



Preface

The Community-Based Planning Task Force, coordinated by the Municipal Art Society since 2001, is a coalition of grassroots community organizations, community boards, citywide civic groups, elected officials, environmental justice advocates, planning professionals, and academics that calls on New York City to join cities such as Seattle, Minneapolis, Houston, Washington D.C., Rochester and Baltimore in realizing that livable communities make a livable city. New York is a diverse city composed of many different neighborhoods, and because of its size and complexity, a strictly-centralized planning process is inadequate.

In 1989, City government revised Section 197-a of the New York City Charter, providing community boards with the opportunity to develop and submit community-based plans to the City Planning Commission. This atlas contains a number of these “197-a” plans developed by community boards in all five boroughs. In addition, the Atlas represents the efforts of many grassroots, local organizations to present the City and their communities with plans for needed improvements. Considered both individually and in the aggregate, community-based plans represent among the best planning being done in New York City. Without planning staff or financial assistance being provided by government, communities have turned to foundations, banks and technical assistance providers for support in developing their plans.

However, while on paper New York City has what appears to be strong support for community based planning, this commitment is less apparent on the ground. Although the original intent of the 197-a plan was to provide a mechanism through which City agencies could consult with communities when public policies were formulated and planning decisions were made, in practice these plans are often adopted by the City and then left unused or unimplemented. Both community boards and local organizations that plan often find it difficult to get their plans taken seriously and integrated into official plans, policies, and investments. Rather than seeing community-based plans as building blocks in developing public policy, City agencies sometimes regard community planning and policy planning, not to mention development planning, as separate—even conflicting—interests.

Today there is an urgent need for timely development of affordable housing, open space, and economic development opportunities that benefit all New Yorkers. Community-based plans, with their emphasis on these pressing issues, frequently offer the most inclusive answers and, in some places, have resulted in almost miraculous urban transformations. But, most of these successes have been achieved only after many years of effort involving:

- Fundraising to hire technical planning assistance;
- Waiting for city and state agencies to share public data (and in some cases having to use freedom of information requests) or having to recreate existing research;



- Convincing city and state agencies to accept innovative proposals as valid and worthy of inclusion in a plan;
- Organizing and pressuring to get plans that do not coincide with market pressures adopted;
- Lobbying, protesting and litigating to stop other plans and proposals from being implemented before community plans have been adopted or before adopted plans have been implemented;
- Identifying and securing implementation funding (sometimes without the assistance or support of decision makers); and
- Lobbying decision makers to support community plans and implement the recommendations by using them to shape and influence capital and expense investments, land use and zoning proposals and approvals.

Clearly, the current 197-a process is neither efficient nor effective. Communities get frustrated. Development gets delayed. Faith in government erodes. The Community-Based Planning Task Force is working to secure a more meaningful role for New Yorkers in the city's land use process, and to establish community-based planning as official New York City policy. The City has a unique opportunity to adopt a new approach to planning that recognizes and values the ideas and contributions of ALL communities and ALL New Yorkers. By working together, we can create the city we all want.