

A Community Erased by Slum Clearance Is Reunited

By NATE SCHWEBER

The reunion at the Frederick Douglass Center in Manhattan on Saturday had all the trappings of a block party. About 75 people turned out, greeting one another with smiles, hugs and questions about neighbors and family. They ate chicken, macaroni and cheese and cake while a man blew soulful melodies on an alto saxophone.

The only thing missing was the block itself.

Or rather, blocks. It has been more than half a century since the apartment buildings, businesses and even the church that filled nearby 98th and 99th Streets between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West were razed, in a massive urban renewal project that created Park West Village, a six-square-block collection of apartment houses that now dominates the northern reaches of the Upper West Side.

“It was a great neighborhood to live in,” said Linda Burstion, 65, who grew up on 98th Street and Columbus. “I remember playing jacks, eating Icees, playing stickball and dodge ball, jumping double Dutch and when it got really hot out they would open up the fire hydrants.”

From about 1905 until the 1950s, West 98th and 99th Streets constituted a vibrant, predominantly African-American community that was something of a miniature Harlem, with its own Renaissance.

Philip A. Payton Jr., a real estate entrepreneur who wanted to end housing segregation, owned or managed most of the buildings on those blocks. The singer Billie Holiday lived there for a time, as did Arthur A. Schomburg, the historian and writer whose collection of art, manuscripts and photographs became the foundation for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Other residents included the author Rosa Guy and the actor Robert Earl Jones, the father of James Earl Jones. The actress Butterfly McQueen lived there for a time, and later in Park West Village.

“You could not imagine the talented people who lived in the old neighborhood,” said Jim Torain, 69, who for the past decade has organized the reunions of what he calls the Old Community; the words were written in green frosting on the cake.

Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 set in motion the obliteration of the neighborhood. Robert Moses, in his position as chairman of the New York City Slum Clearance Committee, condemned the area, largely on the basis of median household income. It was razed piecemeal through the 1950s, and much of it sat as rubble until the early 1960s when the Park West Village apartments were built for middle-income residents.

The story eventually caught the attention of Jim Epstein, 33, a documentary filmmaker who grew up on 99th Street and Riverside Drive. He first learned of the destruction of the long vanished neighborhood in “The Power Broker,” Robert A. Caro’s biography of Moses.

“I discovered this huge community of people and realized right then that I had a story because I had these personal narratives combined with this big slum clearance-urban renewal project,” Mr. Epstein said.

He began filming in 2007 and finished editing the six-minute film last year while working for the video journalism unit of Reason, a libertarian magazine. He showed the film at Saturday’s reunion, to hearty applause. He called the abuse of eminent domain “one of the subjects I’m most passionate about.”

Katherine Massenberg, 87, who compiled a census of every building with the names of the families in each apartment, said that as the decades passed, so too did much of her hurt.

“I have nothing but warm, fond memories of the Old Community,” she said on Saturday. “I just remember my good friends and family.”

Sheila McEachin, 69, was one of the last residents to move out in the late 1950s. She said she went back shortly afterward, but after seeing the blasted landscape, did not return.

“I was very angry about it because there was nothing wrong with our neighborhood,” she said. “It wasn’t a slum; why tear it down?”

Emily Margolis, 81, moved to New York in 1955 and remembers seeing the rubble on West 98th and 99th Streets before she moved into Park West Village in 1965.

“It looked like war-torn Europe,” she said. “It was depressing, but it never occurred to me that previously it had been a vibrant community where people had been pushed out.”

On Saturday, Ms. Margolis and about 10 other residents of Park West Village went to the Frederick Douglass Center to share in the memories. One was Winifred Armstrong, 81, a Park West Village historian. She said she began attending Old Community reunions about 10 years ago.

“Their history is now our history; we’re here to honor that history, share that history and move on,” she said. “We’re now the Old Community No. 2.”



A reunion brought together about 75 people who used to live on or near West 99th Street.



Jim Epstein, center, made a documentary about the neighborhood, which was razed in the 1950s.

Speaking with Winifred Armstrong.