

Chapter 9: Fort Greene, New York

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Linked to lower Manhattan by the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, as well as by major subway lines, Fort Greene is just minutes away from Wall Street, City Hall, Chinatown, Little Italy, and Greenwich Village. Primarily a residential neighborhood, Fort Greene has been known for its racial and social class diversity since the 1840s. Two important characteristics differentiate it from other diverse urban neighborhoods. First, although Fort Greene shifted from mostly White to predominantly Black during its long history, its property values have increased and it has maintained a significant White population, currently about 15 percent. It neither tipped racially nor became poorer. Second, by the 1980s the social class differences between Black and White gentrifiers in the neighborhood's south end and the low-income residents concentrated in public housing projects became more salient than the racial differences between area residents. This article highlights some of the social policies, institutions, and groups that have contributed to Fort Greene's long and unusual history of racial and social class diversity.¹

Fort Greene Park, in the center of the community, offers common ground to the neighborhood's diverse residents, employees, and students. Built to provide a peaceful, green refuge from the wood-frame, brick, and brownstone buildings and city street life that surround it, the park helps define and differentiate the neighborhood's social geography and architecture. Historically, Fort Greene has been a neighborhood of contrasts that are visible in its architecture, racial and ethnic composition, social class mixture, public spaces, and development dynamic or through comparisons with adjacent neighborhoods.

The architectural contrasts in Fort Greene could not be sharper. A large, 35-building public housing project of lowrise (6-story) and midrise (11- and 15-story) buildings spans much of the area north of Fort Greene Park and is bordered on the east by modest wood-frame houses. Myrtle Avenue, a partially vacant and often dangerous commercial strip, separates the projects and wood-frame houses on the north from the park on the south and seems to sag under the weight of advancing deterioration. Elegant, well-maintained 19th-century brick and brownstone houses, many owned and inhabited by young artists and professionals, line streets that stretch south and east of the park. Brooklyn Hospital and Long Island University stand directly west of the park, adjacent to two middle-class apartment complexes.

A number of educational, health, and cultural institutions dot the neighborhood. Fort Greene is home to Pratt Institute, Long Island University, Polytechnic University, St. Joseph's College, Brooklyn Technical High School (a selective magnet school that draws students from other New York City boroughs), Brooklyn Hospital, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and several new, smaller cultural and commercial establishments.

Like the architecture, Fort Greene Park demarcates the neighborhood's social geography. The clearest lines of social differentiation reflect social class, not race. Public housing tenants differ markedly from the local brownstoners in a familiar range of social class characteristics: education, median income, percent below poverty, and occupation.

Fort Greene's History of Diversity

Fort Greene, like most of Brooklyn, was primarily farmland until the mid-19th century. Before 1850, active shipyards, located just north of the neighborhood on the edge of Wallabout Bay, attracted laborers, including a community of free Black workers and their families. Colored School Number 1 (now Public School 67) was built in 1847 for the children of the Black shipyard workers.

Though Blacks were longtime Brooklyn residents (the borough had been the slaveholding capital of New York State), they were a small and declining proportion of Brooklyn's rapidly growing immigrant population during the 19th century. For the most part, this relatively small number of Blacks remained dispersed throughout the borough, unlike White immigrant groups that were far more concentrated. By 1870, more than one-half of Brooklyn's Blacks lived in Fort Greene, but even here Blacks made up only 10.3 percent of the population. By 1900 the area had the only major Black settlement in New York City. Many working-class Blacks and Whites (including the poet Walt Whitman) lived in Fort Greene's northern section.

Between 1850 and 1900, houses for middle- and upper-class Whites were built south and east of Fort Greene Park, drawing business and professional people from Brooklyn Heights and Manhattan. Luxurious, freestanding Italianate mansions lined Clinton Avenue by the 1860s, and elegant brownstones similar to those in Brooklyn Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Park Slope were built in the following decades. Around the turn of the century, several hotels, apartment buildings, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music were built. Racial discrimination in housing intensified early in the 20th century, concentrating Blacks along the Fulton Street corridor, with Fort Greene as its western boundary. As large, single-family homes became less popular in the 1920s—some were destroyed to build apartment buildings for the middle class—the neighborhood began to change in ways that the Depression would soon accelerate. Housing values in Fort Greene, as elsewhere, dropped precipitously during the Depression, creating buying opportunities for newcomers. As German, English, and other older homeowners accepted low offers and moved out, large numbers of middle-class Italians moved to the neighborhood.

By 1940 the outlines of what was to be central Brooklyn's ghetto were becoming clear. By then Blacks had the worst housing and health conditions in Brooklyn, regardless of neighborhood. Fort Greene was no exception. As Francis X. Connolly (1977), drawing on accounts from the *Brooklyn Eagle*, explained, "An intensive study of a heavily Black five-block area [in Fort Greene] known as 'the jungle' revealed the highest tuberculosis and infant mortality rates in the country." It is sobering to read this in the 1990s. The Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership (SNAP), an organization funded by New York State, reported that the very same conditions (along with HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, and asthma) continue to plague the neighborhood today.²

Fort Greene's proximity to the Brooklyn Navy Yard paid off handsomely in the 1940s. The Navy Yard's shipbuilding and weapons manufacturing operations, which ran 24 hours a day, kept the Brooklyn economy humming and provided jobs for neighborhood and borough residents. Although the best jobs went to Whites, Blacks (particularly Black women) also advanced.

Navy Yard workers needed housing, and brownstones were converted to rooming houses to accommodate them. In addition, and far more important in terms of its effect on the neighborhood, a major government-supported housing project (later split into two projects) opened in the area in 1944. At first, shipyard workers and their families (mostly White) were the majority tenants, although a substantial minority of Blacks also lived there. Although the housing projects remained racially integrated, working class, and relatively stable into the 1960s, the projects today are characterized by overwhelming poverty, joblessness, homogeneous minority populations, and dangerous conditions. These projects remained racially integrated for the first 15 years until Whites began stampeding to the suburbs in the 1950s. From 1950 to 1970, Fort Greene lost more than 10,000 residents to White flight. Public housing policies unintentionally hastened this out-migration by pressuring tenants (through rising rents) to move out of the projects as their earnings increased to make room for others who had a more compelling claim on public rent subsidies.

In contrast to the projects' racial mix in the 1940s and 1950s, the areas south and east of Fort Greene Park remained exclusively White and middle-class until the 1950s, when they changed racially and deteriorated quickly. Suburbanization and the construction of the public housing projects had already begun to transform the neighborhood. The Navy Yard's decommissioning in 1966, coupled with the shock waves sent by Robert Moses' never-realized plan to build a new Dodgers' stadium and a campus for Baruch College, forced an increased racial turnover in neighborhood houses and other buildings. Banks stopped lending mortgage money in Fort Greene during the 1960s.

Fort Greene Today

Like most neighborhoods in New York, Fort Greene's boundaries are not officially defined. For the purposes of this study they extend from Flatbush Avenue Extension on the west to just beyond Classon Avenue on the east, and from Nassau Street on the north to Atlantic Avenue on the south (see exhibit 1). This includes the small area to the east sometimes called Clinton Hill³ but does not include the new MetroTech Center office complex or the downtown area across Flatbush Avenue. Before MetroTech was built in the 1980s, Myrtle Avenue continued straight through the center of what is now the MetroTech complex, linking the two sides of Flatbush Avenue. Here, dilapidated buildings housed dwindling marginal businesses, residential apartments, artists' lofts, and performance spaces. Now, Flatbush Avenue forms a natural western boundary for Fort Greene. Neighborhood activists, perhaps hoping to create a stronger connection between MetroTech companies and the neighborhood (and a stronger claim on corporate resources), may define neighborhood boundaries further west to include MetroTech.

A recently published neighborhood profile, which deliberately separates the housing projects from the rest of Fort Greene, reports that median income in the projects is \$11,344, although the median for all of Fort Greene is just under \$25,000 (Brooklyn in Touch Information Center, 1993). A few census tracts south of Fort Greene Park have median incomes in the mid-\$30,000s. The poverty rate is 46 percent in the projects and 31 percent in the rest of Fort Greene.

Due north of the projects lies Brooklyn Navy Yard, a mostly vacant manufacturing—and now warehouse—district once central to the economy of the neighborhood and region. Across Flatbush Avenue to the west stands MetroTech, a large new office complex built with substantial private and public investment. South of MetroTech is bustling downtown Brooklyn and Fulton Mall, touted as “America's sixth most profitable commercial strip.” Fort Greene differs notably from the areas it abuts, and those areas differ from each other.

Exhibit 1

Map of the Fort Greene Area



Nearby are the largely White brownstone neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Boerum Hill, and Park Slope, as well as Bedford-Stuyvesant—“New York’s other ghetto.” (Connolly, 1977; Kasinitz, 1988; Rosenberg, 1987.)

Fort Greene’s population (in 21 census tracts) is approximately 57,000. The neighborhood is predominantly Black. It maintained a stable ethnic composition from 1980 to 1990. The 1990 census found Fort Greene to be 68 percent Black, 16 percent Hispanic, 14 percent White, and 2 percent Asian.

Although social class divisions are clearly visible to residents and observers in Fort Greene, these divisions are not as obvious in census tract data. In Fort Greene, perhaps like many predominantly Black urban neighborhoods, small pockets of plenty—affluent areas with beautiful homes inhabited by high numbers of professional, two-income, resident homeowners families—are muted statistically by the presence of large numbers of lower income renters. Residents with varying income levels typically live in older urban neighborhoods that contain both private homes and rental apartments. In Fort Greene, two additional factors contribute to this social class mix: racial discrimination and rent regulation. Housing segregation by race crowds Blacks who have a wider range of incomes into particular Black neighborhoods. Although far more true historically than today, many urban neighborhoods continue to reflect this fact. In addition, rent regulation in New York City magnifies the income differences among neighborhood residents, since low-income renters, protected from rent increases by government-mandated controls, can remain in upscale areas out of which they would otherwise be pushed.

Since the late 1960s, many Fort Greene residents have been worried they might be displaced due to city plans for major downtown development and continued neighborhood revitalization by brownstoners. Fort Greene’s real estate prices began to appreciate in the late 1960s due to the influx of brownstoners, despite the fact that there was still almost no institutional mortgage money available to purchase or rehabilitate neighborhood properties. In 1970 a number of community groups, acting through local Community Planning Board 2, united to oppose downtown development initiatives that they feared would destabilize their neighborhood by altering its architectural integrity and displacing longtime residents. Inspired by widely known and publicized housing and revitalization efforts of the neighboring Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, community activists and the Downtown Brooklyn Development Group convinced Chase Manhattan Bank (currently Chase Bank) to pledge \$1 million in conventional mortgage money (and another \$200,000 for construction financing) to Fort Greene.⁴ Chase’s involvement was described as “an exercise in corporate responsibility,” and was not viewed by the bank or others as a profit-making initiative.

In mid-1971 the Fort Greene Housing Office was formed to address the neighborhood’s major housing and destabilization concerns. The functions it performed included:

- Establishing and administering a nonprofit mortgage pool to prevent racial or class displacement.
- Obtaining, rehabilitating, and selling/renting city-owned property (taken in lieu of taxes) to low-income community residents.
- Developing infill construction on vacant properties for sale or rent to low-income community residents.
- Providing housing counseling (a time-consuming function) and legal information/referrals.

Reports written at the time reveal how central the issues of both racial and class displacement were to neighborhood activists in the early 1970s. When the Fort Greene Housing Office was first established, there was some tension between its first director and the group's board concerning exactly whom the office would serve. The director seemed inclined to support neighborhood investment by middle-class as well as poor residents, but he was outnumbered by the board members. The Certificate of Incorporation left no doubt about the office's objectives. It specifically stated that its goal was to work "exclusively for the benefit of the poor and low-income residents of the Fort Greene area of Brooklyn." ("The Fort Greene Housing Office," 1972, Unpublished Report: 12; Park, 1972.)

Small community groups formed to improve the neighborhood, replacing some vacant lots and abandoned buildings with community gardens and even new housing. One public housing tenant, Franklin Garrett, and his wife organized a group of other low-income residents (men in their 20s working with local teens) to clean an empty lot and plant a community garden. Their experience in the mid-1970s introduced them to city procedures (how to get a vacant lot approved for gardening, for example) and government support available for neighborhood improvement (including cash grants, workers from the Summer Youth Employment Program, gardening supplies, fencing, shovels, rakes, topsoil, and seeds). The men formed a community group, the Brooklyn Comprehensive Corporation (BCC) to "better the community" by focusing on what they saw as the critical issues of jobs and housing. A \$10,000 grant from a variety of public sources (including the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, HUD, and New York City's Housing Preservation and Development Office) allowed the group to evolve from modest beginnings in community gardening into a substantial housing development program.

BCC exemplified the grassroots, low-income advocacy approach of the Fort Greene Housing Office. Building on its initial community gardening efforts, BCC established a partnership with a large Brooklyn developer, Schnee and Sons, to build 96 units of infill housing for low-income residents in Fort Greene (along Ashland Avenue, Saint Felix Street, and Fort Greene Place) and, eventually, another 98 units in Crown Heights. Infill housing accomplished several major goals: It provided housing specifically targeted to Fort Greene's low-income residents, it filled in the neighborhood's abandoned and dangerous sites, and it empowered local residents to shape and profit from the construction.

Struggling against the specter of displacement, the Fort Greene Housing Office carefully monitored the racial impact of its loan program. As of 1972, at least 43 percent of the mortgage recipients were non-White. By 1984 it was clear that a unique aspect of the revitalization in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill is that the proportion of non-White residents increased through the previous decade. This is unique because revitalization, when it has occurred in minority neighborhoods elsewhere in the United States, typically has resulted in a reduction of the minority population (DeGiovanni, 1984).

Awareness of typical displacement patterns helps explain the paranoia that resurfaces regularly among Fort Greene public housing tenants. Most recently, New York City Housing Authority contracts for \$10 million to landscape and fix the exteriors of the Fort Greene projects created a fear of displacement and fueled a new round of rumors about privatization and eviction.

In retrospect, it appears as though the Fort Greene Housing Office accomplished its goals to stabilize the neighborhood, prevent widespread displacement, and maintain diversity. Rehabilitated and newly built infill housing has transformed blighted areas, offered residents affordable housing, and slowed the rate of gentrification, as did practices like red-lining, where banks refused to lend mortgage money to areas with more than a fixed

percentage of Black residents albeit unintentionally. The Pratt Area Community Council (PACC) is the contemporary heir to the mission first sketched out by the Fort Greene Housing Office—preserving and stabilizing affordable housing in the community.

By the mid-1980s, Fort Greene was moving beyond stabilization. Some of its brownstone blocks were taking on considerable cachet, particularly for artistic members of the Black middle class. The area is home to filmmaker Spike Lee's production company and, until 1998, two small retail outlets as well as his personal residence. Numerous well-known jazz musicians, including Cecil Taylor and Branford Marsalis, and other accomplished, prominent Black artists live in Fort Greene. Comparisons with the Harlem Renaissance and other artistic centers were unavoidable: "The explosion of African-American creativity in this Brooklyn neighborhood is reminiscent of the Harlem cultural movement of the 1920s." Record producer Charles Huggins has dubbed Fort Greene "the new Soho for Blacks." (Shipp, 1990).

By the 1990s the number of young Black artists in Fort Greene seemed to have reached a critical mass, giving rise to a sense of artistic community and expression that reflects on racial identity. The critic Thulani Davis (a resident) captured this mood when she said:

Most of the work that is going on right now is somehow reflective of establishing identity: What does it mean to be Black right now? I think that's what the work is about, whether it's rap music or Spike Lee's work. I think they are trying to tell us what it means to be Black in their time, and that's what artists have always done. (Shipp, 1990.)

Racial pride expressed in art and fashion coexists with cosmopolitan sophistication. Although Fort Greene is a majority Black neighborhood, many residents (Black and White) remain proud of its cosmopolitan aura, sustained, in part, by its racial mix.

Despite the in-migration of young Black and White artists, professionals, and others, very few of the affluent enclaves are even as large as a single census tract. In general, housing discrimination means that Black urban neighborhoods have a greater mix of income groups than White neighborhoods (Massey and Denton, 1993). Still, the data do show clear (and occasionally striking) differences between income levels of residents in the north (public housing) end of the neighborhood and the south and east (brownstone and private apartment) sections.

Stabilizing Factors: Educational and Cultural Institutions

Major institutions in Fort Greene helped stabilize the area by deciding to remain in the neighborhood, thus preventing further deterioration and racial tipping. Polytechnic University's decision to shore up its Brooklyn campus by actively supporting what became the MetroTech development helped improve the area abutting Fort Greene, the school's own immediate surroundings. Over the years, Pratt Institute has attracted many students, a surprising percentage of whom stay in the area. St. Joseph's College, like Pratt, helps populate the area with its students, faculty, and staff. Both Pratt and St. Joseph's own a number of mansions on Clinton Hill. This institutional ownership helped preserve the grand housing stock at a time when it would not have sold to private homebuyers. Long Island University (LIU), financially stretched during the 1980s, sold off some of its area properties but maintained the core campus. As LIU's fortunes improved during the early 1990s, the university made substantial improvements to its physical plant and exterior appearance. The presence of the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), like other institutions mentioned above, has been critical to the stability and preservation of the Fort

Greene neighborhood. BAM's cutting-edge music, theater, and dance programs are, for many upper and middle-class Manhattanites, the only reason to visit Brooklyn.

Finally, Fort Greene is dotted with numerous churches, some of which have been very active in community affairs. Perhaps the LaFayette Presbyterian Church, more than any other, exemplifies this tradition. Consistently and proudly interracial, LaFayette Presbyterian hosts impromptu neighborhood meetings dealing with crime and other issues of broad neighborhood concern. "Our church, like the neighborhood, is two-thirds Black and one-third White," the newly appointed White pastor said in May 1996. He went on to explain, "People come here because they don't want to be in a lily-White, or all-Black, church." This echoes similar comments offered by neighborhood leaders and residents: People move to and remain in Fort Greene *because* they want to live in a tolerant, mixed neighborhood, not a homogeneous one that resists strangers.

Location and Transportation as Assets

Fort Greene's location, directly across the river from lower Manhattan, is a considerable asset. As noted earlier, it is near most major subway lines and 5 minutes from Wall Street. This locational advantage was a strong reason for locating the MetroTech complex, New York's third-largest business district, in downtown Brooklyn. It is very difficult to travel among Brooklyn neighborhoods if they are not connected by subway. Downtown Brooklyn, however, is linked to the rest of the borough by a network of buses, subways, and, increasingly, private vans. The private vans, an enormously successful enterprise in the underground economy, are particularly important for older people and many others who are unable or unwilling to travel by subway or bus.

Confronting White Flight and Racial Change

By the late 1960s, various community groups were coalescing to halt racial tipping and reverse Fort Greene's devastating deterioration. It was a heady time for activists in Fort Greene, elsewhere in New York City, and, indeed, around the country.

At the same time, members of a growing Black middle class joined White pioneer gentrifiers in buying beautiful homes in the area, including some located on what had been previously all-White blocks. A neighborhood study characterizes the class differences as follows: "During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the division of Fort Greene/Clinton Hill into a poor area north of the park and a middle-class area south and east of the park began to become as pronounced as it had been a century before." (Brooklyn in Touch, 1993.) Although the social class differences echoed those of a century earlier, the racial configuration was shifting significantly. In sharp contrast to 100 years ago, Blacks were now in the majority on both affluent and low-income sides of the park. At the same time, however, citywide rent regulations and neighborhood-based antidisplacement policies added to neighborhood stability, preserving the economic mix by allowing low-income residents to remain in their dwellings.

In retrospect, we can see that not only was White flight good for slumlords and realtors, it also provided an opening for members of a growing Black middle class to buy beautiful homes in a previously Whites-only section of a neighborhood that had long had a Black presence. Now Blacks were becoming homeowners in the affluent end of Fort Greene as well as tenants in the poor end. Although it is true that different racial, ethnic, and income groups have lived in Fort Greene for well over 100 years, these groups have, for the most part, stayed within their subsections of the neighborhood. The neighborhood's social geography helps Fort Greene remain a diverse neighborhood with highly structured internal

social differences. There is nothing casual or simple about the social maintenance of diversity in this neighborhood.

Active Community Groups Provide Leadership and Tame Development

In response to demands of neighborhood activists, the Fort Greene Housing Office (mentioned above) was established in 1971 as a nonprofit community organization to stabilize the neighborhood. Its efforts had several thrusts. On one hand, the office sought “to head off the kind of complete collapse that redlining often led to.”⁵

According to David Park, the first director of the Fort Greene Housing Office, the organization was established to stabilize the neighborhood by preventing abandonment and ending the displacement caused by the swelling influx of brownstoners and speculators. He emphasized the bias in favor of low-income residents that characterized the policy orientation of the housing office’s board of directors:

The housing office was formed in part to stabilize a community in transition, but here is a term with two meanings. By stabilize, the office means to perpetuate and to provide housing for existing low-income residents. This is the main objective of the community-based board [of directors]. Stabilize might also mean to halt the decline of the community, in this case by *arresting the disinvestment in properties by absentee owners. To this end, new financing to owner-occupants, reisent [sic] or in-migrant regardless of their income, is an effective tool.* (Appelbaum and Goldman, 1972.) (Emphasis added.)

The Fort Greene Housing Office also provided housing-related information and counseling to neighborhood residents and supported the rehabilitation of housing that had been taken over by New York City for nonpayment of taxes.

Active Fort Greene residents mobilized a variety of efforts to improve their community in the 1970s. Some worked to expose lending policies that discriminated against their neighborhood and pressured the city to provide housing opportunities and mortgage assistance to neighborhood residents. Others documented the neighborhood’s architectural and historical significance, seeking to preserve its integrity and boost its prestige and real estate value by acquiring landmark status. According to one community leader, Fort Greene was among the first neighborhoods that had to convince a skeptical Landmarks Preservation Commission to grant it historic landmark status. Neighborhoods that had achieved landmark status previously, including Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village, had been approached by an already-convinced landmarks commission. This led to a longer research and presentation process that, he argues, inadvertently helped create stronger community ties among the landmark-oriented neighborhood activists.

By the time Fort Greene received landmark designation in 1978, neighborhood conditions had already begun to improve, thus undercutting the preservationists’ arguments that such designation, in and of itself, would increase Fort Greene’s value. Homeowners, Black and White, were seeing their investments appreciate. Buildings that had been broken up into multiple dwelling units were converted back into one- or two-family houses, sometimes displacing tenants. Neighborhood improvements put more upward pressure on housing prices. Buildings that had sold for about \$16,000 in 1960 brought up to \$50,000 in 1970, and sometimes \$300,000 by the late 1980s.⁶

Since the mid-1980s, Fort Greene (south and east of the park) has achieved a reputation as an enclave of mostly young African-American artists and professionals. Spike Lee opened two clothing stores (Spike's Joint and Spike's Kids) on DeKalb Avenue and owns several more buildings in the brownstone end of the neighborhood that house his business offices. Within the last year, Fort Greene was certified as a hip, trendy neighborhood when a full-page feature story in the *New York Times* publicized the neighborhood's assets. The telltale signs of neighborhood upscaling have begun to appear. A few expensive new restaurants recently opened along a stretch of DeKalb Avenue that drug dealers had previously controlled. Yet longtime residents still complain of high crime rates, a lack of places to shop, and a lack of jobs for the young and those with low levels of education.

Over the years a variety of neighborhood groups have formed to confront the problems facing Fort Greene residents. Not surprisingly, most of Fort Greene's community organizations, funded by government or nonprofit agencies, represent the interests of low-income residents: Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area Coalition, PACC, Fort Greene Community Action Network, and Fort Greene SNAP. The Clinton Hill Society is one of the few neighborhood organizations to promote the interests of the middle- and upper middle-class brownstoners. It promotes historic preservation, an issue of particular relevance to more affluent homeowners.

For Majority Black Fort Greene, Class Is More Salient Than Race

The spatially structured social class differences and divisions between the public housing tenants and private housing owners and renters in Fort Greene remain, in many ways, more salient and significant than the racial and ethnic differences. Eric Blackwell, a neighborhood leader who published a local newspaper (*Fort Greene News*), grew up in the public housing projects and now lives in the end of the neighborhood being gentrified. When asked about divisions in the neighborhood, Blackwell uses economic, not racial, terms to contrast the public housing tenants with the affluent residents who live in the co-ops and brownstones. Standing on Myrtle Avenue and pointing up the hill toward the neighborhood's more affluent Clinton Hill section, he says, "We used to call them 'the suburbs.' ... [T]hey have their own [public] schools, their own churches. They're like foreigners [to the public housing residents]." Like other New Yorkers, many Fort Greene residents enroll their children in the selective public schools or public school programs,⁷ or in private schools. (New York City has a long tradition of selective competitive public schools. Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and Brooklyn Technical high schools are the best known.)

One of their institutions, the LaFayette Presbyterian Church, is the "epicenter of Fort Greene.... We have most middle-class movers and shakers—teachers, social workers, and the like," according to the recently appointed Rev. David Dyson.

That residents choose to live in a mixed neighborhood seems particularly significant. Fort Greene is a neighborhood that draws people together, particularly Whites who wish to live in a predominantly Black, heterogeneous area where there are local opportunities for interracial interaction. Two White residents interviewed for this study (a neighborhood Realtor and a civic leader) described the appeal that such a diverse neighborhood has to them and their White neighbors. Both saw diversity as a special neighborhood feature that they wanted to preserve. At the same time, both underscored other advantages that drew them to the neighborhood: great houses at relatively good prices (relative to predominantly White, gentrified areas like Park Slope) and proximity to Manhattan. Some Black residents also savor the interracial character of their neighborhood, while others emphasize the Black

majority and increasingly vibrant Black cultural milieu. Even for them, however, the neighborhood's traditions of tolerance and diversity remain important.

Part of Fort Greene's appeal is that it embodies so many different communities and worlds of meaning. Tom Veltre, president of the Clinton Hill Society, opened a recent community forum on the neighborhood's future "with a statement about the special character of this neighborhood—its people and our diversity." (Vance, 1996.) He underscored the political implications of *concerted diversity* (he seemed to mean diversity that is both conscious and mobilized) when he recalled "the power community alliance can wield against careless government when Hispanic, Hasidic, African-American, brownstoner, and low-income dwellers successfully banded together to oppose the construction of the incinerator at the Navy Yard." (Myerson, 1996.)

Racial and class differences weave through most of the social and civic life of the neighborhood, beyond schools and churches, to include health, shopping, and how people respond to the various development projects around the neighborhood.

The Challenge for the Future: Economic Development and Jobs

The 16-acre MetroTech office complex consists of five granite-and-brick buildings that face inward onto the MetroTech Commons, a grassy area crisscrossed by walkways and dotted by trees, benches, and sculpture. It feels like a serene (some say sterile) oasis—a meeting ground for employees, students, residents, and others traversing the area.⁸ New Yorkers quickly notice the absence of graffiti and trash and the aura of civility characterizing the commons—results of successful Business Improvement District (BID) initiatives. A full staff of uniformed BID security and sanitation workers patrol the area to maintain the quality of public life that distinguishes MetroTech from its immediate surroundings, including Fulton Mall, the Willoughby corridor, and Myrtle Avenue. During the summers, BAM sponsors outdoor lunchtime music programs that draw enthusiastic listeners from nearby businesses and neighborhoods.

MetroTech created a modern corporate presence in what was formerly an older, deteriorated section of downtown Brooklyn. Major corporations (Chase, Security Industry Automation Corporation [SIAC], Brooklyn Union, Bear Stearns) occupy most of the office space in the new buildings at the development's core. New York City's Board of Education and several other government agencies also have offices at MetroTech.

Polytechnic University rings the western and northern ends of the MetroTech Commons. Polytechnic's decision to stay in Brooklyn was a catalyst that sparked MetroTech's development. Hoping to improve the appearance and security of its immediate surroundings, Polytechnic officials promoted a high-tech academic-corporate venture that eventually transformed itself into an office complex for investment firms with sophisticated telecommunications needs. The 1983 Regional Plan Association (RPA) report, sometimes called a blueprint for MetroTech, stated:

The Polytechnic area ... is bordered by deterioration on three sides. The Myrtle Avenue El was torn down a little more than a decade ago, and the street still looks as it did then; the dinginess is simply more visible.... There is a plan for rebuilding some of these blocks to accommodate high-technology jobs that would benefit from proximity to Polytechnic Institute (now Polytechnic University). (Regional Plan Association, 1983.)

The RPA report, credited with moving the MetroTech project forward at a critical time, identified important advantages to building there, such as having engineering students and faculty at Polytechnic and other universities and their research infrastructure nearby.

The development of MetroTech Center directly west of the Fort Greene projects reverberated through the project community, playing on the hopes for jobs and fears of displacement among project residents.

High levels of poverty and joblessness, endemic among Fort Greene's public housing tenants, fueled hopes that this more than \$1 billion office complex would bring a windfall of jobs to Fort Greene's low-income residents. One official justified the extensive public financing of MetroTech in terms of *the implicit promise* that the new center would positively affect the economy and employment picture of Brooklyn and surrounding neighborhoods. To most participants in the process and to area residents, Fort Greene was the surrounding neighborhood most in need of MetroTech's economic and employment impact. A lead article in the *Fort Greene News* asked "Has any affirmative action plan been put in place to assure that area residents are the recipients of a portion of these jobs?" The wording was chosen carefully, defining *affirmative action* to include not only race but also neighborhood residence.

A proposal for MetroTech presented by developer Forest City Ratner indicates an awareness of the implicit promise of jobs for New Yorkers, but there is no mention of jobs specifically for Fort Greene residents. "Tenants at MetroTech will create 16,000 jobs in Brooklyn and retain 550 jobs at Polytechnic University. The annual payroll will exceed \$480 million when MetroTech is in full operation." To address the community's concerns about jobs for Fort Greene residents, New York City and the Brooklyn Borough president's office established a special unit of the city's Department of Employment, called the Downtown Brooklyn Training and Employment Center (DBTEC), to link Brooklyn residents to permanent MetroTech jobs.

Despite its mandate, DBTEC has done little to link residents to jobs at MetroTech or elsewhere. The center has deliberately maintained a very low profile, particularly where jobseekers are concerned. When New York City Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) workers attempted to tell project residents about DBTEC's existence, the center's former director angrily insisted, "We are not a placement agency." When asked about DBTEC, a neighborhood activist stated, "Nobody even knows about it." According to DBTEC's director, the center is supposed to work with other agencies, not individuals, a fact invoked to explain its very low placement rate during its first several years. As the former director explained, DBTEC has redefined its mission to "explore workforce needs for the year 2000." To that end, he assigned an employee to work for almost an entire year revising an unannotated, alphabetical listing of Brooklyn's job training and placement programs.

The main reason MetroTech companies have had so little impact on neighborhood joblessness has more to do with New York City's sluggish economy than with any particular organization's efforts or lack of efforts. By the time MetroTech's corporate tenants moved into their new, high-tech offices, New York City's economy had gone into a tailspin. The sluggish economy accomplished what the companies alone could not have done: It pushed employees who might not have moved to Brooklyn in a more robust economy to follow their jobs across the river. As one Chase employee from New Jersey said in 1994 when asked why she works at MetroTech rather than on Wall Street, "I've got two kids in college and this is no time to be looking for a new job. I'm glad I have this one." In sum, although it is true that MetroTech companies employ more than 16,000 people, most

employees moved to MetroTech with their jobs. They were not new hires. By supporting MetroTech's development, the borough and the city retained jobs and taxes, but did not create new jobs. Not surprisingly, this did not satisfy residents hoping that MetroTech would bring them new opportunities for permanent employment.

The problem of filled jobs is compounded by the mismatch between the majority of work done at MetroTech and the education levels of many low-income neighborhood residents. Middle-management and back-office jobs at MetroTech demand a level of education and training beyond what many jobless project residents possess. What was touted as an opportunity has come to be regarded bitterly as a constant reminder of the absence of opportunity. This was obvious in the door-to-door surveys of 174 residents conducted among housing project tenants in summer 1994 to assess attitudes toward this new corporate neighbor. Nearly all respondents (93 percent) knew about MetroTech and most expressed feelings of ambivalence, marginality, and disillusionment about the development. On the positive side, 45 percent felt MetroTech would improve the neighborhood. However, only 15 percent reported knowing anyone working there. When asked what kind of people they believed worked at MetroTech, most respondents indicated (see exhibit 2) that they are "White,⁹ well-educated, already employed non-Brooklynites." Many of the employees are indeed well-educated, but the majority are from Brooklyn and the workforce appears racially mixed.

Exhibit 2

Respondents' Views of the Type of People Working at MetroTech

Category	Percentage
Well-educated	87
Already employed	85
Other	71
Non-Brooklynites	69

MetroTech's failure to bring permanent new jobs to Brooklyn's minority residents—particularly those living in Fort Greene—contrasts with its success at filling construction and temporary jobs. The Downtown Brooklyn Affirmative Action Advisory and Oversight Committee (headed by Bill Howell, chief executive officer of Howell Petroleum Products) entered into partnership with developer Forest City Ratner and construction manager Lehrer McGovern Bovis to address concerns about construction contracts and jobs for minorities and women at MetroTech (Amusa-Shonubi, 1993). Speaking at Brooklyn Union's centennial conference on urban America in late 1995, Howell touted the achievement of affirmative action goals, offering the committee's experience as a model that contrasts with the typical zero-sum approach.

Most of MetroTech's corporations have taken a different approach, forging links to the neighborhood that do not involve jobs. Brooklyn Union maintains active involvement in the life of Brooklyn's neighborhoods. Its Cinderella program helped revitalize many of the borough's deteriorating brownstone neighborhoods, and it supports a variety of improvement efforts from gardening to sports and afterschool programs. SIAC's community relations office uses more people power than money in its extensive tutoring and scholarship programs for public schools, particularly in Fort Greene's Community School

District 13. In 1995 more than 100 SIAC employees tutored Fort Greene students, often communicating over the Internet on computers SIAC contributed to the schools.

Brian Cosgrove, SIAC's community relations manager, was originally employed as the head of security for the company. His primary responsibility was to help create an airtight security system for SIAC, the information-processing center for the New York and American stock exchanges. Cosgrove, who was a detective with the New York Police Department for 20 years, helped design the security system for MetroTech Center, including SIAC's building. However, he also was concerned with security problems arising in adjacent communities. Walking back to newly built MetroTech #2 with young teens from the Fort Greene projects one day, he overheard one girl say, "I didn't think they were gonna let people like us in here." That comment convinced Cosgrove that the corporation needed to reach across the barriers of class and race to ease feelings of isolation and exclusion, particularly among young people. SIAC's community relations brochure mentions a variety of services that the company offers to the neighborhood, including business and cultural involvement, financial assistance, community outreach, and educational support. The brochure explicitly states:

Of all our activities, the most important are those that support education. The focus on education is critical. Education affords our youth of this community the opportunity to grow and become productive adults. In addition to opening their minds, it can open doors to a better life that would otherwise remain closed. (SIAC, Technical Education Program brochure, no date.)

Though MetroTech is nearly complete and has revitalized its immediate area and some other parts of downtown Brooklyn, its positive impact has not reached across Myrtle Avenue to "downtown," the sagging commercial strip that abuts the housing projects. Downtown Myrtle has continued to deteriorate despite its new corporate neighbors and the substantial revitalization within parts of the neighborhood. Recently, neighborhood activists targeted Myrtle Avenue's decline as a pressing problem demanding attention. The Fort Greene SNAP lists *economic development* first on its list of priorities. SNAP's first economic development priority is to revitalize Myrtle Avenue, a goal that implies improvement of security and sanitation, recruitment of new commercial tenants, general upgrading of stores and shopping conditions, weaving back together varied (class and race) community segments, and bringing jobs to area residents. When asked about MetroTech's lack of spillover, developer Bruce Ratner counsels patience as he recalls how long it took for the area around Lincoln Center to begin to improve.

Myrtle Avenue, however, seems to go from bad to worse. A recent series of fires and vacancies have plunged it to the lowest level yet, dividing middle-class and low-income residents, students, and employees. Pratt Institute's security guards routinely warn students to avoid Myrtle Avenue.

"When nearly 75,000 people worked in the Navy Yard, Myrtle Avenue was the center of the community and, by some accounts, the center of the universe." (Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, 1996.) However, currently there are more vacancies than rented space, and existing stores appear marginal, teetering on the edge. Razor wire rings the tops of buildings, clusters of men hang out on sidewalks, and downtown Myrtle Avenue is plagued by vacancies and illegal activity—both drugs and the numbers racket. Shopper surveys confirm what merchants and onlookers already knew—middle- and high-income residents avoid Myrtle Avenue. How did this former shopping street deteriorate so badly while other parts of the neighborhood seem to be improving?

To some extent the deterioration of a local shopping street is part of a familiar story that has unfolded throughout Brooklyn neighborhoods since the 1950s. Many New Yorkers routinely shop for clothing, groceries, hardware, furniture, and other items at suburban value retailers rather than in neighborhood stores. This is particularly true of more affluent residents who have cars and credit. Consequently, many of Brooklyn's neighborhood shopping streets are frequented by the poorest residents.

Public housing tenants currently constitute the bulk of the downtown Myrtle Avenue consumer base. Despite low per capita and average family income among the public housing tenants, their *aggregate income* (given the population density) creates much more economic opportunity for merchants than they can currently capture. Even these customers are going elsewhere for their food, clothing, pharmaceuticals, entertainment, and other purchases. The street's declining condition undercuts the merchants' ability to compete with Fulton Mall, Manhattan, and suburban stores.

Long Island University, strapped for cash in the early 1980s, sold a block-long (58,500 square foot) building on Myrtle Avenue to John Catsimatidis for \$500,000. Catsimatidis, one of the 400 richest men in America according to *Fortune Magazine*, has subsequently mortgaged his property (in blanket mortgages) for more than \$11.5 million, none of which has been reinvested in the Myrtle Avenue property. As if that were not bad enough, over the last 3 years, two fires "of suspicious origin" have burned in Catsimatidis' downtown Myrtle Avenue building. Neighborhood activists and stakeholders, following the lead of Fort Greene SNAP, are attempting to convince Catsimatidis to upgrade or sell his building rather than allow it to continue to decline, dragging the neighborhood down with it. Initial conversations between the landlord and community representatives (from the MetroTech BID, Fort Greene SNAP, and Chase) held out the promise of some accommodation.

Construction of Atlantic Terminal, a new retail (and housing) development at the southern end of Fort Greene, pushes Myrtle Avenue's problems to the front burner. The giant retail stores (Pathmark, Sports Authority, Old Navy, Caldor, and others) at this new complex threaten to drive nails into the coffins of Myrtle Avenue businesses. Fort Greene SNAP's Economic Development Task Force is struggling to create plans that will revive Myrtle Avenue before it dies completely—buried by Atlantic Terminal.

Conclusion

This study of Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood has attempted to illuminate the history of the neighborhood and its unusual patterns of class and racial diversity. It has attempted to delineate some of the policies, organizations, and groups central to maintaining Fort Greene's unique racial, economic, commercial, and cultural variety. In sum, it is safe to say that Fort Greene's social geography exists along spatial lines radiating out from Fort Greene Park and the clearest lines of social differentiation reflect social class, not race. Is Fort Greene an example of a successfully diverse community? Obviously, this depends on the definition of success. From this researcher's point of view, Fort Greene is unique from other diverse neighborhoods in this study, for although it shifted from predominantly White to predominantly Black (like communities in other cities), its property values *increased* and it *maintained* its 15–20 percent White population (that is, it did not tip). Also, current social class differences among Fort Greene residents have become more salient and significant than racial differences for assessing the community's stability. However, through a variety of efforts, it appears that these differences do not threaten to destabilize the community.

What accounts for the maintenance of such diversity in Fort Greene? It appears that several key forces help explain how Fort Greene became a majority Black neighborhood that maintained its White minority, experienced increasing housing prices, and attracted Black and White homeowners, including a coterie of high-profile artists. These include:

- An excellent location, good housing stock, and good transportation.
- The presence and involvement of major educational, cultural, and health institutions that provided stability.
- A conscious appreciation of class and race diversity, which generated community group action to protect this diversity through a variety of grassroots movements.
- The development of a Black middle class.
- The pursuit of historic landmark status, which produced cohesion.
- The attraction of a corporate center, which spurred outreach to the Fort Greene community.

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Notes

1. This study draws on existing reports; news articles; statistics; a survey of public housing tenants; and interviews with neighborhood activists and spokespeople, city officials, and developers. The author's participation on the Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership Economic Development Task Force has provided useful information about the very important development dynamic that preoccupies many community residents. In addition, a survey of Fort Greene public housing tenants' attitudes toward MetroTech, a billion-dollar office complex built in the late 1980s, was conducted 2 years ago by New York City Summer Youth Employment Workers under the author's supervision.
2. Of the SNAP Action Plan's five priority areas, health and human services, and HIV/AIDS community development are second and third. SNAP publicized the neighborhood's very high rates of infant mortality (13.3 percent in Fort Greene, 10.1 percent in Brooklyn, and 8.8 percent in New York City), tuberculosis (the second-highest case rate in New York City), AIDS (it accounted for 14.5 percent of the deaths in 1992), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and lead poisoning.
3. "Clinton Hill is a part of Fort Greene," the community board's longtime district manager insists.
4. In response to the construction loan program's early success, Chase increased the amount available for rehabilitating old houses; other commercial banks also established interim loan programs.
5. Author's interview with New York City Economic Development Corporation official, June 4, 1995.

6. In one study, many homeowners in an affluent enclave in Bedford-Stuyvesant say they would have preferred to buy a home in Fort Greene, but they could not afford to, suggesting that the prices have continued to rise. Comparable houses sell for \$300,000 in Fort Greene and \$200,000 in Stuyvesant Heights (author's unpublished research).
7. For example, Fort Greene Junior High School, Satellite West program.
8. Unobtrusive, open gates stand ready to lock out MetroTech's surroundings, but so far they have not been used for this purpose.
9. The "other" category of this question was one of the areas in which the bitterness of some residents strongly stood out. Many residents interpreted "other" to mean "White" and argued that MetroTech was meant only for White people.

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