

Advocacy planning for the poor, if it is to have any real meaning, must be planning for power, planning for political and social change. It must serve to organize the community, help the community perceive and understand the working of the system by which it is oppressed, and direct political energies toward the realization of long range, as well as tangible short-range, goals, and these goals must be substantive—a larger share of the pie, different kinds and sizes of pies, the acquisition of real political power.³⁹

East Harlem is an underdeveloped country. Most of it is owned and controlled by private and governmental interests outside the community. In the past, the development of East Harlem has served these outside interests at the expense of an essentially powerless community, but this will not continue to be so. East Harlem is awakening to its rights and abilities for self control and self determination, and the balance of power has begun to shift towards the people. The people have become aware, as part of a nationwide movement, that they must control their own environment in order to determine their own future, and that control begins at the planning level through the utilization of the community's own environmentalists.⁴⁰

During the 1960s there had been an ongoing debate among liberals on the merits of advocacy planning and citizen participation. Like Chester Hartman, cited above, Paul Davidoff had been a principal proponent of advocacy planning, which would openly invite political and social values to be examined and debated within the profession. This position was a clear rejection of planning prescriptions which had placed the planner as a "technician." In the 1950s under the rubric of "objective science," the planning profession had rejected any subjective role for planning and had promulgated the view that it was the planner's role to understand the functional aspects of the city and recommend appropriate future action to improve the urban condition. Davidoff argued that

40 RGS/UPS proposal, p. 4.

³⁹ Chester Hartman, "The Advocate Planner: From 'Hired Gun' to Political Partisan," in Neil Gilbert and Harry Specht (eds), *Planning for Social Welfare: Issues, Models, and Tasks* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 59.

appropriate planning action could not be prescribed from a position of value neutrality, "for prescriptions are based on desired objectives." Thus, planners had to go beyond explaining their values underlying their prescriptions: "he should affirm them. He should be an advocate for what he deems proper."

Pluralistic planning, Davidoff argued, would provide a space where government planners, and the communities who were to be impacted by the proposed plans, would exchange views and negotiate alternatives. The problem was that those impacted the most were people of color, women, and the poor: the disenfranchised. Those who benefited from these actions were the real estate interests, construction industry, and the insurance and mortgage companies: the powerful. The advocacy of alternative plans by interest groups outside of government, Davidoff argued, would stimulate the debate in three ways: make the public more aware of the alternative choices offered; force the public agency to compete with other planning groups; and force those who have been critical of "establishment" plans to produce superior plans. Where pluralistic planning principles were practiced, advocacy became the means of professional support for competing claims about how the community should develop. 44

Advocacy planning had many supporters as well as detractors. One major detractor was Frances Fox Piven, who had argued that, although there was a tendency to "see professional advocates as free agents" and "ignore the federal dollars which support them and the federal interests they serve," they were fundamentally meeting the political needs of the Democratic Party in adjusting to population changes in the cities (mostly the migration of blacks from the south). In fact, these programs provided a battery of services not unlike those of old time political clubs. Planners, argued Piven, offered no concrete service or benefit. They offered their skill in the planning process, whose object, advocates said, was to overcome the "vast discrepancy in technical capacity between local communities and city bureaucracies."

Piven had also argued that another implied message was the notion that "the urban poor can influence the decisions once they are given the technical help of a planner—or better still, once they actually learn the technical skills of planning." Cooper Square in the Lower East Side, for example, had taken 10 years to develop an alternate plan. Their chief accomplishment, according to Piven, was to stop the early threat of urban renewal. Walter Thabit, one of the planners involved in the struggle commented, "Protest without planning could have done as much." Finally, Piven argued that involving local groups in "elaborate planning procedures is to guide them into a narrowly circumscribed form of political action, and precisely that form for which they are least equipped."

⁴¹ Paul Davidoff, "The Advocate Relationship: Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," in Gilbert and Specht, op. cit., p. 192.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Frances Fox Piven, "Who Does the Advocate Planner Serve?" in Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven (eds), *The Politics of Turmoil: Poverty, Race, and the Urban Crisis* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

Advocate planners were "coaxing ghetto leaders off the streets," where they could make trouble.⁵⁰

The advocacy that RGS/UPS was espousing differed from Davidoff's and Piven's views. In fact, Harry and others in RGS/UPS saw how Columbia's advocacy planning studio had failed. Their principal argument, while echoing Piven's, was that even los blanquitos liberales would never cross the line and attempt to disrupt the system, particularly since RGS/UPS saw itself as part of "oppositional movements." Between 1968 and 1970 RGS/UPS instigated protests by joining others in the community in civil disobedience: by burning trash on the streets and blocking traffic on the 125th Street entrance to the Triborough Bridge.⁵¹ As one observer noted, "In July 1968, when they felt the city was putting less antipoverty money into East Harlem than the area deserved, they decided to organize a demonstration. Every day for three days in accordance with a carefully worked-out strategy, youths holding hands, singing, and shouting formed human barricades across busy intersections at peak rush hours in First, Third, and Fifth avenues and created massive traffic jams ... Then all of a sudden a million more dollars came from Lindsay's office for summer jobs in East Harlem."52

Those at RGS/UPS expounded the view, furthermore, that the "problem" dwelt with "white professionals" and that self-determination through ethniccentered development was good. Although the two views were not necessarily incompatible, RGS/UPS was partially basing their rhetoric in the long tradition of Puerto Rican radical politics in the US.53 This view led Harry Quintana, Mauricio Gastón, and others in RGS/UPS to "invite" the Young Lords to join with RGS/UPS in a dual strategy: the Young Lords would raise the volume of protest and the political consciousness of community residents, energizing them by pointing towards the injustices of displacement, deficient health service, loss of jobs, etc., while RGS/UPS would "interpret" the options available for development and pursue those avenues with the most advantage for the community. Harry and others at RGS/UPS recognized that only through a massive grassroots response by the community residents to the nefarious policies being implemented through urban renewal would the power brokers, both in the neighborhood as well as the "white establishment," make adjustments and stop the displacement. However, the "arrangement" between RGS/UPS and the Young Lords did not bear fruit.54

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵¹ Interview with Harry Quintana. ⁵² Poston, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–109.

⁵³ Having grown up in the Italian neighborhood of Pleasant Avenue in East Harlem, Harry remembers that the day after the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party attack on Blair House in Washington, DC, he tried to go to Franklin High and the "ginnies" were waiting to beat him up. In fact, the Italians would not permit him to go to school for a whole week (Quintana). Harry's interest on radical Puerto Rican politics was always linked to the Nationalist event.

⁵⁴ In "The Young Lords Legacy: A Personal Account" (Crítica) Pablo Guzmán makes the connection between RGS/UPS and the Young Lords. In his rendition of the story, however, Guzmán does not specify that the organizing tool used by the Lords—i.e. getting brooms and sweeping the streets, and then burning the trash—had been previously utilized by RGS in 1968 and 1969. Willie Vázquez argues that when Guzmán, Luciano and others came to East Harlem, they had lost connection to *el Barrio*, and that, in fact, had not Mauricio Gastón,

RGS/UPS exhibited the contradictions raised by Piven while attaching itself to Davidoff's view that by developing alternate plans and bringing them to the "public forum" community residents had to benefit ultimately. In the absence of strong neighborhood-specific institutions, however, RGS/UPS reached for too many goals and played too many roles. Perhaps reviewing the organization's strategies and some projects will illustrate these tensions and contradictions.

Organization

The overall general plan of the UPS was to develop a strategy of resistance to displacement while affirming Puerto Ricans' right to be part of the urban culture. To this general strategy was added the dictum that only through a community effort could some of the problems affecting the Puerto Rican community would then be solved. This strategy was articulated five ways in a proposal:

To involve people of East Harlem in the physical development of their own community by assisting any East Harlem resident, group, or coalition to carry out realistic plans for the physical development of their community; to serve as advocate for East Harlem relative to any projects or programs which have been conceived or planned by interests outside the community; to initiate projects and programs which serve the community's interest; to use technical creativity to evolve new approaches to the problems of the physical environment; and to help increase the number of indigenous architects and planners in East Harlem by preparing local youths for careers in environment development by running employment and training programs.⁵⁵

Operationally, RGS/UPS was organized in teams. Each team would usually be comprised of an architect, an urban planner, a lawyer, a community organizer, and a specialist in an area specific to the project. Each team could be involved in one or more projects. However since most in the staff were full time students at Columbia University and elsewhere, the load was extremely heavy. When one examines the array of projects that RGS/UPS was involved with between 1968 and 1970, it is clear that an attempt was made to address the five goals the organization had set itself to reach. By 1969 RGS/UPS had been involved in a number of projects: the development of five vest-pocket parks; Afro-Latin Unity Council Headquarters, a project of the Urban Coalition; the Town House and Prep School; a proposal on how to develop cooperative housing utilizing Old Law and New Law Tenements; facilities building for the East Harlem Triangle Urban Renewal Project; the Aguilar-Hellgate planning study; Barrio Nuevo Planning Study; and a counter proposal for 1199 cooperative housing. During the year two other projects were added: a consulting contract with the Board of Education for the development of an alternative to the

⁽Footnote continued)

Papo Giordani and Harry Quintana urged them to get in contact with the Chicago Lords, etc., these "young Puerto Rican students would have never made the connections" (Vázquez). Due to space limitations we cannot fully explore the ideological issues that attracted and separated RGS/UPS and the Young Lords. A longer version of this essay will explore them.

55 RGS/UPS 1969 proposal, p. 28.

Park East High School; and the development of the health facilities and other facilities for the East Harlem Tenants Council's Taíno Towers Project.⁵⁶

Projects⁵⁷

During the 1960s the "edge" between East Harlem and Yorkville, a traditionally working-class white enclave, was always being challenged by real estate interests expanding the well-to-do Upper East Side further north by developing luxury and middle-class developments. Although there is a major land elevation change between the two communities, and just north of 96th Street, Metro North, the New Haven and other commuter railroads emerge from underground and become a large viaduct that divides East Harlem on Park Avenue, developers were looking at ways of entering the community. One way to reach this goal was to expand the Mt. Sinai Hospital north and east.⁵⁸ In the east, Metro North and East River urban renewal projects were "conquered" land, assuring staff at Metropolitan Hospital, doctors, nurses and others, with moderate and middleincome housing in close proximity.

Barrio Nuevo was conceived by a group of local residents who wanted to hold the line from the expansion of Yorkville, Mt. Sinai and Metro North. Under the leadership of a Colombian national, Edmundo Facini, a grassroots movement had been organized. Their area of "influence" was between 98th Street and 106 Street between Lexington and Third Avenue. This was also similar to the area delineated by HOPE community, a housing development group under the leadership of a white minister, Reverend Calvert. At the time Harry Quintana and others in RGS/UPS, as well as to Facini and others in the community, believed HOPE community's development schemes could easily merge with those interests from Yorkville, and thus a different plan had to be developed.⁵⁹ Two people were assigned to the project: Luis Aponte and Iris Concepción, an architect-urban designer, and a social planner. During the year they went to meetings held in a storefront that had been configured into a theater environment by Facini and were usually very well attended. As part of the planning process all pertinent data were gathered, and all the real estate transactions taking place as landlords were assembling land for redevelopment identified. In

⁵⁶ RGS/UPS proposal. During that same year the Architects Renewal Committee for Harlem was also developing an alternate plan for the State Office Building (SOB) being proposed for 125th Street, During the winter and early spring ARCH called RGS/UPS for help in the development of the project. A group of us spent two long weekends in two extended *charettes* to finish the proposal.

⁵⁷ In an extended version of this essay we examine the following projects and other

projects more closely.

See In East Harlem hospitals have played a significant role in the development of the community. Mt. Sinai, Flower Fifth, Metropolitan and North General have appropriated land for their staff for years. Although these hospitals are the principal employer in East Harlem, the housing they have under their influence is usually provided for people with higher incomes than East Harlem residents.

⁵⁹ The results of HOPE community's development schemes in balance have been very beneficial to East Harlem. HOPE's developments are among the best maintained privately owned housing in the community, providing the neighborhood with ample affordable housing. However, even though the majority of the residents are Latinos, the "control" of the organization has remained in "white" hands and the "leadership" has resisted any changes to promote Latinos to leadership position in the upper management of the agency.

addition, the redevelopment of a bus depot by the Transit Authority was looked at and evaluated. By the spring of 1970 development schemes had begun to be elaborated with the full support of community residents. The project taking shape was a model of participatory planning and promised to provide the neighborhood with an action plan that would guide its development to "mirror" the community's needs. However, while working on the preliminary material, in the early spring of 1970, Barrio Nuevo collapsed. ⁶⁰

The East Harlem Tenants Council (EHTC) had been a pioneering group in East Harlem, and their effort was centered around the redevelopment of two city blocks between 121st and 122nd Streets and between 1st and 2nd Avenues in East Harlem. Under the leadership of Ted Vélez, this project was one of the major sites in East Harlem where African Americans and Puerto Ricans came together and decided to work together towards a common goal. They had envisioned a very novel project which provided poor people with the urban comforts of the middle class. This project, which eventually was built as Taíno Towers, called for the development of a self-sustaining enclave that included housing, health services, an open air amphitheater, a gym with a swimming pool, space for a college, and plenty of commercial storefronts.

Some at RGS/IJPS thought that the project as envisioned w

Some at RGS/UPS thought that the project as envisioned was too big, and that it would overwhelm the scale of the community, while displacing those living in the immediate neighborhoods. During the year RGS/UPS staff began to address these concerns, and began drafting an alternative proposal that would be less centralized and that could be more in context with the surrounding neighborhood, i.e. the tenements. RGS/UPS believed that, even though tenements were not the best building type for development, their scale was appropriate for the neighborhood. The experience of obliterating whole blocks of tenements and rebuilding them with "towers in the park" projects had not produced better neighborhoods and in fact had fractured the fabric of the community. The radical proposals expounded by RGS/UPS led to an unwillingness by the EHTC leadership to lend credibility to their work, or to listen to the ideas being presented.

The difficulties encountered, furthermore, were symptomatic of the period and in particular to East Harlem. If a group had "gained control" of a turf, the last thing they wanted to do was to challenge the way agencies worked. If these groups wanted to promote their "own vision," they had to do so in incremental ways, and in a language funding agencies understood and felt comfortable with. RGS/UPS nationalistic rhetoric, furthermore, threatened the compact between the group and the "establishment"; thus, no alternate proposal was ever developed. RGS's role was limited, therefore, to assistance in the development of a community-based health center.

The Park East High School project was centered around the development of a 4000-student high school to be built on the site of the old Rupert Brewery in

⁶⁰ The circumstances surrounding Pueblo Nuevo's demise remain unclear. However, there was an investigation centered around missing funds.

⁶¹ For many years it was commented that Taíno Towers "sucked" the life from its immediate neighborhood by providing an enormous amount of housing next to decaying units. It is argued by many that in neighborhoods like East Harlem building these mega-projects can do as much harm as good by creating a centripetal force that prevents its immediate neighbor from development.

the upper 90s in Manhattan. From the beginning both the East Harlem and Yorkville communities had challenged the project, but the Board of Education nevertheless hired a white firm, a society architect, for its design. RGS/UPS involvement came through the persona of Felicia Clark, an Upper East Side socialite, daughter of Senator Clark of Philadelphia, who was concerned about the size of the proposed high school, and felt that what East Harlem and the Upper East Side (Yorkville) needed was a more discreet and humane environment that would challenge students and provide real educational avenues linking students with the life of the city. RGS/UPS staff was involved developing an "alternative scheme" to the one the Board of Education was designing. The proposal called for the utilization of several small theme-centered schools that would open around the Rupert site, as well along Madison, Park and Third Avenues on a variety of places, including storefronts. On the Rupert site, the proposal called for a mixed-income housing project along with a much smaller school which included "anchor services" like a gymnasium, a theater and other assorted community facilities that would be open to everyone, thus serving as resources to the community. The proposal also called for the adoption of each theme-centered school by a larger institution—i.e. the theater would be adopted by a Broadway and/or downtown producer, union, or artists, and students would learn their trade and skills by being part of the production of a drama or other work. The proposal was presented to the Park East High School Committee, the Board of Education, and the architect towards the spring of 1970. Although RGS/UPS was not involved in the eventual development of the project, the final result of the project was the development of Rupert Towers and a decentralized Park East Complex which looked very similar to the alternate scheme developed by Neco Otero, Jaime Suárez, and Luis Aponte-Parés.

Problems and Contradictions

When one examines these projects against the avowed strategies articulated by RGS/UPS in their proposal it is somewhat clear that a number of major challenges emerged. These challenges were brought about by both the realities of East Harlem and the specific way community development and housing took shape in the community.

The collapse of Pueblo Nuevo, the premier participatory planning project for RGS/UPS, signaled that even when the best of intentions were present other forces could take a toll. Generally, involving the community residents in a meaningful way, the fundamental tenet of RGS/UPS, became an insurmountable task. First, there were too many issues: housing, health, education, drugs, crime, etc.; and neighborhood residents were being asked to be superhuman. In any given weekday evening there were countless meetings around crime, housing, education, welfare, etc., and even those residents who wanted to get involved were stretched to their limits, most selecting wisely one or two areas with which to be involved. Furthermore, attempting to organize required resources and a clear strategy, both either missing or not well developed at RGS/UPS. The earlier association with the Young Lords proved to be unproductive, particularly when the Lords became entangled in nationalistic rhetoric and reached for citywide exposure. RGS/UPS remained focused on East Harlem and on the

physical development of the community; thus the early connections lost their vitality.

Second, missing also in East Harlem were the appropriate neighborhoodspecific forums and vehicles to both organize the community, provide exposure, and debate ideas. The institutional infrastructure was either missing or very weak. Possibly the most important institution for community development during those years was the Community Planning Boards. These boards played only a minor role in development and appointees were many times suspect, due to conflict of interest. East Harlem residents, furthermore, had had their share of "community action programs," but these worked best when they were promoted by a strong local leadership, usually a clergyman, as in the African American community. The emerging leadership in the neighborhood differed greatly in their strategies. Those with political inclinations had clustered around organizing political clubs. Others had discovered opportunities in anti-poverty programs: they learned how to exploit poverty, becoming the notorious "poverty pimps" of the 1960s and 1970s. Some others learned to mix political clubs and anti-poverty programs, leading to the establishment of the Méndez and Del Toro political dynasties.

There were many others who were involved in other struggles in education reform, the development of health resources, housing advocacy, and joining the boards of community action agencies, etc. However, the "newness" of neighborhood-specific organizing required trials and errors, as the need to invent institutions demanded creativity, resources, and plenty of energy. Thus, although Puerto Ricans living in East Harlem were a community whose economic power had eroded, or never materialized, their chances for survival rested on individual actions, since those devising the strategies were overwhelmed, or did not choose grassroots organizing, nor envisioned a "movement" to deliver change.

Third, although both the "native" and outside staff at RGS/UPS were a majority of Puerto Ricans, all were very young, thus lacking in traditional authority in the eyes of the Puerto Rican/Latino community. The youth level, therefore, posed a real barrier for community residents to consider the "wisdom" of such "young turks" who were espousing radical thinking and calling for a revolt. The likelihood of developing such a following was next to zero.

Providing assistance to East Harlem residents to carry out plans was closer to the available organizational resources. By engaging in several projects the staff of RGS/UPS afforded some groups added resources and the ability to begin articulating their needs. Projects like Taíno Towers, Park East, and Aguilar–Hellgate drained most of the resources RGS/UPS had to offer, many times diminishing the potential effectiveness of the group's intervention in them. Possibly the most successful of all projects RGS/UPS worked on were the vest-pocket parks. The design of vest-pocket parks showed all of RGS/UPS' strength. These small parks were jointly selected by RGS/UPS and neighborhood residents in blocks where there was some community cohesion and where community input would be viable. Usually it entailed working with a youth organization of some kind, and involving block-specific youth in the design and final construction of the parks. This close collaboration guaranteed that the park would be "respected" by the local youth, i.e. no graffiti or vandalism. However, funding for the parks

never included "maintenance" funds; thus, in many cases, these parks went into disrepair soon after, since the local neighborhood users lacked the material resources to repair them. Furthermore, many of these parks remained in an institutional limbo for many years since they did not belong to any particular city agency who would see for their long-term maintenance, etc.

Although the fundamental strategy of RGS/UPS was advocacy, serving as an advocate for all of East Harlem proved politically difficult. Groups in the housing struggle like the East Harlem Tenants Council, Concerned Citizens of East Harlem, the East Harlem Triangle, UPACA, and Metro North, for example, wanted their own voices heard and did not need RGS/UPS to speak for them. They had to "cut their own deals" with city authorities and thus had no use for or mistrusted the "intermediary" role of advocate planners. Furthermore, fundamental to RGS/UPS' vision was using "native" talent in the design of the local projects, particularly in the architecture and urban planning arenas, colliding with the vision of these groups, which like others in the city, selected their "talent" from either "name architects" or from "advocates" who were in direct competition for clients with RGS/UPS. 62 Furthermore, East Harlem had white, Puerto Rican, and black voices, and most of the time each wanted to speak for themselves. However, in at least one case RGS/UPS served the community well. By joining forces with African American architects and planners, Harry Quintana and others in RGS/UPS raised the issue of lack of representation of Latinos and African Americans in the City Planning Commission, a citywide body that had many of the key developmental powers, and whose decisions had long-term impact for all New Yorkers. In 1969 during an intensive lobbying period, RGS/UPS and ARCH, as well as elected officials and other leaders, joined hands by holding press conferences, mounting organized protests at the meetings of the American Institute of Architects, meeting with the Lindsay administration, and other professional forums. The result of this effort led to the appointment of an African American to the Commission.

Initiating projects and programs also proved difficult. The professional requirements necessary to develop proposals, etc., were many times beyond the technical capacities of the staff. On the fifth strategy, RGS/UPS was the most successful. Almost everyone attached to RGS/UPS through its two-year studio continued their careers in architecture, planing or engineering, leading these professionals into further involvement with the community.

Demise

Beyond the contradictions exhibited within RGS that led to its ineffectiveness, the demise of RGS/UPS was brought about primarily by the untimely investigation by the Un-American Committee of the US Senate. It was widely believed at RGS/UPS that the event that triggered the McClellan Committee investigation

⁶² Choosing the "technical team" which included an architect as the team leader was usually a combined decision of the city agency and the developer. This combination all but guaranteed that Latino or other architects of color would rarely be chosen to be at the helm of the team. Beyond these institutional barriers the few Latino architectural firms that had been established in the 1960s faced other formidable barriers, particularly the ones posed by community development agencies, which many times "undervalued" their own, believing many times that white architects knew best. This barrier is still present today.

was the support that RGS/UPS staff provided to the Young Lords during their take-over of the church on East Harlem. However, there had been other problems brewing, problems brought about by internal issues.

The struggle between the East Harlem and Lower East Side branches between 1968 and 1970 was debilitating and consumed too many hours of planning and strategizing, thus leaving less time for the task at hand. There had been other problems, including: class divisions, gender issues, ideological differences, homophobia, administrative disarray, and professional disparities among staff members.

The most noticeable problem dealt with class. Those who had been raised in Puerto Rico, particularly the staff that Harry had recruited from the island and Washington, had a very "middle-class" outlook and were seen by others in the staff as having attitudes of blanquitos. In fact, some were blanquitos and had chosen to work at RGS/UPS not fully understanding the class differences between those who came to the US for an education and those who grew up in a Puerto Rican barrio. Even though Harry Quintana and Angelo Giordani had been to even "better schools," i.e. Yale and Harvard, while those raised in Puerto Rico had been to "second tier" universities, their outlook differed significantly. For Harry and Papo and others at RGS/UPS, gaining access to a professional status was a culmination of their aspirations and a triumph. For those raised in Puerto Rico, including those who went to school on the island, going to college was within the expectations they grew up with. Except for economic barriers, none had grown up as a "minority" and thus did not have any sense of what it meant to be one at the time. 63 The second major area of problems was the gender issue, which was very closely associated with the class issue. Women in the staff had a discreet demeanor and expected some guarded language. The staff in general treated women with respect, but there was always an added sexual connotation and edge that were not well received by the women.

The ideological differences were more subtle. Some in the staff were avowed Marxist, while others were "liberals" who wanted to "join" the system for a better piece of the pie.⁶⁴ These ideological differences, furthermore, were also felt towards the issue of independence of Puerto Rico. To the surprise of some, many of those who grew up in New York wanted statehood for the island. This colored their view towards how to deal with the issues of language, culture, etc. Some of those in the staff from the island were *independentistas* who felt that such attitudes were close to "imperialist attitudes." Although no one in the staff was openly gay, at least two of the staff members were gay. This brought about a lot of discomfort, particularly when a staff member sent a young woman to "test" if one of them was a *maricón*. There was the usual homophobic comment day in

⁶⁴ In both Poston and the *Life* article there is mention of the original RGS crew imagining

invading Cuba to liberate it from Castro.

⁶³ At the time the issue of being a "minority" was not understood by those born in Puerto Rico. Although aware of the colonial status of the island, those who grew up in Puerto Rico and then came to the US, either as students or as workers, were aware of the cultural issues surrounding colonial peoples. However, the experience of the ghetto added other dimensions which those coming from the island failed to comprehend. Thus, to many in the staff, those born in New York City, for example, were always trying to prove themselves. Some finally understood the devastating impact the school system had had in the development of identity to Puerto Ricans in New York and elsewhere.

and day out, and whenever there was someone visiting the office who was either an obvious or suspected gay or lesbian, including some community leaders, the staff made homophobic and bigoted remarks.

Finally, there was always a feeling that the administration of RGS/UPS was in a suspended reality. There was never any explanation of why things were done, and staff meetings were mostly left in limbo. There was an unevenness on the issue of work attendance and the completion of work, issues that were always difficult to deal with.

Conclusions

RGS and RGS/UPS were organized by Puerto Rican youth whose political awareness was being shaped by the cultural forces that had shaken the nation during the 1960s. With calls for "community empowerment," "advocacy planning," "citizen participation," etc., RGS/UPS espoused the language of those in the political arenas of the city, calling for a community's right in the development of their neighborhoods, a call requesting a "piece of the pie." As young Puerto Ricans, RGS and RGS/UPS founders were part of the oppositional forces which questioned the legitimacy of dominant cultural forces in American cities. As community organizers and activists, architects and planners, the staff of RGS/UPS developed a sophisticated understanding of the issues of the day.

This understanding served them well and enabled the organization to interject itself into the *contested terrains* in East Harlem. Thus, differently from the downtown branch, which remained outside the discourse and the central issues in the Lower East Side, i.e. educational reform and the housing struggle, RGS/UPS played a limited but important part in the central issues of East Harlem between 1968 and 1970. Indeed, I contend that even though RGS/UPS accomplished very few of its goals, its efforts challenged the legitimacy of the status quo in East Harlem by increasing the volume of protest, and for a while promoting what Mollenkopf calls a "new political space," where city politicos had to interact with a new set of actors vying for power. For a very short period, RGS/UPS attracted the attention of the power brokers in East Harlem by exposing the many contradictions inherent in the projects supported by local power brokers who had aligned themselves with the downtown politicos.

RGS/UPS emerged in a transition period in the development of Puerto Rican institutions. It combined several of the characteristics of groups organized during those years: it was founded by grassroots community youth; it was also a professionally staffed organization; it was structured around an advocacy model; and it valued its ethnic-specificity, its *Puertoricanness*. Its staff's eagerness to speak for the needs and aspirations of Puerto Ricans was a clear example of what Andrés Torres calls "ethnicity-based struggle." RGS/UPS also attempted to open a dialogue between white urban professionals (architects, urban designers, physical, social and human services planners), Puerto Ricans, and other people of color.

Finally, RGS/UPS also emerged in a transition period in federal urban policy. By the late 1960s, protests arising from the fights against urban renewal gained the attention of federal authorities and a policy shift toward a more traditional urban policy took place. Model Cities, the last of the major programs directed at the urban crisis that HUD implemented, was channeled through city govern-

ments, the very political structures community action had been designed to bypass. ⁶⁵ In the Puerto Rican community, some of these new organizations that had been established at the local neighborhood level *revisioned* Puerto Rican power and identity by appropriating the language of development, while searching for ways of articulating this identity and representing it in the urban landscape. Unfortunately, RGS/UPS emerged when the economic options for Puerto Ricans in New York City became significantly less promising, as they were becoming "surplus labor."

⁶⁵ Robert Halpern, Rebuilding the Inner City: A History of Neighborhood Initiatives to Address the Poverty in the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 118.

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