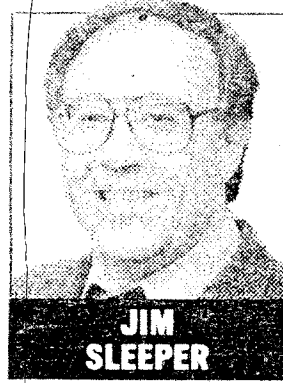


# Rebuilding the ghetto does work



JIM SLEEPER

After enduring years of ribbon cuttings followed only by vacant lots and sealed-up buildings, city dwellers could be forgiven for adopting a

world-weary, we've-seen-it-all-before attitude toward plans to rebuild the inner city.

They'd be wrong, though. There's no excuse for the fatalism recycled by Nicholas Lemann in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine cover story, "Rebuilding the Ghetto Doesn't Work."

Lemann has one thing right: Programs hatched in Washington, especially those focused on job creation, have failed. But that says more about Beltway myopia than about what's going on in our neighborhoods. Let's not get so preoccupied with Washington pots and policy wonks that we miss the real story — that inner-city people have rebuilt whole communities without waiting for more presidential visits to Charlotte St.

Working with foundations, banks and local officials, 2,500 community development corporations (150 in New York City) have punctured Lemannite myths about how their neighborhoods decayed in the first

place. That knowledge is power: It helps put the elements of urban health back together in ways that last.

Lemann thinks we shouldn't bother, because most inner-city communities were destroyed by market forces that reflect people's preference for suburbs and by the social pathology of those left behind.

He doesn't mention the Faustian arrogance of urban renewal experts, who blasted whole neighborhoods to build highways and high-rises. Or the billions of public dollars that greased the real-estate industry's promotion of suburbia with subsidized mortgages and interstate roads. Or the speculators and bankers who actively destroyed sound urban neighborhoods to cash in on the mere *anticipation* of decay.

Compared to such fateful and mostly stupid decisions, federal programs to revitalize ghettos have been an afterthought — and funded like one. So why wring our hands about them? The real story is that community corporations have figured out how to lure bankers, their regulators, federal and state tax officials and developers into coalitions of mutual interest that build or rebuild hundreds of thousands of units of affordable housing. They also improve social and commercial services and, yes, the moral tone in areas long thought drained of political and economic clout.

"See that area?" says a cop, gesturing at a few hundred moderate-income Nehemiah row homes, each with a lawn and driveway, in East New York's tough 75th Precinct. "We never have any trouble here."

No wonder. When these postal and transit workers and nurses' and teachers' aides

**Arrogant urban  
'experts' blasted  
the inner cities. Now  
grassroots groups  
are bringing them back.**

aren't in bed, they're watching over their human-scale community. That one-third of them came out of nearby public housing to invest their nest eggs in their "ghetto" dispels Lemann's myth that everyone with any money wants to flee and to live far away from work.

Again, the truth is complex: Scratch many a white suburbanite, and you'll find someone who'd have preferred the vibrancy of urban living but was *pushed out* by deteriorating housing, services and crime.

"This wasn't some neutral process whereby people decided to leave," says Paul Grogan, president of the Local Initiatives Support Corp., which helps community corporations find big private investors. Powerful actors *decided* they should leave.

**L**EMANN COUNTERS with another argument: It's inconsistent for a nation committed to racial integration not to *help* inner-city folk leave. Where the urban destroyers have been stopped, or co-opted into rebuilding for those who want to stay, there's nothing inconsistent about helping them stay while battling suburban segregation for those who want to move.

Obsessed with past failures, Lemann thinks the feds are fated to keep throwing good money after bad — and that they downplay urban programs because they know it.

On the contrary, it's appropriate that while Lyndon Johnson announced his War on Poverty to a joint session of Congress, Bill Clinton announced *his* urban redevelopment initiatives in a Cleveland parking lot. Washington has learned its place: to support a network of savvy community corporations that mix for-profit, nonprofit and local government resources to sustain sound investment in cities.

## Proven winner

Manhattan: Jim Sleeper's Jan. 16 column was right on the money when it described the drama and the success of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) in rebuilding our central cities. A lot has not worked; but CDCs do, and it's important to underline that in the face of such misleading critiques as Nicholas Lemann's in The New York Times of the same date. Round No. 1 goes to Sleeper. Keep this issue alive.

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