



Issue Brief: Winter/ Spring 2011

REAL SOLUTIONS FOR NEW YORK CITY: AFFORDABLE HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Promoting Livable and Inclusive Neighborhoods

A Blueprint for Justice & Opportunity for Immigrant New Yorkers

Safe, decent, affordable housing and vibrant and inclusive public spaces are vital to the well-being of immigrants and entire communities. The lack of adequate housing places many immigrant families at risk of losing their homes or of living in substandard conditions. The shortage of space means that the city's public spaces are ever important backyards and gathering places for all New Yorkers. While the demand for space presents numerous challenges for the city's development, it also presents opportunities for innovation.

Addressing New York's Underground Housing:

New York City has at least 114,000 apartments that are not reflected in the official number of certificates of occupancy granted by the City and are therefore not approved for use as living spaces. This number is likely a very low estimate. Overcrowding, a scarce supply of affordable housing, inflated housing prices, and a housing gap have led to a surge in unapproved apartments throughout the city, with the highest rates occurring in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Today, many have become home to new immigrants seeking housing during an ongoing affordable housing crisis in New York City.

These units are a critical source of affordable housing for low-income, often immigrant tenants; allowing tenants to stay in their communities, near employment and social networks. They are also an important source of income for homeowners, helping many avoid foreclosure or provide space to house extended family. Some of these units have major health and safety issues which could be remedied if they were brought into the regulated market. Tenants living in these units have very limited rights and live under constant threat of eviction, and homeowners, some of whom do not know their unit is illegal, face fines of up to \$15,000.

And, since these units are not recognized by the city, planning for important services, like schools and transportation, can't reflect a community's true population size. Bringing these currently unauthorized units into the city's regulatory system would not only help protect the tenants living in them, but would also ensure that neighborhoods receive their fair share of city services.

THE FACTS ON NYC NEIGHBORHOODS

- ✓ Immigrants pay a larger share of their income in rent, and they are twice as likely to live in crowded conditions.
- ✓ New York City has at least 114,000 apartments that are not reflected in the official number of certificates of occupancy granted by the City and are therefore not approved for use as living spaces.¹
- ✓ New York City has more than 1,700 parks, playgrounds, and recreation facilities in 300 neighborhoods across the five boroughs.
- ✓ A 2003 report by Project for Public Spaces found that the low barrier of entry to vending and 'sense of place' created by vibrant public markets, among other things, contributed to social integration and upward mobility of neighborhoods and communities.²

Creating Cultural Marketplaces in NYC Parks

A 2003 report on the benefits of public markets stated that, "increasingly, community leaders and local government [are seeing] public markets as a means of addressing some of the more vexing problems of our cities: the need to bring people of different ethnic groups and incomes together; the need to make inviting and safe

public spaces; the need to reinvigorate low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and to support small-scale economic activity; the need to provide fresh, high-quality produce to inner-city residents; and the need to protect open space and preserve farming around cities.”³

Culturally diverse food options can draw visitors to parks and improve the park experience. Immigrant street vendors offer some of the city’s best locally prepared, authentic ethnic foods. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, a group of Latin-American vendors have set up ethnic food stands for more than 20 years at the ball fields in Red Hook Park, creating a cultural marketplace destination that draws New Yorkers from all corners of the city. The NYC Greenmarkets program manages a number of markets in parks throughout NYC, expanding New Yorkers access to local fresh foods and helping to support small family farmers, a number of whom are also immigrants. New York City can build on these models to create cultural marketplaces in other parks, opening up the permit process, creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, and giving hundreds if not thousands of brand-new New Yorkers a chance to earn money—and all New Yorkers an opportunity to eat well.

Real Solutions for New York:

We urge the city to support the building and maintenance of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers in all five boroughs while also preserving the current stock of affordable housing, with a particular focus on housing for low-income households.

1. **Create an Informal Housing Pilot Program.** The city should create an “accessory dwelling unit” program allowing existing units that are safe but currently prohibited by law to be permitted and regulated under the city’s housing and building codes. Legalizing these units would increase the supply of affordable housing, provide occupants of informal units with tenant protections, and allow for an accurate count of population size. The city could begin with a targeted pilot program to test the policy mechanism.
 - a. **Establish nonprofit partners** to administer and support implementation of program and ensure compliance.
 - b. **Provide financial and technical assistance** for compliant owners, including **a grace period during which some fees and fines would be waived.**
 - c. **Existing tenants** must be given priority to remain in unit after legalization
 - d. Rents must **remain affordable** in order for owners to benefit from the program
2. **Increase enforcement to counter increase of “demolition by neglect.”** Community organizations have increasingly observed a pattern of property owners ignoring building code violations, causing buildings to drastically deteriorate. Predatory landlords of rent-regulated buildings have been using this tactic of intentional neglect to obtain demolition rights, remove tenants, and replace these demolished buildings with other capital projects. The Department of Buildings must be empowered with new legislation to enforce landlord remediation of issued violations. In instances of demolition, the landlord must provide comparable sources of housing for the displaced tenants.
3. **Establish a Network of Cultural Marketplaces in New York City parks.** These places would help to create economic and civic engagement opportunities for immigrant workers, reflect and celebrate the diversity of our neighborhoods in parks, and become local and regional cultural destinations.
 - a. **Work with local communities** to identify neighborhoods and parks that would benefit from a cultural market
 - b. **Create a non-profit workers cooperative** that would help to manage, advocate for and support the marketplace vendors.
 - c. **Give priority to vendors who live or work in the community** when they apply to a marketplace.

1. *New York’s Housing Underground: A Refuge and Resource.* Pratt Center for Community and Environmental Development. March, 2008
2. *Public Markets as a Vehicle for Social Integration and Upward Mobility.* Project for Public Spaces. September, 2003
3. *Ibid*