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Introduction

ON THE LAST NIGHT OF JUNE 1969, 200 African American demonstrators gathered at the northwest corner of Harlem's Lenox Avenue and 125th Street. The next morning, crews were to begin building a skyscraper to house state offices on this vast, cleared site. Cloaked by darkness, activists cut the construction fence, passed through, and announced the new name they had bestowed on Harlem's central block: Reclamation Site #1. The protesters intended to stop the project but also to claim and control the land as their own. Soon, the site began to reflect the self-determination that its new occupants espoused. Within a few days, they had raised tents and a nationalist red, black, and green flag. Some protesters moved into an old bus that remained on the block. Others built modest wooden shelters. Occupiers were inspired by the ideal of community control that fueled the ongoing Black Power movement, the drive for African American self-determination that emerged from the radical shift of civil rights activism in the late 1960s. They voiced the lofty aspiration that Harlem could be rebuilt by and for its predominantly low-income residents. In staging a cooperative, grassroots redevelopment of these acres, the occupants of Reclamation Site #1 offered a material reality that matched their words.[1]

Forty years later, however, on the site that had symbolized the possibility of community control, loomed Harlem Center, an edifice remarkable for both its immense form and its function. Soaring ten stories above 125th Street and encased in brick, steel, and glass, this was Harlem's newest shopping center, complete with a Marshalls, Staples, and CVS. The development added to the array of national retail chains that were increasingly ubiquitous on

Harlem's main street, vivid symbols for many observers of the neighborhood's accelerating gentrification.[2] Yet if the distance between Harlem Center and Reclamation Site #1 seemed vast, the extraordinary fact remained that one of Harlem's largest and best-known community-based organizations, Abyssinian Development Corporation, had built the complex in partnership with a major real estate developer. Harlem Center rose, then, not just as a sign of the increasing ease with which residents could purchase mass-market clothing, cosmetics, and office supplies in the neighborhood. Its construction also pointed to the central role that those very residents had played in the dramatic and widely noted transformation of Harlem in the late twentieth century.

The Harlem of the new millennium, marked by increasing privatization, commercial development, and middle-class habitation, did not represent a sudden break from the social movements of the 1960s, I argue in this book, but rather grew from those radical roots. Indeed, profound physical and socioeconomic changes on Harlem's blocks were not forced on an unwitting neighborhood by outsiders, but emerged from within Harlem, as the often-unintended outcome of demands for community control. The new kinds of community-based organizations that developed amid 1960s-era radical movements to facilitate broad participation became the vehicles through which activists with a different vision pursued the economic integration and commercial transformation of the neighborhood in succeeding decades. In fact, the very characteristics that initially defined these groups—democratic, experimental, and ambiguous in their means and ends—enabled this evolution. As their history reveals, Harlem's much-remarked-upon gentrification, which came to symbolize the broader transformation of American urban neighborhoods in this era, had origins in some rather unexpected places.

Indeed, American cities underwent a surprising turn of fortunes in these decades. By the 1960s, cities had become for many the very symbols of all that was wrong in America. Urban centers, wracked by crime, joblessness, and poverty, had entered what observers called an "urban crisis." Television screens and newspaper front pages broadcast the decade's turbulent "long hot summers," delivering images that often confirmed the decision many had already made to leave cities behind. Depending on one's perspective, the uprisings that altered the landscapes of Harlem in 1964, Detroit and Newark in 1967, and hundreds of other communities offered distressing evidence that

cities were a lost cause, that policies had failed to bring equality to all, or that a bigger upheaval was just around the corner. All agreed that cities were in big trouble. "After our inspections, hearings, and research studies," the National Commission on Urban Problems stated in 1968, "we found conditions much worse, more widespread and more explosive than any of us had thought." In the next decade, as America's biggest city lurched toward bankruptcy, the very possibility that urban centers had tipped past the point of return seemed entirely possible, even probable, at least according to the *New York Daily News*. "Ford to City: Drop Dead," read the paper's famous headline.[3]

Yet by the late 1990s it had become quite clear that American cities had not, in fact, dropped dead. At the end of the twentieth century, many urban centers were, as one national broadcaster explained, "hot again."[4] Reporters followed the stories of families who moved back to city centers to rehabilitate historic buildings, artists who turned overlooked neighborhoods into desirable real estate, and new retail centers that emerged on unexpected streets. Rather than a scapegoat for the country's problems, cities became the very image of cool in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They appeared as the stylish settings of popular TV sitcoms or the unlikely inspiration for new developments that sought to mimic urban lofts and walk-up apartments on the suburban fringe. Observers coined a variety of new terms to describe this turn of events: a "back to the city movement," an "urban renaissance." Their optimism suggested unambiguously that predictions of the city's end had been premature.

Harlem provides a particularly clear lens through which to view this transformation. As the most famous predominantly African American neighborhood in American history—if not the most famous neighborhood in America—and also the most mythologized, Harlem offers a vivid symbol of the many facets of urban change in the latter half of the twentieth century. Encompassing roughly three and a half square miles, Greater Harlem's approximate borders extend north from 96th Street on the east side of Central Park and 110th Street on the west, up to 155th Street, and from the Harlem River at the neighborhood's eastern extent to Morningside Park and the Hudson River at its western edge (see Figure I.1). Harlem's central commercial spine has long been formed by 125th Street, with major secondary streets including 116th, 135th, and 145th Streets, and the neighborhood's north–south

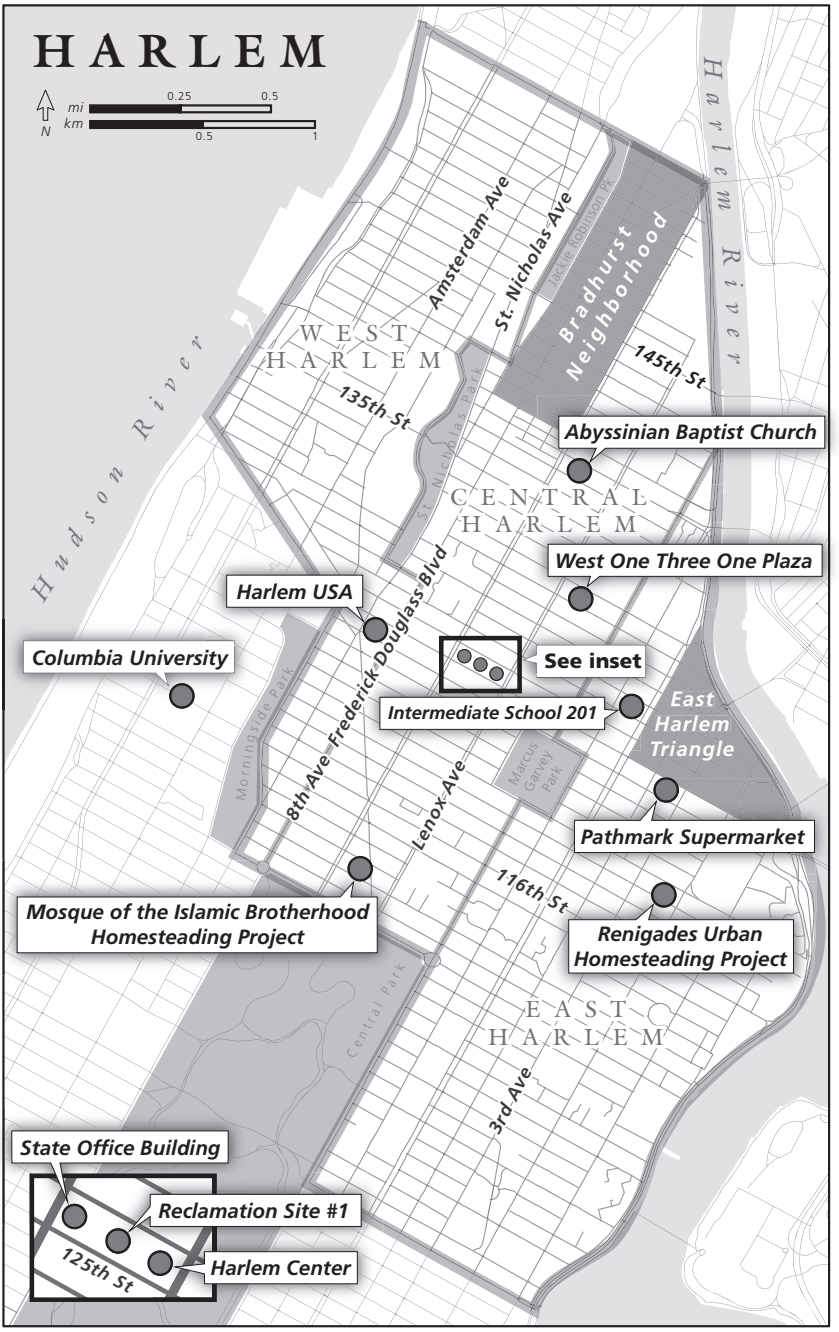

FIGURE I.1. Map of Harlem, New York, showing key sites discussed in book.

boulevards. In between, densely picturesque townhouses, grand apartment buildings, aging tenements, and vast complexes of public housing towers have composed Harlem's variegated residential fabric. Although these blocks had formed the backdrop for many of the most notable people and events in twentieth-century African American history, by midcentury Harlem's streets more typically provided raw material for some of the best-known chronicles of urban crisis. The sociologist and Harlem native Kenneth Clark, for example, used the neighborhood as his laboratory. The title of his 1965 masterwork, *Dark Ghetto,* testified to his bleak findings. So too did the widely seen work of photographer Gordon Parks, whose 1968 *Life* magazine series, "A Harlem Family," chronicled the hunger, poverty, and addiction that haunted his subjects daily.[5]

But Harlem's streets likewise offered a highly visible example of the transformation of so-called inner-city neighborhoods several decades later. Harlem, with refurbished rows of landmark brownstones, new shopping complexes like Harlem Center, and a brightly glowing digital marquee on the Apollo Theater, provided compelling evidence for those who declared the rebound of American cities. Once Manhattan's most infamous enclave, Harlem increasingly appeared as a star in the city's real estate columns. Formerly America's best-known "ghetto," by the end of the century Harlem stood as a symbol that even the most forsaken urban neighborhoods could again become sought-after destinations for a middle-class that had largely deserted them. Harlem's population had approached 600,000 in 1950 before beginning a decades-long descent, bottoming out at 334,000 in 1990. But a marked increase of residents characterized the neighborhood thereafter, reaching nearly 380,000 in 2010. More remarkably, rising wealth spoke to Harlem's new status, with median household income in Central Harlem growing by over 250 percent between 1950 and 2010, from $13,765 to more than $35,335, adjusted for inflation. Indeed, this physical and demographic transformation even earned its own moniker, hearkening back to the era that put African American Harlem on the map. This was, commentators explained, the neighborhood's "Second Renaissance."[6]

Observers often remarked on this apparent revival with surprise, but the story had actually been decades in the making. The years between the early 1960s and the early 2000s were marked by profound transformations at the global, national, and local levels. In this era, Harlem became part of a

transnational network of capital and ideas that turned places like New York into "global cities." Across America, a variety of factors combined to drive an ascendant middle class "back to the city," including the availability of cheap property, new downtown employment centers, and a cultural vogue that celebrated urban places. In New York City, a new economy that prioritized finance, insurance, real estate, and business services over declining industry brought a recovery from the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, making it once again the country's leading metropolis.[7]

Yet these factors are insufficient on their own to explain the physical, social, and economic transformation of communities like Harlem. Individuals who developed a new preference for urban living and abstract forces such as globalization both contributed to neighborhood change in the late twentieth century, to be sure.[8] But this was never simply a process that happened *to* residents in places like Harlem. A deeper look reveals that Harlemites themselves played a crucial role in creating this seeming renaissance on their streets. Even amid urban crisis, residents remained deeply invested in the persistence of their community. Harlemites inhabited, reimagined, and rebuilt their neighborhood despite federal retrenchment, increasing socioeconomic constraints, and Harlem's diminishing profile in the city. Consequently, they wrought dramatic changes in their community's residential and commercial landscape, including the arrival of more affluent residents and the increasing presence of national retail chains. These hallmarks of economic gentrification and the increasing emphasis on creating "free" markets for private-sector investment grew from Harlem's grass roots. The story of this transformation provides a new perspective on the rise of urban neoliberalism, contextualizing its emergence in the social and political history of the very neighborhoods that felt its effects most acutely.[9]

This era in Harlem's history unfolded in relation to, and often in opposition to, the midcentury development strategy popularly called "urban renewal." As Americans settled back into life after World War II, officials and their private-sector and institutional partners reshaped cities through spatial and policy tools emblematic of the conjoined projects of modernism and liberalism. In an effort to keep cities viable in an era of rapid suburbanization, the federal government subsidized the large-scale reconstruction of urban

centers to build housing, commercial enclaves, expanded universities, and new cultural centers. Such projects relied on stock modernist forms—tower block housing, austere marble pavilions, and prismatic glass skyscrapers. Though urban renewal involved complex techniques and diverse outcomes that scholars have increasingly uncovered, the age of large-scale redevelopment nonetheless proved remarkably consistent in its means and ends: projects typically cleared vast urban acreage, displaced thousands of residents, and constructed monumental structures in their stead.[10]

While urban renewal sought to sustain cities in an era when their foundations were increasingly crumbling, the policy often proved quite counterproductive. Renewal ruptured communities with deep social ties as they fell to the force of the bulldozer. In turn, the public housing towers that held displaced residents often became vast centers of concentrated poverty. In effect, if not intent, redevelopment disproportionately harmed low-income, minority populations. For both uprooted residents and outside observers, the failures of urban renewal came to symbolize the failures of the New Deal welfare state. Indeed, many pointed to it as a crucial factor in precipitating America's urban crisis.[11]

By the mid-1960s, urban renewal had received widespread condemnation from all corners, including libertarian opponents of government intervention, liberals who objected to its social costs, and radicals who included a denunciation of this large-scale, generally top-down strategy in the larger demand for self-determination emanating from the New Left. In Harlem and many other American neighborhoods, this radical critique became a central factor in the rise of a more militant approach to gaining civil rights. Civil rights leaders had once looked to redevelopment as a means of achieving the goals of racial liberalism, especially economic and racial desegregation. But a new, younger generation of activists perceived in the failures of urban renewal yet one more symbol of a power structure in which African Americans had little voice in the decisions that most affected them.[12] Instead of seeing their predominantly low-income neighbors as problems to be excised through large-scale clearance, they turned the equation of urban crisis on its head, arguing that the existing community in places like Harlem provided the very basis from which revitalization could occur. Adopting the anticolonial metaphors common in the Black Power movement, Harlem activists explained that the segregated space in which they found themselves could become a

source of power, a means to seize control. They expressed an ambitious, communitarian vision of redevelopment by and for the benefit of Harlem's existing population, an ideal intended to both lift the community's residents and demonstrate their self-reliance.

If Black Power inspired an idealistic conception of community control in the built environment, however, the legacy of such radical demands proved quite unexpected. Activists created a dynamic array of new community-based institutions that promised to realize their ideals in physical form, including community design centers, community associations, and community development corporations. Yet these emergent organizations were inchoate, definitionally imprecise, and thus vulnerable to change. Consequently, they depended on financial partnerships with the public sector even as they preached self-determination; remained subject to the whims of strong leaders even as they promised participatory democracy; were influenced by shifting social thought; and were challenged by the simple difficulty of enacting visionary change against powerful countervailing forces. Over time, they came to idealize new objectives: the cultivation of a mixed-income population and integration into an economic "mainstream." In bringing that vision into physical form in the late twentieth century, these organizations demonstrated their attainment of the long-sought power to shape Harlem's built environment. Yet their accomplishments also exemplified the distance they had traveled from the radical ideals that had once motivated their demands at locations like Reclamation Site #1.

The endpoints of this story testify to the complicated nature of city building in the most recent major period in urban history. If urban renewal grew from a foundation of relative intellectual consensus, the consistent monumentality of architectural modernism, and the backing of a largely stable policy apparatus, the period chronicled in this book manifested competing urban visions, an eclectic and often highly pragmatic approach to physical form, and an equally pragmatic approach to the multitude of policies by which residents brought their ideas to life. A social and political history of urban change in this era largely confirms the late twentieth century as an "age of fracture."[13] Activist designers sought new means of democratizing their professions to enable Harlemites to plan their own future. Enterprising residents demonstrated that if the public and private sectors would not rebuild abandoned buildings into much-needed homes, they

would do it themselves. Church leaders became developers, while parishioners questioned their motives. Instead of a single, prevailing idea of the future of the city, Harlemites of different stripes offered multiple ideas about what their community should be.

If contention defined the spirit of these decades, however, they share the constant—and crucial—presence of community-based organizations at their center. Through them, residents negotiated fundamental questions that had followed African Americans for nearly a century: about the tensions between self-determination and integration; between the idea that Harlem, with its largely low-income population, already bore the seeds of its revival, and the notion that greater income diversity and entry into a broader economic system were necessary for revitalization.

For the most part, historians have yet to examine the events of these decades in detail, yet doing so offers several major insights. First, analysis of urban development in the late twentieth century demonstrates the fundamental and lasting influence of the upheaval that brought the end of modernist planning in the 1960s. Anger over the human costs of large-scale redevelopment motivated activists, as did frustration over housing discrimination, the slow pace of school integration, and the lack of economic opportunity. By the end of the decade, neighbors and likeminded architects and planners stood together in front of bulldozers, demonstrated at public meetings, and drafted alternate plans, all for the purpose of ending spatial practices that harmed residents in majority-minority neighborhoods. Historians have typically positioned these movements as an endpoint, crediting them with bringing the fall of large-scale urban renewal but leaving their constructive effects unexamined, or argued that hopes for broad transformation faded away in disappointment. Where scholars have considered succeeding decades, they have focused on change within the institutional structures of planning.[14] In examining movements against destructive redevelopment more broadly, however, I argue that their demands both fundamentally shaped the subsequent debates that defined the contemporary city and transformed the practice of urban development in ways that we have yet to fully understand. By positioning radical social movements as the starting point of a new period in urban history, I show their enduring influence over the late twentieth

century, as new kinds of community-based organizations became major players in the transformation of American cities.

I thereby reveal the long, complicated, but profound reverberations of the demands for self-determination that arose on a larger terrain in this period. In recent years, historians have taken a closer look at Black Power, examining the radical shift in the civil rights movement as a new phase in the black freedom struggle. Instead of depicting new militancy as the denouement of a larger story of urban decline, historians have uncovered the persistent, often inventive grassroots organizing and activism that suffused Black Power, through which city residents sought to stem urban problems at the community level. In so doing, scholars have revealed the long history of Black Power, demonstrating its deep roots and the diverse forms that it took in the realms of politics, economics, and education. Through examination of black studies programs in major universities and African American electoral politics, scholars have only just begun to bring the history of Black Power forward into succeeding decades, explaining radicalism not as the tragic end of a "heroic period" in the civil rights movement, but as an innovative, often effective shift that brought new forms of participation into American society.[15]

I join this emerging effort through the lens of the built environment. As a sphere that joins politics, society, and culture in a highly tangible form, urban space offers an especially apt terrain for understanding the lasting ramifications of the social movements of the 1960s. By showing the increasing influence of community-based organizations in that context, I uncover a realm in which Black Power profoundly changed—and continues to change—public life in America. Indeed, radical demands for community control helped to establish "community development" as a concept so ubiquitous that many cities now claim a Department of Community Development, not a Department of City Planning. Community developers gained a new role for citizen participation in the construction of the built environment, I argue, extending the gains of the civil rights movement into a crucial and omnipresent realm that encompassed the home, the workplace, and the street.[16]

Yet by explaining the transformations that occurred under the umbrella of community development in the decades that followed the 1960s, I also demonstrate the unstable and often ironic afterlife of such radical social movements, as Black Power's means and ends proved mutable and multifaceted over time. Indeed, Harlem's history reveals the shifting bodies that

donned the cloak of "community development," whether through formal efforts like community development corporations or informal struggles to rebuild the city through the collective labor of urban residents. Black Power shaped the vision of cooperation, self-determination, and democratization that made up radical activists' inclusive ideal for Harlem. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, that idealistic hope yielded to a pragmatic approach that assembled a patchwork of residents, funding sources, and political allies across the spectrum, and ultimately prioritized the act of building over broad structural transformation. As these goals shifted, many Harlemites feared that they would lose the influence they had gained and, as a result, lose their neighborhood too. But they found instead a third way between their inclusive ideal and its exclusionary antithesis—a gradual diversification of the neighborhood as Harlem-based organizations built new mixed-income housing, supermarkets, and shopping malls that often met long-standing resident needs as well as those of a growing middle-class population.

This story complicates and enriches the accounts and explanations that have thus far stood as the record of the city in the post–urban renewal era. By showing the crucial role that community-based organizations played in building a city that emphasized greater private-sector involvement and economic integration—even gentrification—as normative ideals, I explain that such changes in urban centers did not arise solely through the actions of opportunistic speculators or middle-class outsiders who saw places like Harlem as ripe real estate opportunities. I argue that residents themselves, through the social movements they joined and organizations they shaped, helped to produce the Harlem that we find today. At times the neighborhood that resulted from community-level efforts was an unintended consequence of the alliances that Harlemites accepted to make their ideals a reality. At other times, it was a deliberate result of the changing objectives that they pursued. In demonstrating these diverse outcomes, I explain that the story of community development was not a monolithic tale of pluck, perseverance, and drive toward a single idea of urban revitalization, but one of change, conflict, and, often, contradiction. The city of the early twenty-first century did not emerge fully formed, but was the product of a long history. In Harlem, efforts with radical roots followed a path of transformation that registered in the neighborhood's physical space, from a vision of a low-income utopia to a mixed-income reality, from a goal of wide-ranging structural

change to a new pragmatism, and from an ideal of mixed land uses to an approach that prioritized the commercial redevelopment of Harlem's major streets.[17]

Harlem offers a case that is remarkable both for its exceptional history and for the mythology that surrounds it. Always a center of attention, Harlem has served as the ur-type for majority-minority neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century. Harlem's emergence as the heart of New York City's African American population early in the century exemplified the transformative effects of the Great Migration, as white landlords and enterprising African American realtors looked to new arrivals to fill speculative housing built in the late 1800s and early 1900s when mass transit came uptown. These new Harlemites paid dearly to live here, one of the few options they had, but the famed "renaissance" that followed in the 1920s nonetheless suggested the political, social, and cultural flourishing that demographic shifts could bring. Harlem's experience of the Great Depression in the next decade highlighted the disproportionate burden that African Americans bore amid economic collapse, while the neighborhood's streets soon played host to new demands for civil rights as African American veterans returned home from World War II. Harlem political leaders like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. rose to national prominence at midcentury. Here, Malcolm X matured as an intellectual and activist. Harlem also symbolized the deindustrialization, dilapidation, and overcrowding that undermined African American communities in the postwar decades. The neighborhood came to exemplify a period of urban disinvestment and decline.[18]

Despite Harlem's increasing distance from its popular heyday by the early 1960s, and, indeed, despite the neighborhood's diminishing identity as New York City's largest African American community, Harlem retained its role as the symbolic center of black America in the last decades of the twentieth century. The neighborhood's high visibility in many ways proved a self-fulfilling prophecy, the result of Harlem's prominent history and its proximity to the nation's media capital. As a result, things often happened first in Harlem in the years chronicled in this study, and, even when they did not happen first there, often received tremendous attention. The neighborhood became home to the nation's first community design center, for example, an

effort by activist architects and planners to empower residents with the tools to plan their community. Likewise, Harlemites founded one of the nation's first community development corporations in the late 1960s, an entity that aspired to own and shape Harlem's land. When a new generation of community development corporations emerged in the 1980s, Harlem's garnered extensive press coverage and soon became exemplars at the national level. Harlem served as a site for innovative social movements, a destination for prominent national and international officials, and a favored target of public investment throughout this period. Unsurprisingly, then, when middle-class residents began to move back to Harlem at an increasing rate and national retailers like the Disney Store and Starbucks looked to make the neighborhood home, social scientists and journalists took notice. Harlem became a national symbol of inner-city reinvestment and gentrification.[19]

Harlem's history in the last four decades of the twentieth century was undeniably unique as a result of the signal importance of its setting, its cast of notable characters, and the early onset of its physical and social transformation. Yet Harlem offers a telling case through which to understand development in the aftermath of urban renewal precisely because it often served as the leader in techniques and practices that would likewise transform, and that continue to transform, majority-minority neighborhoods elsewhere in the United States. If Harlem provided particularly visible examples of grassroots social movements, community-based organizations, and demographic shifts, those phenomena proved noteworthy not because they were exceptional, but because they soon came to characterize similar communities in other major cities, including the U Street Corridor in Washington, DC, Bronzeville in Chicago, Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati, and West Oakland. This history of Harlem not only illuminates the mechanics of change in one important place, but also reveals the social and political forces, conflicting ideals, and transformational events that help to explain the dynamics in parallel neighborhoods across the United States. If these places lack the attention that Harlem has long attracted, they share socioeconomic commonalities, a cyclical history of disinvestment and reinvestment, and a tradition of community-level activism. Understanding Harlem helps to explain the complex stories unfolding throughout American inner cities.

Though Harlem's grassroots activists often fixed on the built environment as a site and a stake for their demands, their role as spatial thinkers has not

received the historical attention it deserves. Harlemites, including those with and without formal training in architecture and urban planning, did much more than take oppositional stances in their activism. Over the course of these forty years, radical design professionals, charismatic community leaders, and interested residents often expressed their highest ideals about equality and democracy, their "freedom dreams," in the words of historian Robin D. G. Kelley, in the language and material of the built environment.[20] These ambitious, often competing visions of the future city reward detailed analysis. Thus, I combine study of the archival records of community-based organizations and the actors who participated in their activities with close attention to the spaces they produced on paper and in reality. Where the records of architects, planners, activists, and organizations provide a partial history, I have benefited from the intense scrutiny that Harlem received during these decades from both the mainstream and the African American press, and from the memories of the actors in this story.[21]

These sources enable a rich portrait of Harlem's physical spaces during an era in which predominantly low-income, African American neighborhoods, once symbols of decline—if not public pariahs—became symbols of rebirth. Tracing the history of the organizations and individuals who produced this transformation concretizes a process of change that is often described only in amorphous terms, such as "revival," "revitalization," and "renaissance," that fail to capture the social processes, individual decisions, and political dynamics that shaped Harlem at the community level. "Gentrification" itself remains such a term, wielded for diverse ideological purposes, imprecise in its exact meaning, and at risk of obscuring more than it reveals. Yet it remains the predominant word used to describe the demographic and physical changes that swept across neighborhoods like Harlem in these decades and that continue into the present day. Instead of taking one side in ongoing debates over the meaning and implications of gentrification, this book explores and explains its intrinsic complexity and ambiguity. Indeed, examining Harlem from within its boundaries provides an understanding of neighborhood change that goes beyond simplistic frameworks of good and evil, or crude scorecards of winners and losers. As I show here, the gentrification of Harlem was often a two-way street, with chain stores, wealthier residents, and outside money coming into Harlem, and Harlemites themselves creating space for or seeking the growth of those phenomena. Their

history demonstrates that one cannot paint neighborhoods with a broad brush and assume that all residents wanted the same thing for their community. Harlemites brought multiple visions and competing aspirations to the project of city building in the late twentieth century. In the process, they debated and reimagined what it meant to construct their ideal city.

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