

THE NEHEMIAH HOUSING PROJECT

Bricks, Mortar, Hearts and Minds In East Brooklyn, Low-Income Housing Is No Longer a Dream

Don Wycliff

This article first appeared in the 27 August 1985 issue of *The New York Times* and later reprinted in the *Bulletin*. It offers a clear sense of community involvement and leadership development needed in the Nehemiah Housing Project

In east Brooklyn, a coalition of churches is doing what many experts felt couldn't be done—building affordable housing for low and moderate-income families. The Nehemiah project has already produced 300 new row houses in Brownsville at an average cost of \$51,000 and sold them to families with incomes averaging less than \$25,000. Another 300 are under construction; plans call for 5,000 in Brownsville and East New York.

Can such success be duplicated? Representative Charles Schumer thinks so. He wants a \$150 million Federal program to assist similar projects across the nation. For budgetary reasons, Congressional approval this year seems unlikely. But the nation could do far worse than to invest \$150 million in the idea.

Nehemiah is a cooperative effort of a community organization, the governing authorities of several religious denominations and New York City. It began with the community group, East Brooklyn Churches, a coalition established five years ago [1980] with fewer than 10 congregations. Now it numbers almost 50, with a total of 50,000 members.

Showing unusual cohesion and clout, the coalition put together an \$8 million revolving construction fund, including major loans from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, the Episcopal diocese and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. It persuaded the city to clear and donate abandoned land, plentiful in blighted east Brooklyn. The city also agreed to chip in \$10,000 per house, to cut the cost for buyers to \$41,000. The state mortgage authority came along with special 9.9 percent mortgages.

The result was to make home ownership a reality for people who never even dreamed of it. Many of the new owners are vacating public housing, making space available to those on many waiting lists. Meanwhile, neighborhoods that had been written off are being reclaimed.

Nehemiah, city officials say, is producing new housing faster and more cheaply than homesteading programs to rehabilitate abandoned buildings.

Could such success be duplicated? The answer isn't obvious. To some extent Nehemiah's success depends on its east Brooklyn location, an area with large tracts of abandoned land already owned by the city and available for free use. Few cities have as much as New York; the need to purchase land would drive the cost of each house much higher. The project also depends on the ability of the church coalition to tap parent church bodies for construction capital on highly favorable terms—no interest for five years. Church bodies might be able to do the same in other communities, but the prospect is by no means certain.

Most important, East Brooklyn Churches is an unusually powerful community organization, strongly rooted in local churches. Its leaders have benefited from community organizers. It has moved shrewdly to build confidence and respect. A city official, with a trace of awe in his voice, observes that 9,000 people turned out for a recent Sunday afternoon rally the group sponsored. Numbers like that get public official's attention.

Representative Schumer's bill would have the Department of Housing and Urban Development do for other projects what the city of New York has done for Nehemiah—create community organizations like East Brooklyn Churches. It seems clear that only the communities themselves can do that.

It's certainly worth spending \$150 million to find out how many more such organizations are around and help them succeed with housing projects. But in the end, what Nehemiah has wrought in bricks and mortar only symbolized what East Brooklyn Churches has already created in the hearts and minds of people in east Brooklyn. [Used with permission by author]