

# Chapter 8: Jackson Heights, New York

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Some communities sustain ethnic diversity by design. Others have it thrust upon them. Over the past one-quarter century, Jackson Heights, a middle-class community in northern Queens, New York, has become one of the Nation's most ethnically mixed neighborhoods. Little in the area's earlier history prepared it to play this role, and few of its long-term residents ever consciously chose to live in a diverse community. Yet despite the massive in-migration of Latinos and Asians, Jackson Heights has not experienced the rounds of panic selling and disinvestment that so commonly accompany racial transition. Today White, Latino, and Asian, as well as middle- and working-class residents, live side by side, not always in harmony, but united in a commitment to make their neighborhood work.

The ethnic variety that one can see, hear, smell, and taste on the streets of Jackson Heights is truly stunning. At 74th Street, north of Roosevelt Avenue, lies Little India, where visitors find some of the finest subcontinental cuisine in all of New York City. Along 37th Avenue, trattorias share walls with cantinas. Elsewhere, Colombian bodegas share a dumpster with pizza and doughnut shops. At times even ethnic foods, the form of multiculturalism New Yorkers embrace most enthusiastically, seem to test the limits of all but the most cosmopolitan palates. Those who complain about the preponderance of non-English language signage might well be thankful not to be able to understand the message *Cuy Ahora!*—Roast Guinea Pig Today!—in the window of an Ecuadorian restaurant. Yet for the most part, Koreans and Chinese, Peruvians and Hondurans, Dominicans and Jews all have developed pieces of Jackson Heights as their own and fused them together to form a new and dynamic whole.

Jackson Heights is a middle-class community of approximately 85,000 people in northern Queens. Bounded by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway on the west, the Grand Central Expressway on the north, Junction Boulevard on the east, and Roosevelt Avenue on the south, Jackson Heights has become, over the past 25 years, home to immigrants from literally dozens of Asian and Latin American nations. More than one-half of its population is now foreign born. At the same time, the community has retained a significant

portion of its older, middle- and working-class White population. It is also home to a longstanding, substantial gay community. Unlike many neighborhoods experiencing racial and ethnic change, Jackson Heights' overall population has increased since the 1960s, resulting in rising demand that has stabilized and, in some cases, increased commercial and residential property values.

These changes have come to Jackson Heights with remarkable speed. In 1960 the community was nearly 98.5 percent White. As late as 1970, when Whites constituted 87.4 percent of the population, Jackson Heights was still known as a bastion of native-born, middle- and working-class residents—a place of suburban sensibilities despite urban densities. By 1990 Jackson Heights was a multiethnic community with no clear majority: 39.8 percent White, 41.3 percent Hispanic, and 16 percent Asian and other. (Many residents believe that the Asian share of the population has increased since that time.) The census category of Hispanic does not begin to capture the population's diversity. Jackson Heights is home to substantial numbers of Colombians (the largest and most visible single group), Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Argentines, Mexicans, and Salvadorans. In contrast, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans (New York City's largest Latino populations) are present in smaller numbers.

The Asian population includes a significant number of Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. A Little India shopping area has developed along 74th Street, drawing south Asian customers from throughout the metropolitan area to sari shops and jewelry stores. There is also a growing east Asian population, probably an overflow from New York's second Chinatown, Flushing, to the east.

Most of Jackson Heights' local community groups and activists consider the neighborhood's diversity to be an amenity. They often express the idea that diversity is a positive value, even if their actions do not always seem to bear this out. However, it is noteworthy that the community's African-American population remains very low (2.1 percent in 1990, probably somewhat higher today)—a remarkable fact given that Jackson Heights borders on two smaller neighborhoods (Corona and East Elmhurst) with longstanding African-American populations. To a considerable degree, the commonly accepted eastern border of Jackson Heights has been defined by the traditional boundary of Black settlement.<sup>1</sup>

## From Development to Community: The Creation of Jackson Heights

Although first developed as a planned community, Jackson Heights is an example of unplanned, unlikely, and unintended diversity. Indeed, the early vision of the community's developers could hardly have been further from the multiethnic urban neighborhood that it has become.

Like much of Queens County, Jackson Heights remained rural until the late 19th century. Despite its proximity to the city of New York (into which it was incorporated in the 1890s), Queens continued to develop as a network of autonomous townships and hamlets that were surrounded by open land and industrial areas long after Manhattan and Brooklyn were largely urbanized. Queens became a viable bedroom community only after expansion of transportation infrastructure made commuting to Manhattan practical in the early 20th century.

Present day Jackson Heights was created by a group of real estate speculators who, in 1908, started to buy open land in the western part of the former township of Elmhurst to

capitalize on the opening of the Queens Borough Bridge the following year. The most significant of these real estate investors, Edward MacDougall, purchased a 325-acre parcel of undeveloped land that, in 1909, he dubbed *Jackson Heights*. Although sections of the area were leased or sold to different developers, MacDougall's Queensboro Corporation maintained considerable control over the creation of what he envisioned as a distinct and unified community inspired, in part, by the low-density, garden city model of British planner Ebenezer Howard.

The garden city model emphasized light, space, and greenery. Jackson Heights apartment complexes, often built in imitation Tudor or faux-Georgian architectural styles, featured interior gardens that sometimes stretched from sidewalk to sidewalk. Buildings covered only 30 to 50 percent of a block, in contrast to the more than 70 percent typical of residential blocks in Manhattan. Public streets were lined with trees and, on some blocks, one- and two-family homes alternated with modern apartment buildings. Leading architects were commissioned to design the larger buildings, many of which were built around common courtyards. With the trip to Manhattan reduced to 20 minutes by the opening of the elevated train in 1917, Jackson Heights was touted as a bucolic, yet convenient, alternative for families looking to escape claustrophobic Manhattan. Despite the community's six- and eight-story apartment buildings and its proximity to Manhattan, every effort was made to maintain a suburban feel, including the construction of a nine-hole golf course in 1919.

In contrast to the social inclusiveness of Howard's utopian proposals, Jackson Heights was envisioned as an exclusive suburb for a native, White, middle-class fleeing a city that was not only crowded, but increasingly culturally diverse.<sup>2</sup> Initially advertised as a "restricted residential community," Jackson Heights' early developers specifically barred both Jews and Blacks, by custom and restrictive covenants.

In 1919 the Queensboro Corporation first introduced a cooperative ownership plan in five of Jackson Heights' six initial apartment complexes. Families who had previously rented were offered the opportunity to buy their apartments for \$500 down and mortgage payments of about \$52 a month. Tenants owned their apartments and, unlike a typical condominium arrangement, they actually became shareholders in the complex, although Queensboro initially stayed on as the managing agent. Over the years, cooperatives or "co-ops" (as the apartments came to be known) would continue to make up a significant portion of Jackson Heights' housing stock, enabling residents to enjoy the financial advantages of homeownership while living in professionally managed apartment buildings.

Jackson Heights grew rapidly through the boom years of the 1920s. From 1923–30 new housing quickly covered the remaining open areas. Fifteen more apartment complexes were built, and private homes were developed to fill in the gaps between them in an area covering 33 square blocks. By 1930 Jackson Heights was home to 44,500 people compared with only 3,800 people living there two decades earlier. Racially homogeneous, solidly middle-class, and architecturally unified, Jackson Heights developed a strong sense of community identity by the mid-20th century.

Among the new arrivals was a colony of vaudevillians, many of whom were gay. These men and women worked in the theater district around Manhattan's Times Square, the final stop on the west end of the elevated line. They found in Jackson Heights a convenient and pleasant alternative to the tiny apartments and rooming houses of midtown Manhattan. Slowly, with little public notice, Jackson Heights developed into a gay haven—a remarkable contrast to the intolerance toward ethnic and racial minorities in the area.

Development continued over the next two decades, although not generally with the same aesthetic finesse and adherence to MacDougall's suburban vision. In 1950 developers leveled the golf course and local tennis courts to erect more residential property, and by 1954 local development had largely come to a close. Nonetheless, the legacy of MacDougall's racial policies endured. While Jews began to move into the area after restrictive covenants were ruled illegal in the late 1940s, Blacks continued to be excluded from the area until Congress passed the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Discrimination against Blacks may have continued *sub rosa* through the 1980s. This is particularly likely in the co-ops, where antidiscrimination statutes are notoriously difficult to enforce.

MacDougall's legacy remains important in another sense: The neighborhood he created continues to have a strong and often architecturally defined sense of community. Jackson Heights was born of a commercial venture. It corresponds to no political jurisdiction for elected office at the city, State, or Federal level. Even its local community board—the decentralized planning units New York introduced in 1973 to make government more in touch with neighborhood concerns—is shared with neighboring Corona and East Elmhurst.<sup>3</sup> Yet Jackson Heights has developed a clear sense of itself. The visual distinctiveness of its early development has been crucial to maintaining that identity. Today Jackson Heights is a community that has (for the most part) clearly defined boundaries and a sense of history. To be sure, over the years developers have strayed from MacDougall's original stately notions. In many courtyards where manicured gardens once stood, one now sees swingsets and sandboxes cemented in low-maintenance asphalt. On some blocks basements and even garages have been converted into illegal apartments crowded with new immigrants. Yet for all of these changes, Jackson Heights maintains a sense of itself as a distinct entity that, at times, transcends ethnic and class boundaries.

Community groups, preservation enthusiasts, and homeowners' organizations all reinforce this sense of distinctiveness, at times asserted in unexpected ways. Recently, White Jackson Heights parents fought bitterly against having their children bused out of overcrowded, predominantly Latino schools in Jackson Heights and to predominantly White schools in nearby Astoria. Their argument was that their children should not be deprived of the unique, if loosely defined, experience of growing up as members of the Jackson Heights community. This sense of community is often associated with the distinct look that MacDougall's development scheme has imprinted on the local landscape. This may, in part, explain why aesthetic issues have been so central in recent community struggles.<sup>4</sup>

## An Improbable Diversity: A Community in Transition

Jackson Heights' appeal to young, middle-class families diminished with the postwar building boom in the Long Island suburbs, which had been made accessible by Robert Moses's ribbon of highways. By the late 1960s, many local residents feared that Jackson Heights was destined for the cycle of disinvestment and decay apparent in so many urban neighborhoods. This did not occur, due to two very different, yet simultaneous, trends: the post-1965 reopening of mass immigration into New York City and the urban renovation and historic preservation movements spearheaded by middle-class Whites during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 paved the way for a massive influx of new immigrants to the United States from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. New York City received more of these immigrants than any other city, and the New York metropolitan area was second only to the Los Angeles metropolitan area as an immigration center.

While some new arrivals settled in traditional immigrant and minority enclaves such as Manhattan's Chinatown, El Barrio, and the Lower East Side, many—particularly those who were relatively affluent—moved to the less dense neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens.

In Jackson Heights, a large concentration of South American immigrants began to emerge in the 1970s. Roosevelt Avenue, the traditional boundary between the older White population of Jackson Heights and the Asian and Latino populations of Elmhurst, soon became the primary commercial strip for the city's growing Colombian, Peruvian, and Ecuadorian communities. As exhibit 1 shows, the local Hispanic (mostly South American) population grew from only 6.1 percent in 1970 to 30.7 percent in 1980 and 41.3 percent in 1990. Also during the 1980s a smaller influx of Asians began. Although Jackson Heights has no residential Asian enclaves, a three-block section of 74th Street became a center of south Asian business activity and soon acquired the name Little India (Khandewal, 1994).

## Exhibit 1

Population Figures and Race in Jackson Heights, 1960–90

	1960		1970		1980		1990	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	#	No.	%
Total	81,038		83,083		81,156		84,979	
White	79,786	98.5	72,630	87.4	47,615	57.8	33,844	39.8
Black	233	0.2	573	0.7	1,338	1.6	1,792	2.1
Hispanic*	696	0.8	5,050	6.1	25,323	30.7	35,120	41.3
Other**	323	0.4	4,830	5.8	–	–	–	–
Asian/ Other**	0	0	0	0	6,880	8.4	13,579	16.0

\*For 1960 and 1970, Hispanic means people of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent.

\*\*For 1960 and 1970, Other represents a residual category of all non-White, non-Black, and non-Hispanic cases, and includes those who declined to state their ethnicity.

Jackson Heights' diversity sometimes led to adversity. As Roosevelt Avenue became the commercial hub of New York's South American community, some White Jackson Heights residents sought to cede the street to the adjacent neighborhoods, despite the fact that the avenue is only a few short blocks from some of Jackson Heights' most distinctive co-op complexes. Fieldwork on Roosevelt Avenue revealed that many Whites insisted that Jackson Heights ended on the north side of Roosevelt, whereas Blacks and Latinos considered the border to be less clear. In 1992, when crusading journalist Manuel de Dios Unanue was gunned down in a Roosevelt Avenue restaurant on the orders of a Colombian drug cartel, several local residents protested that the *New York Times* had misidentified Jackson Heights as the site of the killing. Angry letters to the editor explained that the restaurant where de Dios was killed was on the south side of the street, therefore not in Jackson Heights.

The de Dios killing focused attention on a more serious problem than neighborhood boundaries. By the mid-1970s, with its large concentration of South American immigrants, northern Queens had become the U.S. base of operations for several South American organized crime groups, some affiliated with the growing Colombian drug trade. To the alarm of many residents, quiet, tree-lined Jackson Heights began to draw national media attention, much of it lurid and sensationalist. A 1978 *New York* magazine story, "Gunfights in the Cocaine Corral," set the tone:

Over the past three years, in this nice, quiet neighborhood, 27 people have been killed and dozens have been injured.... The violence spreads to surround neighborhoods as cops and prosecutors fight a losing battle. Double and triple homicides go unsolved. The biggest unsolved mass murder in New York in recent years—the LaGuardia Airport bombing that killed 11 and injured 75—seems to have a Jackson Heights connection. (Schorr, 1978.)

While there can be little doubt that drug dealers are present in the area, and that it is a center of high-level drug wholesaling, this criminal activity actually has little impact on the daily lives of most residents. The media and some local residents often point to the bustling business in beepers, fax machines, and international money transfers along Roosevelt Avenue as evidence of the shadowy presence of the Colombian cartels. It is certainly true that some local businesses, including travel agencies and check-cashing services, profit indirectly from the drug trade by providing convenient channels for money transfers from Jackson Heights to Colombia. Yet these businesses also provide vital services for tens of thousands of working- and middle-class immigrants trying to make a new life and an honest living in the United States while maintaining their ties back home.

Similarly, the presence of Latin American-owned bars and clubs along the avenue, some with iron gates and tinted windows, is seen by many as evidence of nefarious activities. A few of these are indeed headquarters for gangsters, although in most cases the crowds of young men gathered there each weekend are involved in nothing more sinister than watching soccer matches from home on satellite television. The large number of single men among the immigrants has caused another service industry to emerge. Numerous brothels now quietly ply their trade on the floors above Roosevelt Avenue storefronts. In August 1996 several were shut down after a number of customers were arrested in a police sting operation in which, after raiding the houses, undercover policewomen replaced the prostitutes.

Despite its reputation as a tough and seedy area, a budding South American culture is growing in the corridor along Roosevelt Avenue, which has become known as Little Colombia. On a sunny Saturday the street is packed. Families shopping for bargain clothes and Latin American foods are more in evidence than those looking for more sinister pleasures. Established, middle-class South Americans and poor, recent immigrants alike frequent Little Colombia's restaurants and retailers where, in the words of the Colombian-American writer Jaime Manrique, they can "refuel on the familiar" (Dao, 1992).

Little India has also been the site of controversy. Indians are actually a minority among residents of the street. This is not surprising, as south Asians are the least residentially concentrated of all recent immigrants in the New York metropolitan area. South Asian retail businesses, however, are highly concentrated. Since the mid-1980s, dozens of Indian businesses have sprung up along 74th Street in Jackson Heights: sari shops; Indian jewelry stores; restaurants; and stores selling imported books, magazines, and videotapes. On the weekend the street draws south Asian customers from throughout the city and suburbs.

This upsurge in business on a formerly sleepy commercial strip has caused considerable tension between new merchants and long-term White and Latino residents over parking problems, sanitation issues, and rising commercial rents. These problems, it should be noted, are not the result of disinvestment and commercial decline that many had feared a decade earlier. Rather they are the result of businesses being too successful and, in some cases, causing the displacement of long-established, familiar stores and restaurants in favor of more profitable ones. Many local residents see these changes negatively. They perceive little direct benefit from the thriving businesses or even from the tax dollars they generate. As most Indian shoppers and store owners are not local residents, they are easily cast as outsiders or even invaders. Longtime residents complain about seeing their familiar community turn foreign before their very eyes. Although property values are going up, some residents speak of a declining quality of life. For their part, the merchants complain that local youth harass their customers.

As in Roosevelt Avenue's Little Colombia, merchants, customers, and residents of 74th Street and the surrounding blocks have yet to achieve a consensus over the proper use of public space. However, the fact that most users of Little India do not live in the area further complicates matters. It means that local political and civic institutions do not usually provide an opportunity for the interaction out of which mutual understandings might emerge. Civic leaders and Indian business owners have, however, made attempts to bridge the gap by arranging, among other things, tours in which longtime residents can learn about Indian hand-painting, jewelry making, and other exotic cultural practices that take place a few blocks from their doors.

By 1990 Jackson Heights was 54 percent foreign born. Yet the influx of new immigrants has not radically changed local class composition. The 1990 census reported that Jackson Heights households had a median income of \$32,735, slightly above average for New York City. Thirty-three percent of residents owned their own homes, high for New York City (although low for Queens). Homeownership has actually risen slightly since 1980. Latinos are, however, far less likely to own homes. As exhibit 2 indicates, the ratio of White renters to homeowners is 1.6:1; for Blacks it is 1.7:1; for Asians, 1.5:1; and for Latinos it is 3.7:1. Reality may be even more skewed than the official statistics imply. Anecdotal evidence suggests large numbers of Latinos, not counted by the census, rent in illegally converted one- and two-family houses.

The demographics of the gay community also changed, as did its visibility, following the 1992 gay-bashing murder of a local man named Julio Rivera in a neighborhood park. The

## Exhibit 2

Renter and Owner Households by Race, 1990

Race	Number of Renters	% of Renters	Number of Owners	% of Owners	Renter/Owner Ratio
White	10,702	47.5	6,801	61.3	1.6:1
Black	446	2.0	261	2.4	1.7:1
Hispanic	8,883	39.5	2,390	21.5	3.7:1
Asian*	2,481	11.0	1,641	14.8	1.5:1

\*Asian includes residents of Asian, Indian, and other descent.

murder of the 29-year-old Rivera galvanized gay residents into a burgeoning political force, and in 1994 local activist Ed Sedarbaum founded the Queens Gays and Lesbians United (“Protest After Death in Queens,” 1994). As Sedarbaum recalls, “We felt fear, the kind of fear any community fears when one of its members is attacked. We also felt abandoned by the police department, who not only refused to classify the case as a bias attack, but lied and classified it as drug related.”

Like the rest of Jackson Heights, the gay population has become increasingly diverse. In 1994 some 40 percent of the Jackson Heights Lesbian and Gay Pride Day committee was Hispanic. The committee’s annual summer parade through Jackson Heights now attracts about 20,000 participants. This community is also aging and Sedarbaum recently received a grant to spearhead development of a gay senior citizens center in the neighborhood.

## Making Community Happen: Activism in Jackson Heights

Despite the influx of Asians and Latinos into a once overwhelmingly White area, Jackson Heights never experienced the exodus of Whites that so often accompanies such changes (Massey and Denton, 1993). Even when non-Whites became the majority, Jackson Heights did not “tip.” Any tendency toward panic selling was stemmed by the relative stability of co-op owners (or, perhaps, their inability to sell), active community organizations, preservation groups, the material and psychological investment of residents in the community, and a tight New York real estate market that made it difficult to find equivalent housing elsewhere.

Civic organizations and political groups have played a crucial role in allowing this transition to occur smoothly. In many cases these groups managed to mobilize new residents and longstanding populations against the negative aspects of recent changes to the area, such as drug dealing and prostitution. At the same time they helped to define *diversity* as a positive amenity for the community. Today local leaders almost universally point to Jackson Heights’ diversity as one of the community’s finest features and one of its proudest achievements. Yet, as shown below, there is often a thin line between preservation of a community’s intrinsic values and intolerance toward those who are different.

Jackson Heights is home to a great variety of civic groups, political clubs, and active religious and ethnic organizations. The Jackson Heights Beautification Group represents some residents’ effort to maintain uniform building standards in the community’s recently designated historic district. Merchant groups formed in the commercial hubs of 74th Street and 37th Avenue. The Jackson Heights Community Development Corporation (JHCDC) lobbies for the interests of numerous underrepresented groups in the community. Block associations deal with the day-to-day concerns of clean streets and public safety. The local community school board and parent-teacher associations struggle with overcrowding in the public schools while political clubhouse members still work to get out the vote. Despite the official commitment of all of these groups to a policy of inclusiveness, Whites continue to dominate local political activity and civic life to a degree far out of proportion to their declining numbers.

There are several reasons for this dominance. Although a minority in the neighborhood, Whites continue to form a narrow majority of the voting-age citizens and the large majority of the homeowners. In some cases their declining numbers have actually strengthened the hold that small groups of Whites have on political offices and institutions. The large numbers of noncitizen Latinos have created “rotten boroughs,” allowing a relatively small number of Whites to monopolize public offices. The local



Democratic political machine has made few efforts to reach out to new immigrants or to incorporate their organizations into the political process (Jones-Correa, 1998).

The immigrants have not always been anxious to be incorporated. Jackson Heights is home to the headquarters of many ethnic and nationality-based civic organizations serving New York's Colombian, Ecuadoran, Peruvian, Korean, Dominican, Mexican, and, surprisingly, Haitian communities.<sup>5</sup> Ecuadoran immigrants hold an annual parade through the neighborhood, and Colombians and Peruvians have their annual fetes in a nearby park. South American political candidates frequently visit the area to raise money and seek support from their immigrant constituents, who, in some cases, still vote back home using absentee ballots. Yet these organizations are often locked into narrowly defined ethnic and national concerns. Their leaders still think of themselves as Ecuadorans or Peruvians and have a great deal of difficulty working together as Hispanics or immigrants, much less joining with Indians, Jews, gays, or old-time Yankees (Jones-Correa, 1998).

One organization that tries to bridge these gaps is JHCDC. Founded in 1979, JHCDC is a nonprofit organization serving Jackson Heights, Corona, and East Elmhurst as a housing rights advocate, strategist on economic development, and coordinator of youth outreach programs. In the early 1980s, JHCDC battled on behalf of low-income renters against the conversion of more rental units into co-ops. Eric Jacobs, JHCDC executive director, recalls, "There was enormous momentum for conversion, and we were very unsuccessful in stopping it. You really had to have a savvy renter's group." When asked who benefited most from the conversions, Jacobs smiles and says, "The banks; oh, they loved it. It created a whole new loaner market." A few years later, JHCDC began a Fair Housing Eviction Program to prevent exploitation of low-income renters. Although JHCDC outreach focuses primarily on Jackson Heights, its efforts extend across most of Queens.

JHCDC's efforts highlight the neighborhood's ethnic diversity. In 1994 the group initiated a Harmony Day program that brings together "performers and people from throughout the neighborhood to celebrate cultures and spirit." Like many people in the Jackson Heights civic world, JHCDC staff do their best to promote neighborhood diversity as a positive value while discouraging White out-migration. Jacobs notes, "The change in ethnicity [here] is in the size of the pie. For the most part, Whites have stayed." Dave Genaway, the group's economic development manager, had these comments about a mural sponsored by JHCDC in November 1995: "I hope that it will stress unity, diversity, community, and the environment." ("Protests After Death in Queens," 1995.)

The other leader best known for promoting diversity in Jackson Heights is Reverend Austin Armitstead. As pastor of the Community United Methodist Church from 1974 to 1995, Armitstead helped ease Jackson Heights' cultural transition by promoting inclusive practices and preaching the value of diversity at every opportunity. Prior to arriving in Jackson Heights, he had been active in social and philanthropic causes, had worked to create New York City's present community board structure, and had fought for the preservation of the public hospitals. After taking up his position at Community United, Armitstead restructured the church into four separate ministries: Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and English language. He also opened the church's facilities to other community groups to create a "community center and hub of civic life." Today more than 90 groups hold meetings at the church.

Armitstead's legacy lives on today under the guidance of Dr. Ronald Tompkins. Tompkins sees his role as "making some cross-cultural connections" among his flock. The church still hosts services in four different languages every Sunday. On a recent

Sunday, before the English service, one could see Hispanic and Chinese children running errands for English-speaking church associates. A group of four Asian women, one Indian woman, and one White man sat around a table, heads bowed and hands held, as they made their offerings to a common God. Yet by and large, the congregations remain separate, sharing the church's space and facilities amicably, but only rarely coming together for common activities. Like ethnic groups in the neighborhood, the congregations lead essentially parallel lives, coming together occasionally at moments of common interest, but remaining fundamentally distinct.

Yet when Jackson Heights residents feel threatened by outside forces—especially what they perceive as an unresponsive government bureaucracy—a strong sense of neighborhood solidarity emerges. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the struggle to maintain the local public schools.

Jackson Heights' schools are among the city's most overcrowded, and many seem to be nearly bursting at the seams. The new immigrants brought large families into what had been an aging neighborhood. By 1996 the schools of Community School Board 30 (which has jurisdiction over Jackson Heights and surrounding areas) were running at nearly 130 percent of capacity on average, with several at more than 150 percent. Classes are held in hallways, former offices, and temporary facilities of every sort, and the problem is expected to worsen in the coming years.

In January 1996 Community School Board 30 attempted to relieve crowding at a Jackson Heights middle school by enacting a rezoning plan that would send children to schools in other parts of the district. Surprisingly, scores of parents and community leaders packed school board meetings to express their opposition to the plan. Many argued that local schools are an integral part of the community and that rezoning would make the area less attractive to potential residents. As Gene Stewart, president of the parent-teacher association at Intermediate School (IS) 145, asked: "Why would someone want to purchase a home or co-op in Jackson Heights if their children could not attend neighborhood schools?" The board, faced with health and safety issues stemming from crowding, eventually approved the plan over these objections. However, it is important to note the strength of the opposition and the fact that most plan opponents were White parents resisting an effort to bus their children into whiter schools. IS 145 was 66.2 percent Hispanic and only 8.6 percent White. The two schools to which students were reassigned, IS 10 and Junior High School 141, were 31.3 percent and 46.3 percent White, respectively.

Moreover, in general, White parents did not openly blame burgeoning enrollment on the influx of immigrants. Instead, parent leaders argued that the best way to relieve crowding at IS 145 would be for the Board of Education to build a new school in the area. As Stewart observed: "The problem with rezoning is that it has long-term effects. Zoning lines stay a long time and the community could be destroyed. It makes more sense to build a new school here than to push students out to other neighborhoods." One activist, a retired architect and vice president of the Jackson Heights Neighborhood Association, compiled a list of five potential school sites (on 23rd Avenue near LaGuardia Airport), and sent his suggestions to the central Board of Education, arguing that all the locations were vacant and accessible by public transportation.

Others in the neighborhood perceived the rezoning plan as an attempt by external forces to dictate local policy. As Thomas Raffaele, chairman of the local community planning board, described the conflict:

At a period when busing is being rejected across the country, I don't think this is the right time to make young children in Jackson Heights travel to distant schools.... The overcrowding problem has existed in this area for a long time and there's no indication that the number of students will decrease anytime soon.

In a letter to the *New York Times*, one parent complained that his children, who had chosen to attend a school for the academically gifted in Astoria, no longer felt a commitment to their neighborhood:

There they learn nothing about our historic district, about our magnificent diversity, or about the great things residents are doing to improve the neighborhood. Their friends and allegiances are Astorian. They now hate Jackson Heights, their mantra is: "Dad, when are we going to move to Astoria?" (Lowenhaupt, 1996.)

## Whose History? The Jackson Heights Landmark District

If the politics of school rezoning presents a case of community identity overcoming ethnic division, the politics of historic preservation, at times, have mixed the laudable goal of preserving Jackson Heights' architectural heritage with an undercurrent of intolerance and ethnocentrism. The fact that historic preservation has been a source of sustained controversy also indicates how central aesthetic issues have been to the way in which the community is constructed in Jackson Heights.

In October 1993 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated a section of Jackson Heights as a historic district, a move designed to protect the area's buildings from development or renovations that might change their original character. The district includes more than 200 buildings and private homes clustered between Roosevelt and 34th Avenues, from 76th to 88th Streets. Most of these structures were built by the Queensboro Corporation between 1910 and the late 1940s.

The commission's unanimous vote—and its subsequent ratification by the city council—was the culmination of a long campaign by a group of residents to win landmark status for the neighborhood. The campaign began in 1980 when Community Board 3 asked the commission to consider landmarking a large portion of Jackson Heights. The campaign waned due to bureaucratic hurdles and the prodevelopment politics that dominated Queens County at the time. Landmark districts impose severe restrictions on property owners. The exteriors of landmarked buildings cannot be altered without the commission's approval, and landlords must obtain permits from the commission even for minor work. Major alterations, like adding a porch, removing a stoop, or building a garage, require a commission hearing. Although landmarking has been a popular way to gentrify parts of Brooklyn and Manhattan (Kasinitz, 1988), this historic preservation program was out of step with the progrowth agenda touted by the Queens Democratic machine and its leader, the late borough president Donald Manes. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Manes consistently used his seat on the now-defunct Board of Estimate to block or modify landmark designations in Queens.

As a result, Jackson Heights residents found it difficult to win political support for their landmarking effort. By the late 1980s, however, the tide began to shift. Manes, implicated in a corruption scandal, committed suicide in 1985. Four years later his successor, Claire Shulman, lost most of her influence over the landmarking process when changes in the city charter eliminated the Board of Estimate and granted the city council power to ratify landmark designations. As a result, the political jockeying shifted to council members and Jackson Heights preservationists began to focus their lobbying efforts on them (Bazzi, 1995).

Two events in the late 1980s aroused fears of impending development and galvanized neighborhood residents around the historic district proposal. First, a series of private homes were demolished and replaced with a new row of attached houses. Then a block of two-story neo-Tudor commercial storefronts burned down and has since been replaced by a nine-story office tower (Landmarks Preservation Commission of New York City, 1993).

The effort gained momentum when the Jackson Heights Beautification Group (JHBG) launched a campaign to promote the benefits of landmark designation. The group sponsored lectures, organized walking tours, and published a neighborhood history written by one of its board members, Daniel Karatzas. JHBG members also volunteered to take photographs and research the history of individual buildings for the commission's designation report.

Founded in 1988, JHBG is concerned with neighborhood beautification issues. In its early days, the group organized street cleanups, a graffiti removal program, and walking tours of the neighborhood. (For a discussion of walking tours as a prorenovation strategy, see Kasinitz, 1988.) Within a year, the group had begun to address wider issues, such as crime, public safety, and quality-of-life complaints, and then sought to pressure local police officials to clean up Roosevelt Avenue. In the early 1990s, JHBG drew hundreds of residents to a series of town meetings with politicians, police brass, and the district attorney's office. Although the group does not officially endorse candidates for public office, in 1992 its founder ran (unsuccessfully) for city council in the Democratic primary at the head of a slate of candidates (all JHBG members) for party offices, including positions for two district leaders and the local party committee (Bazzi, 1992).

In many of its activities, JHBG seeks to create a mythology that runs counter to the view that Jackson Heights is a drug- and crime-ridden neighborhood. Residents wrote angry letters to local newspapers and television stations to protest the neighborhood's depiction as "the cocaine capital of the world." At times JHBG's strategy includes disclaiming that Roosevelt Avenue is part of the real Jackson Heights, as in the wake of the de Dios assassination. At other times its strategies have been more inclusive, such as the recent publication of a children's book on the history and virtues of Jackson Heights, published in collaboration with local public and parochial schools. The book features art work by neighborhood children, mostly immigrants, representing different ethnic groups (Grecco, 1996).

Today JHBG claims a membership of about 2,000 people. Most of its leaders are middle-aged White business owners and professionals. The group's founder is an insurance executive, and its board of directors has included attorneys, financial analysts, and small-business owners. As owners of co-ops and private homes, they have a considerable stake in the area's physical appearance and its perceived reputation.

There is little doubt that many buildings in Jackson Heights have architectural and historical merit. The architect Robert A.M. Stern writes that the neighborhood "played a special role in the development of a new urban-suburban multiple-dwelling type, the 'garden apartment,' which functions on the principle that the true unit of planning is the city block rather than the individual building" (Karatzas, 1992). Yet the historic district movement was spurred by more than concerns over protecting the neighborhood's buildings. JHBG also seeks to preserve certain standards and project a positive image of the neighborhood. Some members seek to restore an idealized past symbolized by Edward MacDougall's master plan for Jackson Heights.

Throughout the landmarking process, there was an undercurrent of opposition from business owners and landlords who argued that conforming to landmark standards would increase repair costs and restrict a building's use. Beyond these concerns, however, many saw the effort to preserve the neighborhood's history as an urge to protect the old Jackson Heights, interpreted by at least some newer residents as "White" Jackson Heights. Multilingual signage and improper modes of commercial activity, such as street vending and loud hawking of goods, have been particular targets of JHBG's activists.

In October 1995 the landmarks commission drafted regulations limiting changes that could be made to storefronts within the historic district. The rules prescribed the specific size, type, and color of material that could be used to alter signage, awnings, light fixtures, and security gates. These regulations represent one form of the physical conformity that preservationists hoped to achieve through landmarking. As Jeffrey Saunders, chairman of JHBG's architecture committee, put it, "The overall effect will be to lower the visual volume of lighting and awnings, so they're not screaming out." Saunders hopes the regulations will eventually lead to the removal of the splashy yellow and green awnings that cover most neighborhood storefronts.

Tensions over landmark designation escalated in August 1995, when an anonymous group distributed fliers calling for a boycott of 18 local businesses that it claimed were not conforming to landmark standards. The group called itself Action Jackson and claimed to represent residents of several co-op buildings. The appearance of these fliers in bank lobbies and on shop doors enraged many merchants and residents. The flier listed the names and addresses of businesses that "have not complied with landmarking regulations and have impacted negatively on our community." It went on to urge residents, "Don't shop in the stores listed below! These stores are illegal! Don't give your money to stores that bring the quality of our community down!" (McKnight, 1995; Cohen, 1995.)

Joe Reese, president of a local tenant association, expressed his outrage at the content of the flier:

This kind of thing breeds hate in the community. They [Action Jackson] were hiding behind a mask and attacking business people.... Maybe some of these businesses should be improved, but the way they went about it was wrong. They should have contacted the owners and met with them. How can you fight something like this if you can't meet your accuser?

Reese and others felt that the Action Jackson campaign was motivated by racism. Many of the targeted stores were owned by immigrants. Indeed, a *New York Times* article on the issue described an encounter between JHBG's Saunders (who denied being part of Action Jackson) and a local merchant: "Sitting on a ladder outside of E & S, a clothing store on 82nd Street, a man shouted out to passers-by in Spanish. Staring at the hawker, Mr. Saunders said, 'This is not the way it is done in Jackson Heights.'" (Cohen, 1995.)

In interviews Saunders stressed the importance of the storefront regulations by saying they would "speed up the process of civilizing the streets in a historically appropriate way." In an essay on landmarking published in a local preservation newsletter, he laments signs of negative change affecting neighborhoods like Jackson Heights. He rattles off a list of physical changes, ranging in magnitude from an absentee landlord subdividing his home to a homeowner repairing his chimney with black pitch rather than mortar, and argues that "these collective changes cheapen, degrade, and coarsen our community.... For example, how many can enjoy a stroll along Main Street in Flushing, Broadway in

Elmhurst, or Roosevelt Avenue at 74th Street?” This list of examples is telling. Saunders does not name low-income areas that have experienced disinvestment or abandonment (although there are many in Queens to which he could have pointed). Rather, he points to one Jackson Heights address—literally the corner of Little India and Little Colombia—and groups it with two other busy, prosperous shopping areas associated with new Asian and Latin American immigrants. He then warns, “As those who are accustomed to a higher standard move out in response to the oncoming ugliness, others, for whom their disappointment is a step up, move in.” (Saunders, 1995.)

Mary Sarro, then district manager of the local community board and a longtime Jackson Heights activist, used an even less subtle comparison when she told the *New York Times* that she applauds Action Jackson’s intentions. “I think getting quality businesses back in the community is an admirable pursuit,” she said. “Do you want a shopping community like Rodeo Drive or [one] like in Bombay?” (Cohen, 1995.)

Like many community leaders, Sarro and Saunders appear to be threatened by Jackson Heights’ rising immigrant population and increasing physical diversity (in shops, restaurants, and so forth). Analyzing the effects of heterogeneity on a neighborhood, Herbert Gans writes, “Heterogeneity is itself an effect of residential instability, resulting when the influx of transients causes landlords and realtors to stop acting as gatekeepers—that is, wardens of neighborhood homogeneity.” (Gans, 1995 [1963]:176.) At one point, Sarro and Saunders were probably gatekeepers of the neighborhood, but when they could no longer contain population changes, the historic district and other aesthetic regulations gave them a way to exert some control, at least at the symbolic level.

Brad Polan, co-owner of an optometry store listed on the Action Jackson flier, said his partners did not know they were in a historic district when they opened their business in March 1994. He said, “We didn’t do anything to the exterior of the store, we just covered an awning that was already here.” Even though the old awning was grandfathered in, the landmarking law stipulates that it had to be removed when a new business moved into the space. Polan received summonses from the landmarks commission and was ordered to change the awning. Dr. Mitchell Biderman, who works at the optometry store, described his frustration:

We want to help the neighborhood and conform to its standards, but this seems to be harassment. There’s nothing offensive about the awning. We’re just trying to do business in the neighborhood.... The merchants should have a voice in defining what’s best for their own interests.... That’s not happening here. Who defines what’s best for the community?

The historic district movement mobilized a significant group of area residents around maintaining Jackson Heights’ aesthetic quality, potentially a powerful force in sustaining a vibrant community. At times, however, the movement’s attempts to impose its vision of community aesthetics seem to have taken on aspects of a symbolic crusade (Gusfield, 1963) in which much more than architecture is at stake. For at least one faction of the movement (represented by Action Jackson), attempts to mandate compliance with aesthetic regulations have become a battle over who will decide what constitutes a proper and civilized community. The landmark designation could be a positive force in Jackson Heights. The challenge, it appears, is to broaden the base of people who define the community’s interests.

## Jackson Heights: A Model of Stable Diversity?

Can Jackson Heights be described as a successful, diverse community? At the most fundamental level the answer is, probably, “yes.” To be sure, local members of various groups generally do not love each other or even understand each other. Attempts to stabilize the community particularly those focused on aesthetics and physical preservation have, at times, turned intolerant and even ethnocentric. Yet, by and large, Jackson Heights has become a community in which people of vastly different cultures and backgrounds live in very close physical proximity with little overt hostility. Further, the ethnic conflict that does exist is generally played out abstractly—through disputes over aesthetics, for example—rather than directly. Community diversity is widely celebrated as a positive value, at least in theory. If some of the more excessive pronouncements from preservationists seem to display parochialism and veiled xenophobia, we should remember that veiling xenophobia may be a first step toward overcoming it.

Demographic change in Jackson Heights was not accompanied by widespread panic selling or blockbusting. For a variety of reasons, including location, architecture, ownership (even in apartment buildings—thanks to the co-op arrangement), and a deep sense of identification with the community, many of Jackson Heights’ White residents continue to have a stake in maintaining the neighborhood. Despite cultural differences, many Latino and Asian newcomers share this interest. Property values are stable and commercial rents are rising. The new population has revitalized commercial strips and some cultural institutions, most notably churches. Many Whites are committed to staying in the area, even though they are now a minority within it. Even if older Whites leave gradually, they will probably be replaced by newcomers of similar, if not higher, incomes, including Asians, Latinos, some Whites, immigrants, gays, and young professionals seeking distinguished architecture and an easy commute to Manhattan. Thus Jackson Heights will, in all likelihood, remain a racially mixed community.

There are, however, limits to Jackson Heights’ commitment to diversity. Some Whites plainly resent the newcomers. Although new immigrants have been good for local commercial activity, many older residents do not feel they share in these benefits. Generally, the advantages of commercial revitalization go to the city and a few landlords. The costs—parking problems, street congestion, and disagreements over acceptable behavior in public—are borne locally.

While cosmopolitan professionals clearly enjoy the variety of many new restaurants, shops, and food stores, many longtime residents resent the changes that immigration has brought to the neighborhood. Language—“Nobody learns English anymore”—and culture—“It looks like a foreign country”—are particular focal points for hostility despite the official embrace of diversity by most community groups. Finally, if the new population had been African-American rather than South American and Asian, outcomes might have been very different. Foreign newcomers, no matter how exotic their ways, seem to inspire less hostility and fear in Jackson Heights than do African-Americans, despite the fact that, culturally, the latter share much more in common with older White residents. The continuing salience of anti-Black feeling, even in areas of extreme ethnic diversity, should serve as a caution to those who feel that greater exposure and understanding will necessarily reduce racial hostility.

Despite physical proximity, the different groups in Jackson Heights have little day-to-day interaction. Generally, Jackson Heights’ White, Indian, Chinese, and Latino residents live

in very different communities. In many ways the church that houses four separate congregations is a metaphor for the whole community. These congregations negotiate not how to worship together, but rather how to share the space while they worship separately.

At the same time, Jackson Heights is a place where very different people live together in peace and (usually) civility, if not always mutual admiration. At times, it can be a place where people come together and engage in common projects around areas of mutual interests. This is, perhaps, the first step toward making diverse neighborhoods work. Members of different ethnic groups are rarely close friends. Yet in a multiethnic neighborhood in a cosmopolitan city it may be more important that groups have the physical, institutional, and cultural spaces in which they can interact and, in so doing, come to constitute a public.

Jackson Heights, rich in such spaces and blessed with a strong sense of community identity, is perhaps a model of how a diversity that no one planned, or even anticipated, can nonetheless be made to work.

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## Notes

1. Local residents still refer to this street, Junction Boulevard, as the "Mason-Dixon Line." Yet it should be noted, this is a division of race, not of class. Queens has a substantial population of middle-class Black homeowners. The 1990 median household income for Blacks in Queens County was actually slightly higher than that for Whites.
2. In this respect Jackson Heights was much like the other garden cities of Queens built during the same period: Robert Law Olmstead's somewhat more upscale Forest Hills Gardens and Sunnyside Gardens, the longtime home of Lewis Mumford. For a comparison, see Goldberger (1983).
3. The largely minority residents of Corona and East Elmhurst frequently complain of Jackson Heights' White domination of the community board. Despite the fact that Jackson Heights is now also mostly minority, its political and community board representatives are, indeed, mostly White.
4. For more on the role of the visual elements of landscapes in the formation of community identity, see Zukin (1991, 1995).



5. Although there are almost no Haitians living in the area, there is a longstanding Haitian community in nearby Corona.

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