

# FOAM

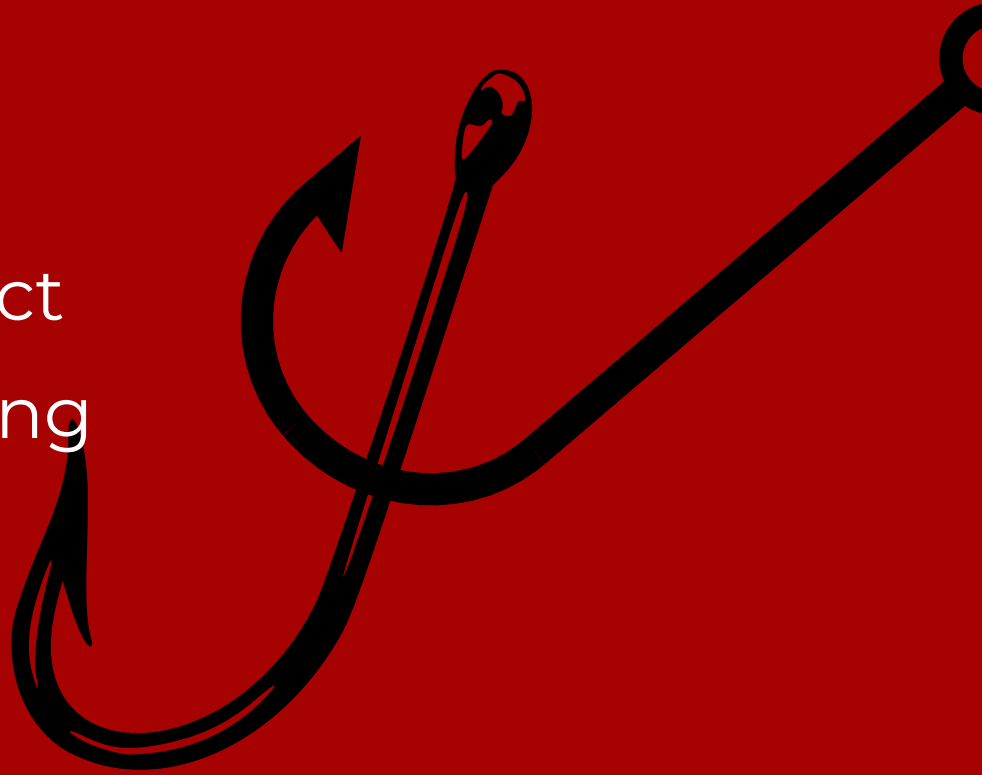
Fix Our Apartments Movement

## Twin Horrors in Red Hook

URBS 402

Capstone Project

Adam Dore-Young



# May 2023 Update



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the turn of the decade, a strange man-made blight has devastated Red Hook Houses. All green spaces have been torn to shreds by the FEMA-funded Recovery and Resilience program, leaving the complex a dusty maze of fenced-off corridors. Efforts to strengthen the local environment against future floods and hurricanes have for years left it more unsafe instead, with the projected end of construction still far off. Over half a billion dollars has been sunk into this effort, and the residents have little save anguish to show for it.

Meanwhile, the interiors of the buildings in the development are underfunded and left to rot. Interviews with hundreds of residents have revealed widespread dilapidation and a building management apparatus that residents have lost faith in. Inadequate budgets for everyday maintenance have produced a failure cascade in the Operations Department, where failures of provision and staffing produce unmotivated workers who regularly file false reports about problems being resolved or nonexistent. Consequently, Red Hook Houses tenants often end up seeing the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) as useless or outright malignant.

For those invested in preventing conditions in Red Hook Houses from deteriorating further, the Fix Our Apartments Movement can offer the following recommendations:

- 01 Congress (through the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and the New York State Legislature must fully fund NYCHA's Capital Projects Division to provide all needed infrastructural improvements inside long-neglected NYCHA buildings.
- 02 Development-level administration should be devolved to tenant-run Resident Management Corporations (RMCs).
- 03 These RMCs should exercise oversight of citywide projects such as Recovery and Resilience with regard to their local implementation.

# INTRODUCTION

Spanning 40 acres with around 6,000 residents, Red Hook Houses is the largest public housing development in Brooklyn and the second largest in New York City.<sup>1</sup>

A modern example of de facto racial segregation, its overwhelmingly Black and Latino population (with a small but significant Chinese community) comprise the majority of residents in Red Hook, while the largely white residents of privately-owned housing live closer to the coastline in what is known as “the Back” of the neighborhood. Pedestrians are discouraged from the commercial districts of nearby Carroll Gardens and Gowanus by the hostile architecture of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, which geographically severs the neighborhood from the greater Brooklyn landmass.

“The Back” is not by itself entirely sufficient for residents’ full spectrum of needs: many Red Hook Houses tenants find themselves traveling miles by car to find a bank or hair salon. Few businesses exist in the immediate vicinity of the development aside from a few grocery outlets, a dollar store and a laundromat.

Structurally, the development is on the verge of collapse. Ten years ago, Red Hook Houses faced significant flooding in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. FEMA then pledged \$550 million in “resiliency repairs” to create permanent, durable heating and electrical infrastructure that could survive the next flood.<sup>2</sup> The immediate and lasting effects of these repairs have been disastrous. Started before the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing to this day, all efforts thus far have served to transform the Red Hook Houses into a toxic labyrinth.

Construction has completely annihilated every single green space on the grounds, cut down every tree, fenced off pedestrian walkways and flung lead-tainted dirt, unmoored by vegetation, into residents’ windows. The environmental devastation left in the wake of this “green” program is uniform and unceasing.



1. “MyNYCHA Developments Portal”. <https://my.nycha.info/DevPortal/Home/Index/?redirectUrl=/DevPortal/Portal?>

2. “NYCHA Breaks Ground on Landmark \$550 Million Sandy Recovery Project at Red Hook Houses”.

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/nycha/about/press/pr-2017/red-hook-sandy-groundbreaking-20170906.page>.

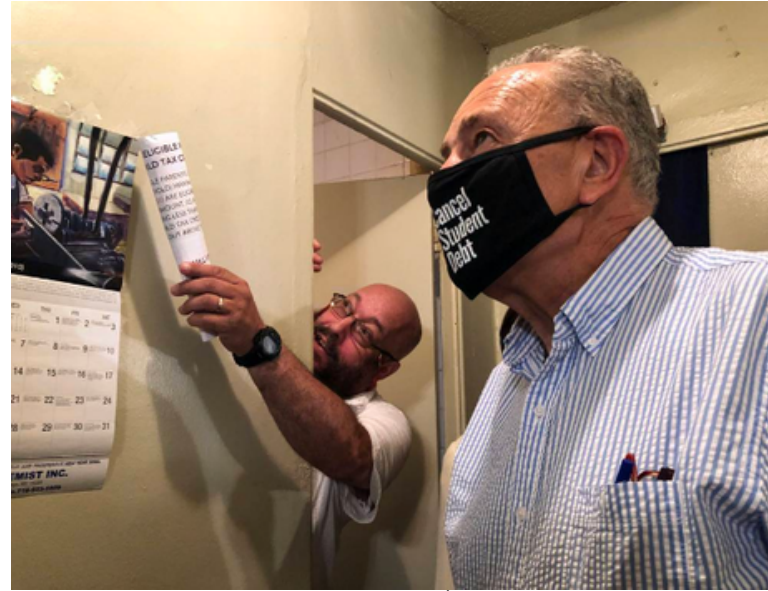
Meanwhile, the interiors of the buildings, starved for federal and state funding, are completely falling apart. Clogged plumbing and leaking drainage pipes, electrical and gas outages that last for months, a mold problem so pervasive it is continually monitored by the federal government, crumbling lead paint, garbage disposal issues that attract vermin of every size, plaster cracked through to the brick, broken appliances like sinks, bathtubs and refrigerators going unreplaced: a unit-by-unit investigation through any of the complex's buildings on any given day will reveal horrors beyond anything the average New Yorker might imagine.

## Destructive repairs outside and lack of repairs inside Red Hook Houses have given birth to the worst housing conditions seen in New York City since the age of the tenements.

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) manages two distinct repairs-related bureaucracies, each operating on a top-down understanding of maintenance and development, that have done grievous material harm while acting independently of any local oversight or input. Studying them in depth might reveal the twin aspects of what government neglect looks like in marginalized communities. Well-funded capital projects can destroy faster and more comprehensively than they rebuild, and poorly-funded maintenance projects can become unresponsive and inert.

With this in mind, the Fix Our Apartments Movement (FOAM) was formed to help advocate for Red Hook NYCHA residents' most urgent needs. Our membership recorded tenant complaints, collaborated with local government officials and participated in various community events and protest actions, all with the aim of highlighting the gruesome dilapidation caused by both neglect and ill-thought-out capital projects. "Twin Horrors in Red Hook" is the sum of our efforts.

This report will take a systemic analysis of NYCHA's approaches to climate resiliency and everyday maintenance, contrasting their stated aims and ambitions with a view of their grim failures from below (their impact on everyday residents). Dozens of anonymized personal interviews about repairs-related issues will be referenced, as well as an in-depth interview with FOAM supporter and NYCHA tenant Nilsa Vargas. All photographs of the Red Hook Houses grounds were taken by the report's author on May 13, 2023 unless otherwise noted.



Credit: Josie Stratman/NY Daily News

Ruben Morales was instrumental in getting the Fix Our Apartments Movement off the ground.

Above, he can be seen directing Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer around his damaged apartment, (left) and below, protesting the frequent gas outages in his building (right).



Credit: Hiram Alejandro Durán/THE CITY

# SEVERE UNDERFUNDING AND ENVIRONMENTAL DANGER

Red Hook Houses exists at the intersection of neoliberal austerity, land contamination and climate risk.

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With rents often considerably lower than the costs of apartment maintenance<sup>3</sup> and countless buildings in severe disrepair,<sup>4</sup> it can scarcely be denied that NYCHA no longer receives sufficient government funding to operate as an effective manager of its real estate portfolio.

And despite countless budget cuts at the federal, state and municipal levels in recent decades, the true deathblow to America's public housing system was dealt over thirty-five years ago. President Ronald Reagan slashed federal subsidies to local public housing developments by almost sixty percent<sup>5</sup> over the course of the 1980s.

The impact of the continuous cuts is obvious to contemporary residents of Red Hook Houses. Aging infrastructure is crumbling at an alarming rate. Even the last two years have seen a massive uptake in heat and hot water outages,<sup>6</sup> among other immediate, life-threatening concerns.



3. As of fiscal year 2023, the average NYCHA apartment maintenance cost is \$1,394 per month, and the average rent paid per household was \$542 in 2022. See the "Preliminary Mayor's Management Report, January 2023"

[https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2023/2023\\_pmmr.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2023/2023_pmmr.pdf)

and "NYCHA Fact Sheet 2022" [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_2022.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA_Fact_Sheet_2022.pdf).

4. See Public Advocate Jumaane Williams' report: "How the Other Half Lives in Public Housing," 2022.

<https://advocate.nyc.gov/reports/how-other-half-lives-public-housing/>.

5. Peter Dreier. "Reagan's Real Legacy." *The Nation*, June 29, 2015. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/reagans-real-legacy/>.

6. Williams, "Other Half," 2022.

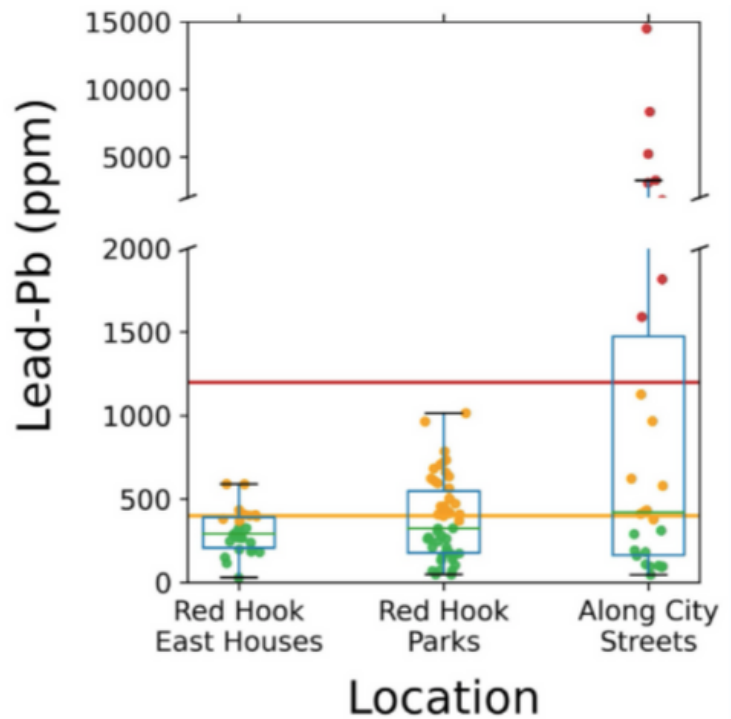
And more subtle, behind-the-scenes issues have emerged in the Authority's day-to-day operations as well. Around the start of the previous decade, NYCHA adopted what public housing expert Nicholas Dagen Bloom calls a "centralized call center system, borrowed from the private-sector model,"<sup>7</sup> coinciding with what Red Hook tenants see as a noticeable decline in quality of service. In an interview for this report, Red Hook East Houses tenant Nilsa Vargas remarked:

*"I do remember when they said you no longer can call the [local] office and put a ticket. They gave us a new number, where you can call and put in your ticket, so that they can do the repairs in your apartment."*

in reference to the specific moment when repairs complaints stopped being responded to.

Lead remains a great hazard to residents both inside and outside their buildings. Years after former Mayor De Blasio's first-appointed NYCHA Chair Shola Olatoye resigned in disgrace in the wake of a faked lead testing scandal, Red Hook Houses tenants and their children were still being poisoned by lead paint that NYCHA refused to acknowledge.

Meanwhile, a recent Columbia University study<sup>8</sup> has indicated elevated lead levels in several plots of uncovered soil nearby.



A study of Red Hook soils by Columbia University found that many green spaces around Red Hook East Houses contained soil with lead levels above the Environmental Protection Agency's 400 parts per million threshold for toxicity.

### Disgraced NYCHA boss Shola Olatoye to resign as she faces criticism over lead paint scandal

By Jillian Jorgensen and Greg B. Smith  
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS - Apr 05, 2018 at 10:59 pm



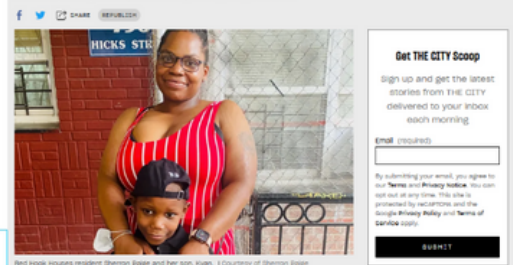
DC Board



### NYCHA Falsely Certified This Brooklyn Child's Apartment Lead-Free. Now He Has Lead Poisoning - and He's Not Alone

"When people make mistakes and then cover those mistakes up with lies upon lies, that's when people get really hurt," said Sherron Paige, whose 7-year-old son, Ryan, has grown up in a lead-painted apartment in the Red Hook Houses.

BY GREG B. SMITH | GBSM1@THECITY.NYC | JAN 11, 2021, 9:18PM EDT



Sources: left, Daily News; right, THE CITY.

7. Nicholas Dagen Bloom. "Maintaining NYCHA: Debunking the Myth of Unmanageable High-Rise Public Housing." *Urban Omnibus*, April 22, 2015. <https://urbanomnibus.net/2015/04/maintaining-nycha-debunking-the-myth-of-unmanageable-high-rise-public-housing/>.

8. Jennifer M. Sobolewski et al. "High soil lead (Pb) concentrations resurfacing in Red Hook, Brooklyn." 2021. [https://www.ideo.columbia.edu/~avangeen/publications/documents/High\\_soil\\_lead\\_\(Pb\)\\_concentrations\\_resurfacing\\_in\\_Red\\_Hook\\_Brooklyn.pdf](https://www.ideo.columbia.edu/~avangeen/publications/documents/High_soil_lead_(Pb)_concentrations_resurfacing_in_Red_Hook_Brooklyn.pdf).



The former location of the Red Hook Senior Center at 6 Wolcott Street has been abandoned for ten years, after taking critical damage from Hurricane Sandy. During the early days of the pandemic in 2020, a tenant living above informed the author of this report that the empty space had become a breeding ground for vermin. Credit: Nikhita Venugopal/DNAinfo.

Ten and a half years ago, Red Hook Houses faced horrendous flooding damage from Hurricane Sandy.

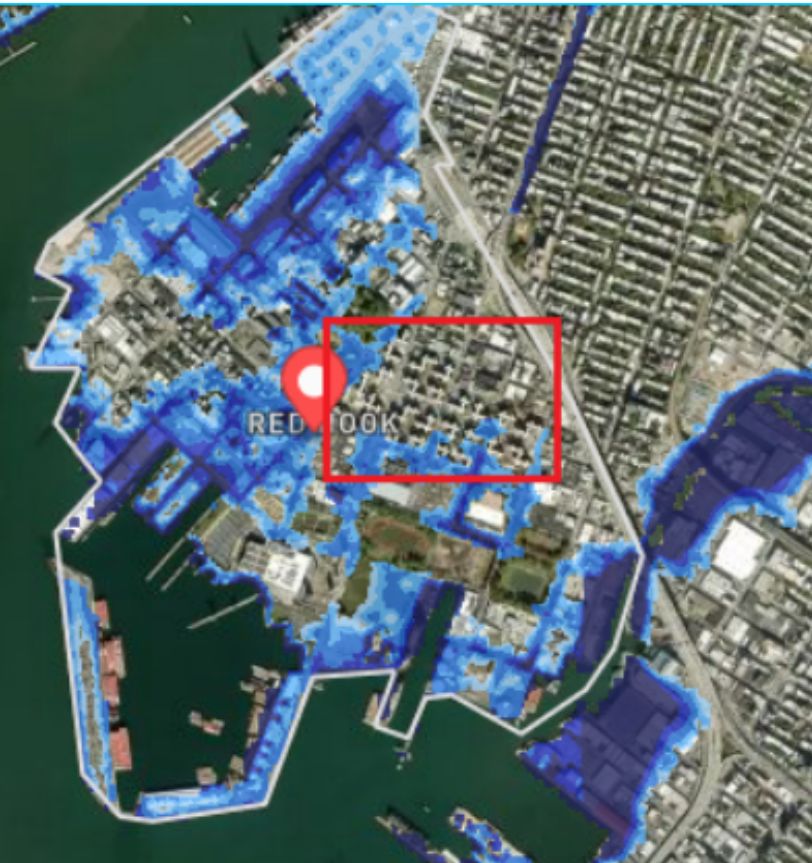
Nearly all residents experienced electrical and gas outages and the emergency infrastructure set up to restore heat and power remained in place for years afterward.<sup>9</sup>

The \$550 million grant from FEMA (first mentioned in the Introduction of this report) was long overdue, and would take even longer to implement.

And the results, as we shall see, were disastrous.

There is no malicious explanation for what happened next: Red Hook Houses cannot serve as a “sacrifice zone” or be converted into a flood barrier to protect more valuable real estate. As demonstrated by this flood risk map, the development does not stand between the waterfront and the commercial heart of the neighborhood.

The environment around Red Hook Houses was torn to shreds because the people tasked with fixing it didn’t care about what would be lost in the process.



Above: projected high flood-risk areas 30 years from now. The red box indicates the location of Red Hook Houses. Source: riskfactor.com.

9. Hana Kassem and Richard Roark. “Beyond Resilience.” *Urban Omnibus*, September 12, 2018. <https://urbanomnibus.net/2018/09/beyond-resilience/>.



# DESTROYED INSIDE AND OUT

Right: Red Hook Houses has become a labyrinth of fences and dust.

Below: A photograph showing severe damage to an internal drainage pipe at 606 Clinton St. only recently accessed and replaced by maintenance workers. Credit: Nilsa Vargas



Tenants have witnessed the consequences of underfunding and destructive capital projects firsthand. Nilsa Vargas, a resident of 606 Clinton St., had this to say about a leaking drainage pipe that heavily damaged her and her neighbors' apartments:

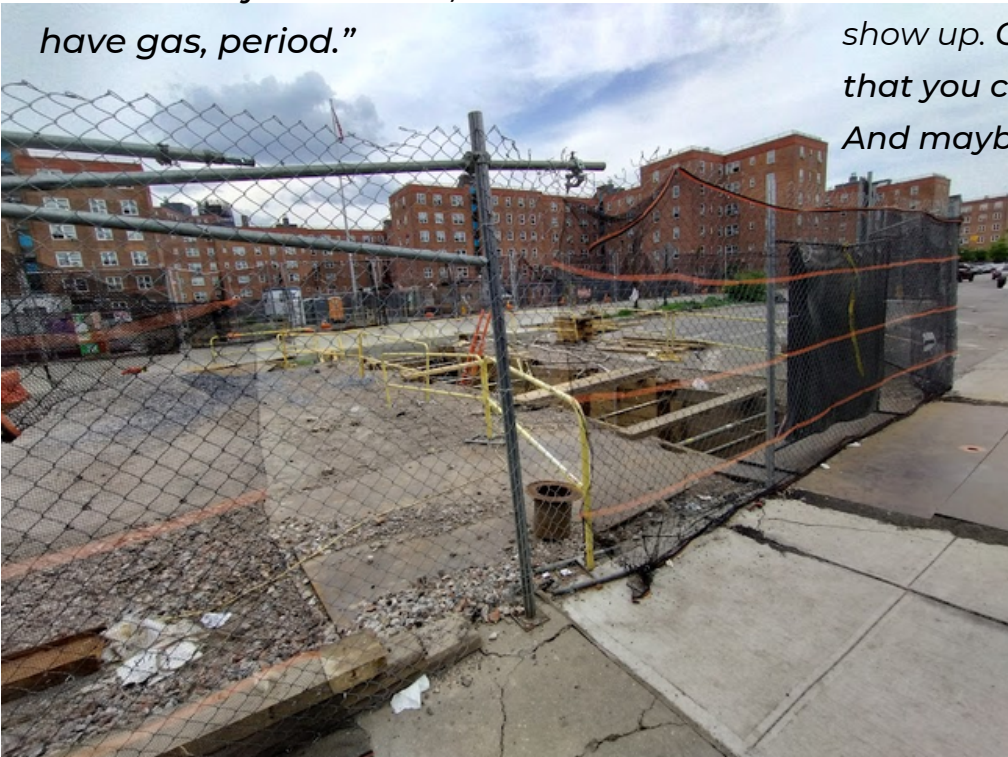
*"We've been dealing, since I moved here, with that pipe from the roof down. That, every time it rained, I get water, in my bathroom, my hallway. It took so long for them to fix that, because every time it rains, you will get the water from the fourth, third, second and first floor. That was the worst.*

*So we kept complaining, and kept complaining, and one day they came, and they did the fifth and sixth. That's not where the problem was. The problem was between the third, second and first floor. And it took so long for them to come back and see how the damage was. Because it was hell of a damage. It was horrible. I've been living [in this apartment] now over fifteen years, and just now they did this job."*

Ms. Vargas also recalled a variety of issues that had plagued her building in recent years:

*"I do remember the compactors that we had to deal with. A lot of fruit flies, going into your apartment. They would creep through your door, go into your refrigerator. Destroying all of that, and the building just smelling horrible from not fixing the compactor right away. That we just had to deal with all that smell and all that garbage, and stuff like that. It was horrible."*

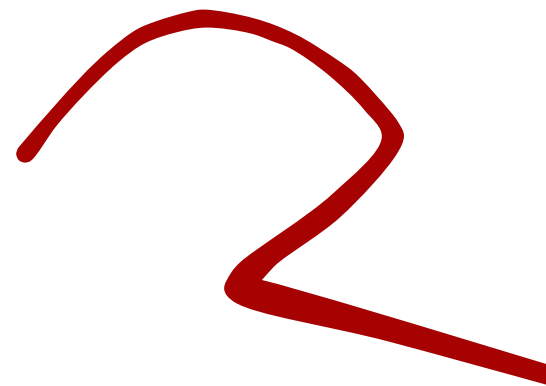
*"I remember when we didn't have no gas. And we had to be with no gas for a couple of months. And we had to cook things on a hot plate, which took sweet of a time to cook your foods. Because you only had one to cook with, and it just took so much time. And it was just terrible, when we didn't have gas, period."*



And here is her description on the typical process of waiting on repairs from NYCHA:

*"Now they come, if you put in your ticket- sometimes they aren't here. And sometimes, they don't show up at all, because- they'll tell you- they had an emergency that was a little more severe than mine. So they'll come the next day, or they'll come a week later when you're not home. So now I have to put another ticket for them to come back, or they say that ticket is open. So then, when will they come to your apartment? I have to wait, or close out that ticket and just make another one."*

*"[Neighbors] that I might speak to, they just have no choice but to wait. Or just continue to complain until someone comes to the apartment and fixes what they have to. Continue and continue calling if they don't show up. Or if you get so upset- enough!- that you can't take it anymore, go to court. And maybe they can do your repairs."*



With the aim of improving repairs reportage, FOAM has surveyed hundreds of Red Hook Houses residents about their housing issues.

## Some of the problems encountered include:

Bathtub overflowing- bathtub plaster collapsing since 2009. Toilet causing a drip from the ceiling. **No paint job in 37 years.** Tiles have been lifted by flooding since Sandy.

Plaster peeling. Need new sinks.

Need a paint job in the hallway and bathroom.

NYCHA didn't remove disconnected stove and fridge. No electricity in kitchen. Bedroom wall mutilated. Hole in wall by the bathtub.

Need new window. Replacement stove doesn't work.

To fix a leak, NYCHA tore up the bathroom wall around the tub- never fixed. It's been covered in plastic and roaches are coming out.

Bathroom wall bulges from internal leaks. Windows don't fully close. Peeling ceiling as a result of leaks.

Holes in room doors. Radiator pipe severed- leaks steam. Bugs everywhere. Floors broken. Oven broken. Walls ruined- internal leaks caused it. Mold. Drainage pipe leaks. Electrical outlets broken. Need new cabinets.

Ceiling leaks from a higher floor in the bathroom and bedroom.

Leaks from ceiling and bulging walls. Lock broken.

Peeling and chipping paint. No lead tests yet. Tried to file tickets but they were immediately closed.

Experiencing mold and lead in bathroom, rooms need plastering and painting. Need new cabinets in the kitchen- a lot of wear and tear. NYCHA has only sent staff to look at the issues, but still have not repaired anything. NYCHA has not repaired any of the lead, mold, paint or plastering. Need an exterminator for mice- since the construction the problem has gotten worse- and need new radiators. Also the bottoms of the radiators need to be plastered and sealed.

Cracks in walls. Paint chipping.

Mold in kitchen. Toilet bowl broken. Windows broken. No vents in kitchen.

Walls falling apart. Rain comes through walls.

Persistent mildew from leaks from upstairs. Bathroom ceiling black with mold.

Walls chipping. Floor tile distorted.

Heating pipe broke. Ceiling ruined. Black mold. Holes in walls.

Tub stopped up. Need new cabinets.

Walls ruined, massive mold problem.

Leaks from kitchen, bedroom and bathroom ceilings.

Roof leaks from rain. Apartment is right under where the rain accumulates- leaks through wall/doors. Messing up ceilings and walls. Wall comes out even after being fixed.

Massive amounts of mold in bathroom. Walls cracking and floods in kitchen. Pipes overflowed from upstairs- kitchen ceiling is caving in. Sink water not potable. Tiles eroded.

Bathroom replastered but no one repainted. Plaster chipping after a big leak. Bathroom work left undone- shower panel also needs work.

Bathroom walls crumbling.

Took pipe from sink- Handle broken. Walls peeling. Toilet messed up. Bathroom radiator broken- leaking water.

Peeling paint. Bathroom leaks. Cracks in wall.

All the garbage from the entire development is routinely piled outside. Lead pipes. Bathroom ceiling broken from leaks. **Dust comes up from construction.**

Need new circuit breaker. Power blows all the time. Asked for a paint job. No mold abatement. Socket in bedroom needs fixing.

This anonymized data clearly indicates persistent problems with NYCHA's limited capacity for building maintenance.

**Every entry recorded here is from a distinct household.**

Ceilings and walls messed up, plaster falling over the stove. Also leaks in the bathroom ceiling and walls and light fixture. No gas for cooking. Plaster is falling in every room. Has sent tickets for years, no repairs made. Asbestos.

Leaking for four years- sent three tickets. Water Damage, possible mold.

After bathroom leak was fixed, in two weeks it was leaking again.

Lights go out all the time.

No electricity in bathroom.

Mold everywhere, even windows, dressers.

Cabinets, floors ruined from pipe leakage.

Washing machine upstairs wrecks ceiling.

Parts of tub broken. Broken bathroom window- mold. Broken ceilings. Hole in bedroom door.

Bathroom paneling and plastering needed. NYCHA closed the ticket, had to put in a new one. Daughter's bedroom radiator leaking- making it hot like a sauna. Leak under sink- have to keep a bucket under it.

Sink broken. Holes in walls.

Bathroom needs plaster.

Radiators and windows broken. Tiles and bathroom mold. Need new fridge and bathtub.

Mold in bathroom. Needs replastering and repainting.

Electricians incompetent. **Workers tore out window and never replaced it.** Bathroom sink also disconnected. Ceiling bulging. The building's garbage chute is broken.

Sink faucet broken- bathtub gets clogged.

Bathroom ceiling needs paint and plaster- leaks eroded it.

No replastering after sink was replaced. Walls bulged after a paint job. Circuit breaker blocked by cabinet.

Bathtub and sink broken. Bathroom paint peeling, mold issues.

Massive amounts of mold. Roaches. Room doors broken. Exterior door needs paint since 2012.

Bathroom window broken. Bathroom ceiling cracked from mold.

Ceiling cracked- mold? NYCHA said they'd respond, but didn't. The lock broke last year- NYCHA came four times and each time said it was fine.

**Has cancer, needs asbestos removal.**

Two years ago a plumber attempted to fix the leaks and they just came back. Bulging wall.

Radiator gets too hot- and you can't turn it off. Bathroom has leaks, mildew, chipped plaster. Ceiling, kitchen, doors all need replacing. Windows don't open. Oven might leak gas- it hasn't been replaced.

Toilet too loud. Can't use tub- water leaks everywhere. Walls crumbling- big hole in living room wall.

Kitchen wall needs replastering. Needs their whole bathroom redone.

Windows, cabinets, ceilings, bedrooms, all in need of repair.

Electricity in kitchen not working.

Bathroom ceiling is coming down. It leaks on and off.

Walls cracking, paint chips everywhere. Since Sandy.

Windows messed up. Walls are cracking- sheetrock. Lead pipes in the bathroom. Behind the stove is corroded.

Leaking pipes. Mold. No wall repairs for two years.

# Can you imagine if any of these things happened to you?

Walls- mold from pipes every time they fix it, it comes back. A couple decades in the bath/bed area. Washing machine backwash goes downstairs and out the drainage pipes. Radiator pipes leak. Heat on when its unnecessary- thermostat broke. Also doesn't turn on when its cold. Floor gets so hot you could melt a crayon on it.

Leaks ruining walls everywhere.

Bathroom & bedroom- plaster cracked. Leaks everywhere.

Radiator water leak destroyed tiles. No repairs after a leaky pipe disintegrated the wall.

Bathroom leak for two years. Every time the neighbor takes a shower. Lots of mildew and mold. Still waiting on kitchen lighting. When they fixed the light, they left two huge holes- still not repaired, had to be taped up.

Garbage chute issue. Attracting bugs.

Window won't close. Floor uncleanable. Kitchen tiles splitting. Mold in bathroom.

Walls bulging from leaks. Had to replace cabinets themselves with no help from NYCHA. Garbage chute broken. Broken internal doors and cabinets.

Sink has been broken for eight months- it caused the floor to bulge, even. NYCHA replaced that with a "slop tank"

Bathroom ceiling is leaking above the toilet due to a leak from the apartment above. NYCHA came to look at the leak. They literally just looked and then went upstairs to check with the neighbor's bathroom and haven't been back yet.

Can't turn radiator on or off. Heat is too high. Can't open window.

No gas, no water. After putting in ticket after ticket, nothing. No sink- it's been torn out. Had to wash dishes in bathtub. Living room wall cracked and broken under window. Pipe "fixed" by NYCHA then flooded the apartment. They said they were going to paint- didn't bother doing it or checking back afterwards for over a week. The walls are peeling off and no one bothered to fix the drain.

No gas.

Water irregular and brown. Crumbling ceiling.

Leak on floor from wall pipes. Bathroom and toilet leak.

## The Impact of Mold on Red Hook NYCHA Tenants

A Health Crisis in Public Housing

A groundbreaking study by the Red Hook Initiative was a major inspiration for this report.



OCTOBER 2016

Beyond lead, mold remains the most urgent threat to NYCHA tenants' quality of life. A 2016 study by the Red Hook Initiative (RHI) found evidence that Red Hook Houses residents saw little support for mold remediation, directly violating the agreement that settled the 2013 federal lawsuit *Baez v. NYCHA*.<sup>10</sup>

Our own subsequent survey of tenants confirms that virtually nothing has changed in the ensuing years. Mold remains pervasive, and the attempts by NYCHA to eliminate it are sporadic rather than systemic.

10. *The Impact of Mold on Red Hook NYCHA Tenants*. (Red Hook Initiative, October 2016). [https://rhicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ImpactofMold\\_RHI\\_FINALREPORT\\_2016.pdf](https://rhicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ImpactofMold_RHI_FINALREPORT_2016.pdf)

# The tearing up of Red Hook Houses' green spaces has had a deleterious effect on tenant health and well-being.

Outdoor common areas are now coated with dust, and large piles of dirt have started to attract rodents. Nilsa Vargas comments:

*"You get asthma. It's a windy day, you're walking in the street, and all this air comes to you- your face, your eyes. And you're just unable to stand here because if you do or if you walking to your building- you gotta deal with these rats, going here, going there. I feel like the environment is just not safe anymore because of all of this stuff that's going on in the project grounds. I don't appreciate most of that stuff, and being that I'm asthmatic I can't deal with that, it really bothers me."*

Nilsa's car was recently damaged by the rats:

*"Now with all this ground-digging, and all of this stuff that's been happening- so many rats that's been running under the garbage, on the paths. I have a vehicle, and I park it, and they live under your car. They bring bones, bread and stuff that they just happened to eat up- all the wires, from underneath my car."*

## Rodents, critters invade Brooklyn housing complex; residents plead for help

"We have skunks and we've got raccoons and we've got possums," Betty Bernhart said.



By [Sonia Rincon](#)

Monday, December 12, 2022

It's a problem made worse by the long-term construction and flood proofing upgrades being done to the complex since Hurricane Sandy. The old basement boilers are also being replaced with an above ground central heating system.

The multi-billion dollar resiliency plan has meant a lot of digging, and there's still another year and a half to go.

Eyewitness News reporter Sonia Rincon was told that rats live in tarp-covered piles.

The rodent problem exacerbated by resiliency repairs has become impossible to ignore. Source: ABC News

# WHAT WENT WRONG?



Despite three years of nonstop construction, the large piles of dirt around Red Hook Houses have yet to transform into the “Lily Pads” envisioned above by architecture firm KPF.

Source: Bklynr.com



## NYCHA'S CONSTRUCTION PLANS CALLED FOR EVERY TREE AND LAWN TO BE RAZED SIMULTANEOUSLY.

Here, the Recovery and Resilience Department explain their reasoning:

*"A disadvantage of this solution is that by lifting the topography, existing green spaces and trees have to be removed, which is less than ideal in terms of sustainability and impacts the resident experience throughout the construction project.*

*"First the existing green spaces were in poor condition. A large portion of trees that were removed were deemed by an arborist to be in poor or very poor health and needed to be replaced regardless of construction.*

*"Second, since the project included the construction of a raised central mechanical plant and elevated MEP annexes, it was necessary to install site-wide distribution systems for natural gas lines, electrical conduit, and steam distribution. The associated trenching would require the disruption of the site. Trees, grass, and plants had to be removed to implement this state-of-the-art and energy efficient infrastructure. Even if the budget would have permitted it, tree relocation is a precarious operation that often results in the death of the tree.*

*"Adjustments to the design were made to reduce the total number of trees removed from 572 to 457 (-20%).*

*"NYCHA strives for one-to-one replacement at the end of each project as space constraints and funding permit. As FEMA funds tree removal but not tree planting, alternative funding will be leveraged for this purpose.*

*"Third, a social analysis of the site showed that buildings in Red Hook are felt to be isolated.*

*Visitors and emergency personnel say it is difficult to navigate the site or differentiate one building from another."<sup>11</sup>*



Since 2020, fences have wrapped around nearly every entranceway and blocked several pedestrian walkways. Red Hook Houses is far harder to navigate than ever before.

11. Flood Resilience at NYCHA: Memorializing Lessons Learned Through the Hurricane Sandy Disaster Recovery Program. (New York City Housing Authority, October 2021), 59-60. [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/Flood-Resilience-at-NYCHA\\_lores\\_single-pages.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/Flood-Resilience-at-NYCHA_lores_single-pages.pdf)



These graphics represent the defoliation of Red Hook Houses from the planners' perspective.

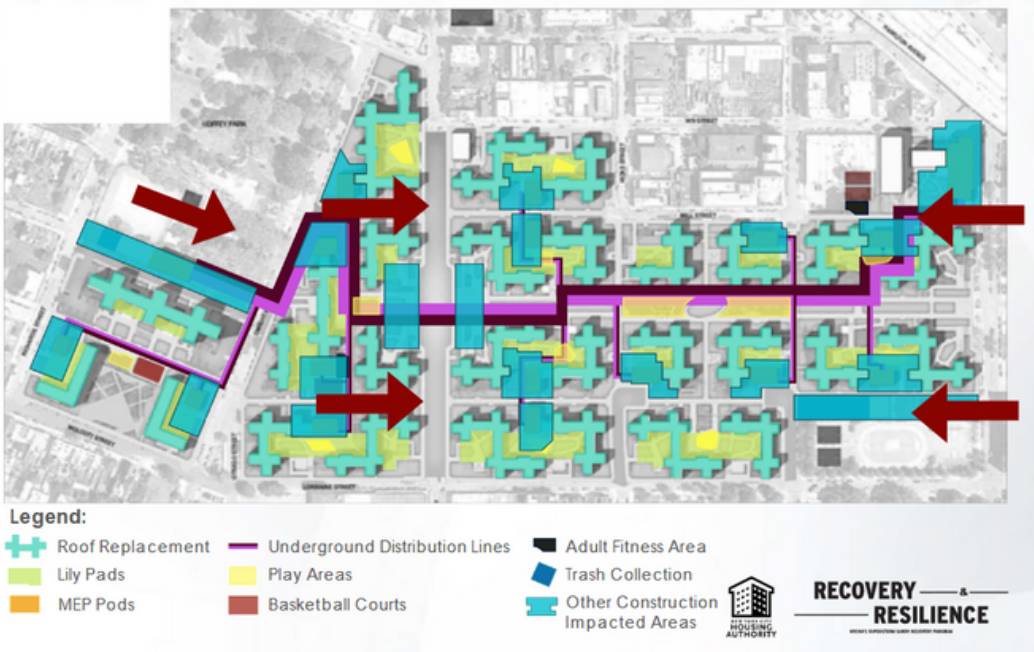
Top: KPF Architects, the designers of the Red Hook Resilience program, demonstrate the intended tree cover once the project is complete. Source: <https://www.kpf.com/project/nycha-red-hook-houses>

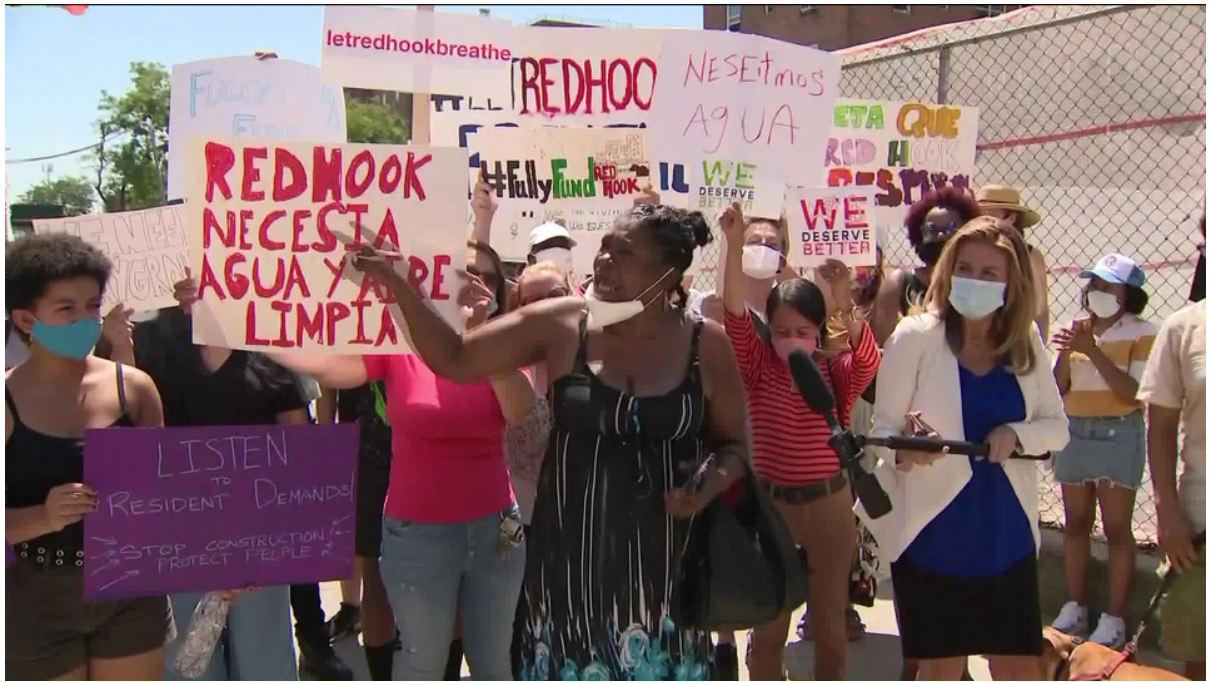
Middle: NYCHA maps out the trees scheduled for removal during construction. The yellow dots represent trees removed to clear the way for resilient infrastructure, as pictured below. Source: [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA\\_Urban\\_Forest.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA_Urban_Forest.pdf)

Bottom: NYCHA depicts the placement of the new gas and electrical infrastructure. Source: [https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/2019\\_11\\_21\\_Red\\_Hook\\_Kickoff\\_Final\\_Phase.pdf](https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/2019_11_21_Red_Hook_Kickoff_Final_Phase.pdf)



## Red Hook Site Plan





Here activist Karen Blondel can be seen leading a protest against continued construction on July 28, 2020. Source: PIX11 News

Residents disagreed that it was necessary for all trees in Red Hook East and West Houses to be removed simultaneously. The community expressed their outrage on a number of occasions.

But it was too late. The damage was already done, and tenants had no choice but to wait for construction to be completed. They have been waiting now for three years. The majority of former green spaces remain in disrepair.



Residents often attempt to decorate the fences in order to restore some semblance of beauty.

Life in a fenced-off maze has proven utterly dehumanizing. Some residents have declared the environment “like being in a prison.”<sup>12</sup> Ms. Blondel, referencing slavery and the historic oppression of Black Americans, has often compared it to a “plantation.”

Many of the new resilient infrastructure hubs are nearing completion. The fences, for the most part, have yet to come down. As of its most recent update on May 11th, NYCHA's Recovery and Resilience Department claims construction will conclude around this time next year..



12. Williams, “Other Half,” 2022.

# RECOVERY — & — RESILIENCE

NYCHA'S SUPERSTORM SANDY RECOVERY PROGRAM

The New York City Housing Authority is building back safer, stronger and smarter by improving structural resiliency and infrastructure protection at **Red Hook Houses**. NYCHA's Recovery and Resilience Department (R&R) is pushing design boundaries in building reinforcements, storm surge protection, and infrastructure upgrades. Below, please find the latest R&R construction update for Red Hook Houses. To learn more about the R&R program visit <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nycha/about/recovery-resiliency.page>

**Power Plant & Pods Phase Percentage Completion:** 65%  
**Project Start:** Q4 2019  
**Anticipated Completion:** Q2 2024

Above: NYCHA allows interested parties to receive construction updates by email subscription. Below: The bulk of the \$550 million granted by FEMA has gone to Adams European Contracting, INC. Their contract expires next April.

Contract Number	Start Date	End Date	Vendor Name	Contract Amount	Spend-To-Date
1812885	08/14/2019	04/10/2024	ADAMS EUROPEAN CONTRACTING INC.	\$380,896,848.90	\$261,084,550.27
<b>Procurement Method</b> COMPETITIVE RFP <b>Description</b> SANDY RESTORATION AT RED HOOK EAST & WEST <b>Material/Service</b> Decar <b>Type of spend</b> GR-GENERAL RENOVATION TYPE A.1CM <b>Location</b> VARIOUS PROJECT-VARP					

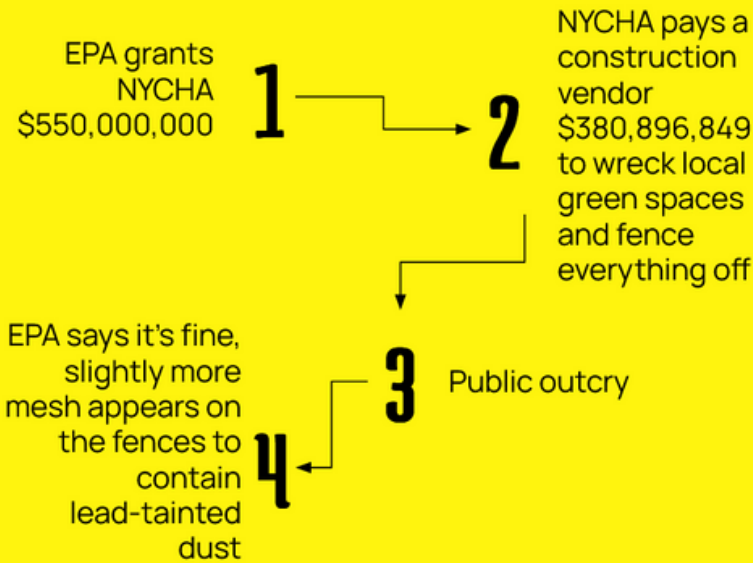
FOAM members have only witnessed one incident of deliberate environmental oversight: a Zoom hearing on November 5, 2020 with NYCHA officials and a representative of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who tried to allay tenants' fears about the toxicity of the now-omnipresent construction dust.

Additional mesh covering the fenced-off areas was introduced after the EPA official claimed it was already there. Lead-tainted dirt has continued to collect in many residents' windowsills, per our survey.

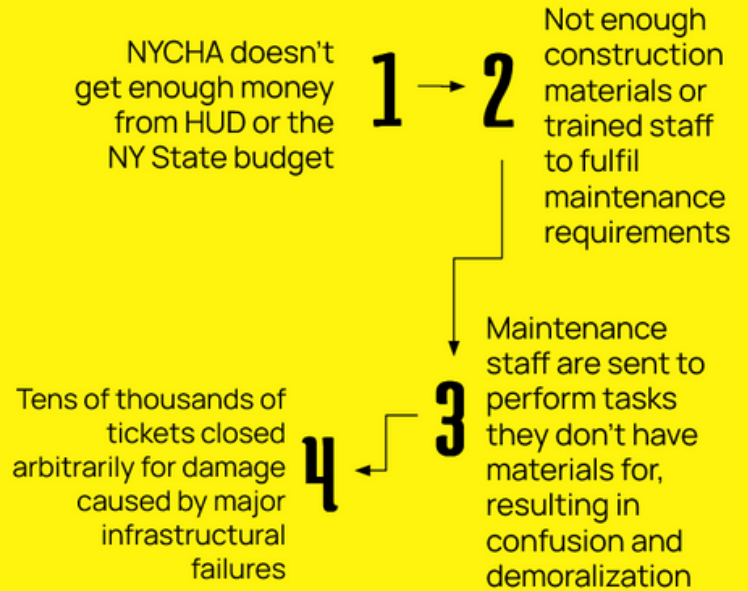
Whether projects are well-funded or poorly funded, NYCHA administration of Red Hook Houses can be said to suffer from a complete lack of accountability.

**ZERO ACCOUNTABILITY**

**Resiliency Repairs- Adequate Funding**




**Everyday Repairs- Inadequate Funding**



**IN TWO FLOWCHARTS**



The slow pace of the resiliency project and the lack of funding for day-to-day operational maintenance can result in bizarre and costly ad-hoc solutions to basic issues. This external boiler fits right into the devastated industrial landscape caused by the resiliency repairs, but is actually funded by NYCHA rather than FEMA. Since NYCHA neglected this building's heating systems until they collapsed beyond repair, the only remaining feasible course of action was to purchase a massively expensive piece of equipment and plant it behind one of the development's many fences, presumably impeding local construction. Thus, a temporary solution has become permanent until the new heating system is finished.



# POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

No matter what happens, NYCHA is due for a major change. On January 31, 2019, an agreement between NYCHA and the local U.S. Attorney’s office resulted in the appointment of a Federal Monitor for NYCHA,<sup>13</sup> assigned to transform the administration into something vaguely functional. That same year, on June 18, 2019, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio hired Gregory Russ,<sup>14</sup> a veteran privatizer of public housing agencies across the country,<sup>15</sup> to serve as the permanent replacement for Shola Olatoye. Decisions have been made in the last few years that will permanently shape the future of NYCHA. This section will provide a brief overview of the courses of action recommended by a diverse array of government actors and community stakeholders.

Financial Solution	Outcome	Administrative Solution	Outcome
RAD/PACT Privatization	Elimination of public housing	Neighborhood Plan	Decentralization of NYCHA operations
NYCHA Preservation Trust	Financialization of public housing		
Fully Fund NYCHA With Federal/State Subsidies	Public ownership remains intact	Resident Management Corporations	Local tenant oversight of all NYCHA operations and projects

13. U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of New York. “Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces New Agreement For Fundamental Reform At NYCHA” Press release, January 31, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-new-agreement-fundamental-reform-nycha>.

14. Office of the Mayor of New York City. “Mayor de Blasio & U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Carson Announce Appointment of Gregory Russ as Chair of the New York City Housing Authority.” Press release, June 18, 2019. <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/312-19/mayor-de-blasio-u-s-department-housing-urban-development-secretary-carson-announce>.

15. Greg B. Smith. “Meet NYCHA’s New Boss: A Fan of Private Management of Public Housing.” *THE CITY*, June 17, 2019. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2019/6/17/21210996/meet-nycha-s-new-boss-a-fan-of-private-management-of-public-housing>.

## A systematically underfunded institution will inevitably feel pressured to liquidate its assets.


Privatization is a real possibility for Red Hook Houses and many other NYCHA developments like it. The Rental Assistance Demonstration Program (RAD), known in New York City as Permanent Affordability Commitment Together (PACT), is a federal initiative designed to incentivize the conversion of public housing to **private ownership and management**.

A study last year by Human Rights Watch found that tenants were immediately and aggressively disempowered when their buildings converted from Section 9 public ownership to Section 8 rental subsidies:

*"PACT has negatively impacted the right to housing of low-income residents by leading to a reduction in oversight and crucial protections for tenants' rights, including the loss of a federal monitor overseeing a previous settlement with NYCHA. Inadequate government oversight and avenues for redress may render tenants more vulnerable to other violations of their rights, such as increased evictions leading to a loss of housing or ongoing habitability issues." <sup>16</sup>*

Thus far, 36,000 NYCHA units have undergone PACT conversion, with 24,000 more scheduled for the next five years.<sup>17</sup> Privatization can be tempting to residents faced with the physical disrepair of underfunded public housing, but many tenants may find themselves without eviction protection and with even less recourse for repairs requests once the deal is struck.

RAD is, without question, the **gravest threat** facing public housing in America today, and will further undermine the affordability of our city down the line. But a new compromise between privatization and the status quo has emerged in the last year, and its long-term effects on the public housing ecosystem remain to be seen.



16. Jackson Gandour. "The Tenant Never Wins": Private Takeover of Public Housing Puts Rights at Risk in New York City. (Human Rights Watch, January 27, 2022). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/27/tenant-never-wins/private-takeover-public-housing-puts-rights-risk-new-york-city>

17. Tatyana Turner. "NYCHA Plan to Put Units Under Private Management is More Than Halfway Done—But Skepticism Persists." City Limits, April 4, 2023. <https://citylimits.org/2023/04/04/nycha-plan-to-put-units-under-private-management-is-more-than-halfway-done-but-skepticism-persists/>

# A new investment-driven vehicle for public housing known as the NYCHA Preservation Trust exists at the intersection between public ownership and privatization.

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On June 6, 2022, Kathy Hochul signed into law a bill establishing the Trust. It is a body completely under the control and management of NYCHA, one that technically exists as an independent entity in order to fund repairs by soaking up RAD subsidies and issuing bonds.<sup>18</sup>

The danger of relying on debt financing, particularly debt not backed by any larger governmental body, has attracted the concern of many NYCHA tenant advocates.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the bill, by transferring buildings off of Section 9 ownership, may open the path to liquidation through receivership in the event of default.<sup>20</sup>



Gregory Russ. Source: Minneapolis Public Housing Authority

Originally known as the Blueprint for Change, the Trust was the brainchild of NYCHA chair Gregory Russ, a public housing administrator previously best known for overseeing comprehensive RAD privatizations in Cambridge, Massachusetts and his native Minneapolis<sup>21</sup> (from which he commuted to his New York job regularly by air).<sup>22</sup>

Despite his history, Russ (who resigned seven months after the bill was passed, his task accomplished)<sup>23</sup> and other advocates claim that the Trust is much safer than RAD, that it eliminates Section 9 without the possibility of damaging preexisting tenant protections.

18. Greg B. Smith. "NYCHA Rescue Trust Approved by State Lawmakers." *THE CITY*, June 2, 2022. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2022/6/2/23152132/nycha-preservation-trust-approved>.

19. Kristen Hackett and Glyn Robbins. "No, Our Homes Aren't a Plaything for Speculators." *Jacobin*, June 13, 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/nycha-trust-public-housing-privatization-nonprofits>.

20. See Section 637(6)(G) of the passed bill: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/S9409>

21. Smith, "Meet NYCHA's New Boss."

22. Greg B. Smith. "High-Flying NYCHA Chair Greg Russ to Announce Departure." *THE CITY*, January 25, 2023. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/1/25/23570300/nycha-chair-greg-russ-to-depart>

23. *Ibid.*



# Mayor Adams, NYCHA Establish Public Housing Preservation Trust Board, Appoint Six Members

May 5, 2023

*Board's Formation Marks Another Key Repair Homes Initiative*

NEW YORK – New York City Mayor Eric Adams (NYCHA) Interim CEO Lisa Bova-Hiatt today announced the newly established board of the New York City Public Housing Preservation Trust. Following the publication of final voting preferences, the formation of the board marks another key step in the city's commitment to billions of dollars in federal funding for maintenance across the five boroughs.



The six appointees are:

- Lisa Bova-Hiatt, Board Chair (ex officio); Interim CEO, NYCHA
- Karen Blondel, Resident Advisory Board Nominee; President, Red Hook West Houses Tenant Association
- Baaba Halm, Member At-Large; Vice President and New York Market Leader, Enterprise Community Partners
- Jessica Katz, New York City Chief Housing Officer (ex officio)
- Annika Lescott-Martinez, Chief Financial Officer, NYCHA (ex officio)
- Barbara McFadden, Resident At-Large; President, Nostrand Houses Tenant Association; and Vice Chair, NYCHA Citywide Council of Presidents

Sources: Nyc.gov (press release), Harvard.edu (portrait).

One such advocate is Karen Blondel, now Tenant Association President of Red Hook West Houses. She has recently been appointed to the new Preservation Trust Board, all but guaranteeing that her development is next in line for a vote on privatization.

Much to the chagrin of Section 9 supporters, the three options for such a referendum<sup>24</sup> are PACT, the Trust, or the stagnant status quo. But there is indeed a way of maintaining NYCHA properties without privatization or financialization.



Above: Mayor Adams was a key backer of the Trust. Here he can be seen rallying supporters in May 2022. Credit: Michael Appleton/Mayoral Photography Office



Left: A different rally opposing the Trust took place simultaneously in front of City Hall. Credit: Dashiell Allen/The Village Sun

24. Marquis Jenkins, James Rodriguez and Aixa Torres. "Opinion: NYCHA's 'Public Housing Preservation Trust' Is A Farce of Resident Engagement." City Limits, June 22, 2022. <https://citylimits.org/2022/06/22/opinion-nychas-public-housing-preservation-trust-is-a-farce-of-resident-engagement/>

One option, rarely discussed in policy circles, could involve the state and federal authorities actually attempting to adequately fund NYCHA for the first time in decades.

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Bart Schwartz, the Federal Monitor appointed to improve NYCHA's administration, makes it clear in his most recent Quarterly Report that transformation is impossible with the current budget.

*"The Transformation Plan presents a set of initiatives unconstrained by resources, as if NYCHA were fully funded. News of budget cuts in the last several months will have an impact on NYCHA's ability to fully realize all initiatives."*<sup>25</sup>

*"Unfortunately, budget restraints for FY2023 have resulted in NYCHA's elimination of crucial staff lines that will impact the successful roll-out of Organizational Plan goals... NYCHA simply needs more skilled trades workers."*<sup>26</sup>

The Residents To Preserve Public Housing (RPPH) is an advocacy group for NYCHA tenants connected to the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP), the central body of NYCHA's Resident Association leadership. FOAM has been present at their recent budget deliberations, where they determine their demands for the State Legislature.

Last year RPPH requested an increase to the NYCHA Operations Department budget by \$2.8 billion and the Capital Projects Department budget by \$3.4 billion. This year's state budget will increase capital funding by roughly 4% of that.<sup>27</sup> NYCHA's capital repairs backlog stands at around \$40 billion, according to the Community Service Society.<sup>28</sup>

25. Office of the NYCHA Federal Monitor Bart M. Schwartz, 13th Quarterly Report, March 8, 2023, 1, <https://nychamonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Thirteenth-Monitor-Quarterly-Report-3.8.2312401.pdf>.

26. Ibid. 6.

27. New York City Council, *Report to the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Public Housing on the Fiscal 2024 Executive Plan and the Fiscal 2024 Executive Capital Commitment Plan for the New York City Housing Authority*, May 19, 2023, 6. <https://council.nyc.gov/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2023/05/NYCHA.pdf>.

28. David R. Jones. "NYCHA Resident Input Is Critical Piece to Fixing Agency's Woes." February 2, 2023 <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/nycha-resident-input-is-critical-piece-to-fixing-agencys-woes>.

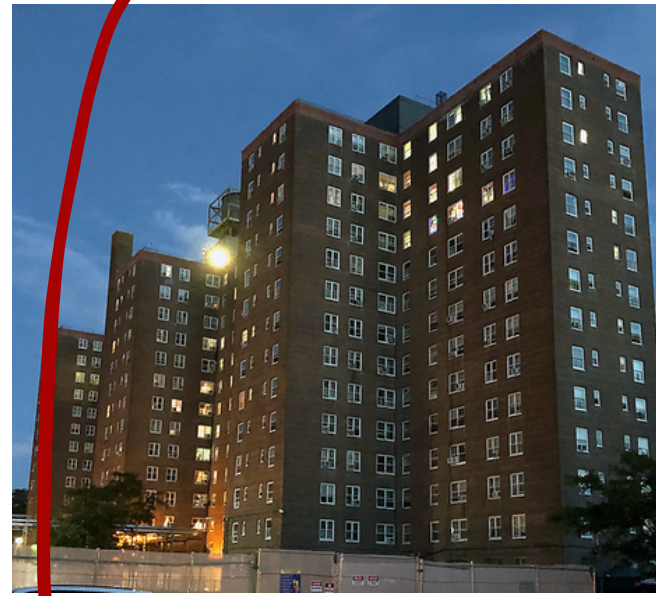
The state government is not totally averse to increasing NYCHA spending: it has recently allocated \$391 million to cover NYCHA tenants who filed for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP).

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NYCHA tenants were deprioritized for ERAP relief because they had other avenues to adjust their rents in response to loss of income. The surge in NYCHA ERAP applications led to widespread rent nonpayment, further deepening NYCHA's budgetary crisis. Not all tenants were susceptible to the temptation of ERAP, though, even if they were wronged by the NYCHA administration. Nilsa Vargas remarks:

*"I don't think that you should stop paying the rent because they're not repairing your apartment. I think you should be able to pay for your apartment because, sooner or later, they're gonna get to you. [Why are] you holding rent when you gonna have to pay it anyway, if you want to continue living here? I think that you should pay it. I don't think that you should stop."*

The New York State Legislature might take inspiration from her fiscal responsibility to properly pay the NYCHA bills they've been ducking for generations.



Source: Nyl.com

29. Tatyana Turner. "NYCHA Expected to Get 'Significant Majority' of State Budget Rent Relief Funds." *City Limits*, May 17, 2023. <https://citylimits.org/2023/05/17/nycha-expected-to-get-significant-majority-of-state-budget-rent-relief-funds/>

30. Iziah Thompson. "Forgotten: Rent Arrears in New York Public Housing Over the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Community Service Society*, March 2023. [https://smhttp-ssl-58547.nexcesscdn.net/nycss/images/uploads/pubs/NYCHA\\_Arrears\\_V4.pdf](https://smhttp-ssl-58547.nexcesscdn.net/nycss/images/uploads/pubs/NYCHA_Arrears_V4.pdf)

Meanwhile, under the guidance of Federal Monitor Bart Schwartz, NYCHA is attempting to revitalize its normally sluggish administration.

Schwartz's plan, called the Neighborhood Model, would decentralize NYCHA decisionmaking, letting local administrative regions respond more promptly and flexibly to area-specific issues:

*"The Neighborhood Model is a three-year plan to redeploy resources and move additional decision-making authority from the central office to the agency's boroughs, neighborhoods and 290 developments. The Model sets new standards for the staff at each development, neighborhood, and borough, while allowing for discretion in managing each site to the specific needs of its residents and physical environment."*<sup>31</sup>

*"An expectation of the Neighborhood Model is to set centralized standards for performance while delegating day-to-day decision-making responsibilities to site-based staff."*<sup>32</sup>

All to the good. There's only one issue: as mentioned before, NYCHA does not have the funding to properly implement this model.

Moreover, while administering at the neighborhood level would resolve many operational coordination issues, particularly around materials procurement (the Borough Monitors on the Neighborhood Model transition team are still struggling with this),<sup>33</sup> there is nothing to suggest that resident engagement would be strengthened to the point where tenants can exercise executive control over destructive capital projects like in Red Hook.

31. Office of the NYCHA Federal Monitor Bart M. Schwartz, *NYCHA Transformation: Phase 1 Implementation Plan*, February 2022, 23, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Transformation-Implementation-Plan-Phase-1-Final.pdf>

32. Office of the NYCHA Federal Monitor Bart M. Schwartz, *NYCHA Transformation: Phase 2 Implementation Plan*, February 2023, 6, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Transformation-Implementation-Plan-Phase-2-Final.pdf>

33. Federal Monitor, *13th Quarterly Report*, 6.

Crucial to resolving the issues of negligence discussed in previous sections of this report is the possibility of tenant self-governance.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development allows local housing authorities to transfer managerial responsibility for their properties to Resident Management Corporations (RMCs) formed by the buildings' tenant associations and ratified by resident referendums.

Anti-privatization groups like RPPH and the Committee for Independent Community Action (CICA) advocate for RMCs as a way to decouple from the unresponsive NYCHA bureaucracy without threatening public ownership of their buildings.

**NYCHA has no incentive to authorize RMCs:** they offload control of building management without offsetting the burdens of ownership. The Authority would still bear ultimate responsibility for funding and maintenance. RAD-PACT, by contrast, takes the buildings off NYCHA's strained balance books.

Since privatization is the most appealing option from the government's perspective, **it will be an uphill battle for residents to gain control of the buildings they inhabit.**

But in the system RPPH and CICA envision, with NYCHA management devolved to local tenant administrators and central authority in the hands of citywide tenant association leadership groups like CCOP, residents will have the ability to take control of their own living conditions for the first time.

**And projects that result in the callous and unrelenting destruction of a development's local environment will never be authorized again.**

34. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Public Housing Resident Organizing and Participation Toolkit Guide 8: Resident Management Corporations. <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/PHA-Resident-Management-Corporations.pdf>

# CONCLUSION



Here is what resident engagement looks like right now: Red Hook Houses tenants can offer their input on the spending of paltry sums, less than a minimum wage worker's annual earnings. Meanwhile, the sign above advertises a construction company paid over ten thousand times that amount to ruin their neighborhood.

To call the existing administration a failure is an insult to all failures who at least attempted to put in effort, to call it a crime an insult to all criminals who at least intended to commit crimes. No one coming from any perspective is denying it: NYCHA must change. With proper funding and resident management, though, we might produce a change for the better.

These reforms may be possible sometime in the future. For now, to remind yourself of their urgent necessity, consider taking part in FOAM's next survey or petitioning drive. Wander the devastated grounds, enter a dilapidated building, knock on some doors, ask what's wrong. You will see six thousand souls trapped in the maw of a rogue government agency pathologically obsessed with the twin goals of destroying itself while filling as many private coffers as possible.

And yet, you will also see people continuing to live, even living well, despite the surrounding environs. The denizens of Red Hook Houses are **so much more resilient** than NYCHA ever gave them credit for. There, in what we might call the shame of the cities, live the pride of the human race.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Residents to Preserve Public Housing

Committee for Independent Community Action

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*One day, justice will come for us all.*

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