There seem to be few equally hotly contested issues concerning the New York City metropolitan area besides that of housing the renting working and middle classes affordably. This is especially the case within the five boroughs of the city, and of even more significance to long-term Manhattan and Brooklyn residents of gentrifying neighborhoods. Allied with this concern are other issues that dovetail with it: good public schools, accessible, affordable and adequate mass transit, and location of services, like food shopping, that residents can viably partake in.

I plan to focus on a highly visible, yet ironically low key housing development called Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village, geographically located above the Lower East Side and below Murray Hill. Architecturally undistinguished, yet hewing to a Le Corbusier style of urban planning, this housing estate stands as an example of mid-20th Century urban housing efforts. What is its’ legacy, and its’ prospects for continuing its’ mission in the 21st Century?

“Stuy Town”

Stuyvesant Town is not a place where the hop on hop off tour bus stops. There’s no famous museum, no historic or memory markers. It’s not included in the AIA Guide to New York City. It consists of 80 acres (320K M2) of verdant parkland and playgrounds where one looks up, and sees 100+ red brick residential buildings scattered among the greenery. Welcome to Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village, 2 housing schemes developed by The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company with the push and backing of New York’s planning czar, Robert Moses during the post WW II years in the mid to late 1940s.

Peter Cooper Village, sited adjacent to and north of Stuyvesant Town, was also included in the housing the “un-rich” scenario. Unlike its sibling though, Peter Cooper was aimed at a slightly higher economic demographic, demonstrated by the oft cited fact that Peter Cooper had air conditioning long before
Stuyvesant Town. However, since they were both developed at the same time by the same developer, we treat the 2 developments as one, and refer to them as Stuyvesant Town.

In this guide, I focus on the history, geography, and politics surrounding the development and viability of two housing schemes that were among the earliest to address the issues raised. I will explore their history, and geography, including transit options, and what may turn out to be the most critical element: the politics involved in their creation and maintenance.

History and Geography

It seems as if New York City, and especially Manhattan, has forever suffered from a dearth of housing that middle class wage earners with families could actually afford. Long known as a high cost place to do business and raise a family, there have been plenty of neighborhoods where the poor and the wealthy have historically congregated.\(^2\) Moving through the early to mid-20\(^{th}\) Century, Manhattan especially was in need of finding homes for families that fit into the economic middle and wished to rent, not buy. This included many soldiers returning from WW II.\(^3\)

In 1943, Robert Moses, the notably controversial building and development czar, strongly defended the potential public benefits surrounding the proposal to build Stuyvesant Town.\(^4\) It should be noted, that like much development of housing for the “un-rich” in the United States, the development was the result of a private/public partnership. NY State legislators, the bureaucrat Robert Moses, and The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company came together, each contributing ideas that would result in the creation of housing for the middle class in Manhattan. Choosing a site that was originally known as “The Gashouse District” \(^5\), the developers created a landscaped, park like housing estate with 11,000+ units.

The creation of this housing for the “un-rich” was not without controversy. There is ample literature, including a number of *NY Times* articles that detail the massive displacement that the development caused. The project was sold to the public on the idea clearing the existing “blight”, a sufficiently vague
description that captured enough positive public feedback and fought off loud but ultimately useless remonstrations from poorly organized community groups. The Gashouse district, home to about 11,000 residents and imbued with the industrial character of huge gas storage tanks, was to be razed. As part of the demolition, the Gashouse District’s historically less than savory reputation would also be erased.
As a swatch of Manhattan real estate, always a valuable 20th Century NYC commodity, this particular parcel of land stood to be the locus of a map changing, neighborhood scale redevelopment. To its south was the traditional home of many poor people, the Lower East Side. To its’ west was Stuyvesant Square, a genteel but not particularly wealthy neighborhood. To its’ north was Bellevue Hospital. The new housing estate might be thought of as a potential East Side anchor.

There were also ample mass transit options, a factor in the livability of a NYC neighborhood. Witness the presence of the “LL” subway line that traverses 14th St. This line happens to be only one of two such specifically connecting crosstown subway trains; the other is a pair of trains crossing 42 St. Other major crosstown streets, e.g. 23rd, 34th, and 57th Streets, do not have subway service. Houston St has an off shoot of the F train that does not serve the area west of 6th Ave.

Above is a photo of a page in the 1973 Stuyvesant High School Year Book The Indicator. The scene is the westbound 1st Ave Stop of what is currently known as the “L” train. The relationship of students from my alma mater to the train is duly noted. Stuyvesant High School was situated across from Stuyvesant Town.

There were many NYC Transit buses serving the area, like the M15 that has perennially run along 1st Ave. They were the most convenient mass transit options for residents of Peter Cooper. Both developments, due to Robert Moses’ predilection with the automobile had ample indoor car parking garages for the one family, one car era. Access to the FDR Drive was also convenient; however, it is ironic that the original East River Drive (now The FDR Drive) was one of the few parkways in New York City not built by Moses.⁶

As previously noted, the political and legal process to create this public-private housing entity was involved and arduous, as one would expect. Unlike future developments⁷ Stuyvesant Town was not intended to be either a tenant owned scheme or did it necessarily receive direct Federal government
financial assistance. Like a predecessor project, Parkchester in the Bronx, Stuyvesant Town was a nominally private development, built by The Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. However, like many schemes of the era, there was a blur between public and private entities in the estate’s development process.

The New York State legislature passed a specific law, the State (of NY) Redevelopment Companies Law of 1942 and amended in 1943. This law permitted private insurance companies to invest in commercial real estate, and was lobbied heavily for by Robert Moses, NYC’s de facto building and redevelopment czar. Other financial incentives, like the public financing of infrastructure for the project in return for Metropolitan Life’s financial commitment to the estate’s maintenance were keys to the overall success of the project.

Significantly, the development was proposed and opened as an all-white enclave. In fact, the chairman of Metropolitan Life, Mr. Frederick H Ecker, was reported to have stated to a newspaper reporter for that period:

“Negroes and whites don’t mix. Perhaps they will in a hundred years, but not now. If we brought them into this development it would be to the detriment of the city, too, because it would depress all the surrounding property.”

This racial bias was the basis for much of the opposition to the building of Stuyvesant Town. In fact, this haunted Met Life well into its ownership tenure. However, the extent of controversy surrounding the exclusion of African Americans is likely the topic an entirely separate research paper.

A sister development, called Riverton Houses, was developed by Metropolitan Life for African Americans in Harlem. Other than location and the skin color of the population, the housing estates could be mirror images of each other. This is a shot of Stuyvesant Town:
Here is a shot of Riverton Houses:

The Present Into the Future

Although built as housing for the middle class, under New York City’s byzantine rent laws, about half the apartments in Stuyvesant Town are now market rate “luxury” housing and thus are not rent regulated.

Many of the rent regulated tenants have aged out or simply passed away. While serving its’ original
purpose of providing “housing for the un-rich”, the wait list for an apartment in the latter half of the 20th century appeared to be endless. I personally experienced a 10 year wait in the late 1970’s into the late 1980s. By the time I was offered an apartment, my then wife and I were about to move to a coop in Riverdale.

As befits the full contact sport nature of New York real estate, a number of attempts have been made to make significant profits from the property. When a new owner buys a New York City residential property with a large number of rent regulated tenants, the intentions and actions of the new owner are often tied to revenue enhancement:

- Upgrade newly de-regulated units
- Buy out the tenancy of those whose legal rights permit them to stay in place
- Create a two-tier system of landlord provided services.

All these actions are intended to discourage those who have chosen to stay in place to do so. Add the lure of open space (land!) to develop additional non-rent regulated, i.e. more profitable units, and the threat to housing the un-rich comes into clearer focus. Both the character and the economics of owning this estate would be forever changed if the new owner proved to be successful.

The largest single default on a US real estate mortgage occurred after Tishman Speyer, the large New York city based real estate developer, bought the property in 2006 from Met Life. By 2010, the company’s aspirations, which likely included a number of the above options, were interrupted by both the realities of the New York estate market and the timing of the Great Recession. TS defaulted, in the amount of $5.4 billion. The status of the rent regulated tenants was safe for the time being.

Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village are currently racially integrated, and economically mixed: market rate and rent stabilized tenants both live there. Even Riverton has a few white tenants. But the future of all 3 estates is surely up for grabs. They are part of the “game” of New York Real estate: a
complicated and complex mix of rent regulations, tax exemptions, private and public funding, and lots of money potentially to be made. As a result, the odds of the “un-rich” continuing to live affordably in Manhattan do not look good.