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FEATURES

The Land That Time and Money Forgot [Share This](#)

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A noted New York housing expert described the relationship between NYCHA and its residents as “borderline pathological ... like an abusive parent-child syndrome.” You could see what he meant this past June, as NYCHA ran a series of citywide roundtables to inform residents on the current state of the system. After two hours of brain-numbing speeches and many pie charts, the residents were afforded a twenty-minute period to offer feedback, i.e., vent their often-heard complaints about leaks, rats, lost paperwork, etc. The NYCHA officials scribbled on pads, said nothing. It was all pretty routine until the subject of the cops came up.

The consensus is project policing started going seriously wrong in 1995, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani merged the previously distinct NYCHA housing cops with the NYPD. During “the old days,” projects were assigned specific officers. Now each of the nine Police Service Areas (PSAs) cover a number of developments. “You used to know them, now you don’t,” said one resident at the Bronx roundtable. Stop-and-frisk was bad, but people also complained of the indignity of being charged with trespassing in the lobby or hallways of their own building. Cops assigned to the pj’s were often rookies, the residents charged—young, jumpy Caucasians from Massapequa Park freaked to find themselves in close quarters with so many blacks and Latinos.

“They don’t do verticals,” people said, meaning the police rarely go beyond a building’s lobby. “The stairwells, man, you could meet the Alien in there,” said one roundtable attendee. “I get home from work, dead on my feet, and the damn elevator’s broken. Again. I could walk up the ten floors, but I don’t need that kind of exercise. If the cops are afraid to go in there with guns, how am I supposed to feel?”

Many cops agreed. As one ranking officer with long experience in the projects said, “Go into St. Nick’s Houses, or Grant, they hate you on sight. You can feel the waves of it hitting you in the face. It’s just fucking dangerous. There’s a million places to hide. Shit comes at you all angles. Once these guys were on a call at the Polo Grounds Towers. They’re there like five minutes and someone screams, ‘Incoming.’ This massive, Costco-size jar of mayonnaise comes flying out of the 27th-story window and goes through the windshield of a cruiser. Guys were licking their fingers, going, ‘It’s fucking mayonnaise’ ... Sometimes you have to ask yourself, *What’s the point?*”

The kicker to this is, as part of the 1995 deal, NYCHA pays the NYPD an extra fee (currently in excess of \$70 million a year) for “above baseline” police services. This is exactly the sort of stuff that drives people like John Johnson crazy. Now 48 and often nattily attired in *faux* designer sunglasses and Mets cap, Johnson, who has been living in the South Bronx’s Mott Haven Houses since the “Fort Apache” days, is the chair of the Bronx South District Council of Presidents (BSDCOP), the most powerful of NYCHA tenant groups. I first called him after seeing a video on the BSDCOP website. Accompanied by Ray Charles’s version of “America the Beautiful,” the tape shows a man with a bicycle coming out of the project elevator, where he’s stopped by a couple of cops who take away the bike, get into a fight with him, and eventually arrest him.

“Oh, yeah, that’s ours,” Johnson said. “The tenant watch. We watch them watch us.”

Delayed installment of security cameras has been a continuing issue, and after a series of robberies in the neighborhood, Johnson tried to get the Authority to put in the devices at Mott Haven. “NYCHA said I’d have to wait, that it was too expensive, blah, blah, blah. So I found these genius local guys, the Digital Divide Partnership. They set up the cameras so you could see the feed on smartphones and computers. They also put Wi-Fi in the building running off a solar panel for free. It was fantastic.

“But NYCHA blew a gasket. They were mad I didn’t ask permission. People are getting mugged, and they want me *to ask permission!* They said they’d rip out the cameras. I told them, ‘You’ll have to be taking me to jail before you do that’ ... Well, there was a NYCHA party at Gracie Mansion. I see Bloomberg, ten feet away from me. I go up to him with my cell phone, show him the feed. ‘That’s the lobby of my building, right now, in real time,’ I tell him. He said, ‘Wow, that’s