FROM EXCLUSIONARY COVENANT TO ETHNIC HYPERDIVERSITY IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, QUEENS*

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ABSTRACT. When Edward MacDougall of the Queensboro Realty Company originally envisioned and developed Jackson Heights in Queens, New York in the early twentieth century, he intended it to be an exclusive suburban community for white, nonimmigrant Protestants within a close commute of Midtown Manhattan. He could not have anticipated the 1929 stock market crash, the subsequent real estate market collapse, or the change in immigration policies and patterns after the 1950s. This case study examines how housing and public transportation infrastructure intended to prevent ethnic diversity laid the foundation for one of the most diverse middle-class immigrant neighborhoods in the United States. Keywords: immigrant neighborhoods, New York City, public transportation, Queens.

During the decade of the 1990s the borough of Queens in New York City became the most ethnically diverse county in the United States (Kasinitz, Bazzi, and Doane 1998). Its population had been predominantly non-Hispanic white until the 1970s, but since 1995 it has been the destination of one of the nation's most diverse pools of immigrants (Salvo 2001). The area most affected is the corridor along which the Number 7 train runs, an elevated route of the New York subway system originally constructed to take middle-class and upper-middle-class commuters to their suburban homes in north-central Queens. One neighborhood that has been completely transformed by the recent immigration is Jackson Heights.

In most ethnic enclaves in major immigrant cities, including New York, one particular national-origin group dominates an "ethnic Main Street." But Roosevelt Avenue, one of the principal commercial streets in Jackson Heights, and the streets that intersect it have attracted entrepreneurs from all over the world, mainly from Latin America. The parallel street one block to the north, 37th Avenue, has become part of the economic heart of "Little India." Ethnically heterogeneous economic and residential patterns have served as magnets for even greater diversity.

The consolidation of New York's five very different counties, or boroughs, in 1898 defined the current boundaries of the city. Prior to 1898 each borough had a unique settlement morphology. The preconsolidation history of Queens is linked to rural, agricultural Long Island, with most of the urban development and population growth occurring as postconsolidation planned communities. Jackson Heights is one of those communities. It was originally developed in the early decades of the twentieth century as an elite suburban community for middle-class and upper-middle-class families desiring to move out of Manhattan without leaving the city. Like two other Queens developments, Forest Hills Gardens and Sunnyside Gar-

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dens, Jackson Heights was an adaptation of Ebenezer Howard’s “garden city” concept. Its developers utilized the politics and geography of the city’s emerging mass-transit infrastructure to draw well-to-do Manhattanites to cooperative apartments with elaborate English gardens and other elite amenities.

The purpose of this article is to discuss how early-twentieth-century transportation development combined with exclusive housing development to unintentionally lay the foundation for one of the most diverse residential and commercial districts in the United States. David Keeling (2002) argues that transportation research rarely examines the relationship between transport infrastructure and quality-of-life issues such as housing. New York City, where, in 2000, 70 percent of households were renters, only 44 percent owned automobiles, and 53 percent commuted via public transportation (American FactFinder 2004), serves as an ideal laboratory for examining such an assertion.

Unlike the other garden-city neighborhoods developed in Queens, exclusionary covenants and religious politics were initially employed to inhibit recent immigrants, Jews, and African Americans from settling in Jackson Heights. The developers never foresaw the stock market crash or the subsequent real estate collapse, events that rendered exclusionary covenants moot in the struggle for economic survival. Nor did developers in the 1920s foresee the complete change in immigration law in 1965 that reversed the restrictions of the 1924 National Origins Act and opened the door to immigrants from nearly every nation in the world. In ironic fashion, the neighborhood’s housing and transportation infrastructure responded to the real estate crash of the 1930s and the 1965 Immigration Reform Act by transforming Jackson Heights from its exclusive white Protestant origins to its current state of ethnic hyperdiversity.

The relationship between real estate cycles, transportation, and ethnic or racial change in New York City is not exclusive to Jackson Heights. In Manhattan, the extension of elevated trains northward to Harlem in the 1880s and the subsequent construction of subway lines resulted in the building of spacious apartment houses in that neighborhood between 1898 and 1904. Although developers hoped to attract middle-class families to the area, large numbers of Eastern European Jews moved there in order to either “avoid or escape from the tenements of the Lower East Side” (Gurock and Holder 1995, 523). Attempts were made to prevent middle-class African Americans from moving to Harlem during that period, but tenants who were willing to pay full rent in a soft real estate market gave birth to one of the most significant black communities in the United States (Gurock and Holder 1995, 525).

Brighton Beach, along the southern coast of Long Island in the borough of Brooklyn, is another example of an elite neighborhood that developed through the integration of public transportation and housing construction and that unintentionally attracted a diverse immigrant population of Jews, Italians, Chinese, and Puerto Ricans. As with the African American social and cultural dominance in Harlem, Brighton Beach has become increasingly “Russified” and is now dominated by recently resettled Jewish refugees and immigrants from the former Soviet Union.
(Chiswick 1993; Weinstein 1995, 140; Miyares 1998). What makes Jackson Heights different from Harlem and Brighton Beach is that, as time has passed, no single language or cultural group has become dominant. Instead, the magnitude of the diversity continues to increase.

Jackson Heights is not the only hyperdiverse neighborhood in this part of Queens. Two adjacent areas, Elmhurst and Corona, have comparably diverse immigrant populations. Elmhurst, however, dates back to the early Dutch settlements; Corona, to the nineteenth century. Both have long histories of receiving waves of working-class immigrants (Ricourt and Danta 2003) and reflect the changing immigrant pools.

**A Brief Historical Geography of Queens County**

To understand the significance of the diversity of Queens in general and Jackson Heights in particular, it is critical to review the borough’s historical geography. Queens lies on the northwestern portion of Long Island, which had been part of New Netherland, a Dutch colony governed by the Dutch West India Company in the 1620s. The first known settlements were developed sometime after 1637 in the areas that are now Long Island City, Astoria, Hunter’s Point, and Dutch Kills along the East River across from present-day Midtown Manhattan (Figure 1) (Peterson and Seyfried 1983). In the 1640s the Dutch West India Company recruited English settlers from New England and granted them territories in Mespat (now Maspeth, Queens) and Hempstead (now in Nassau County). The town of Middleburg was founded along the creek that ran through the Mespat patent area. By the 1660s the English settlers were increasingly loyal to the British Crown, and Dutch influence was waning. The entire settlement area was renamed the New Towne. When the Dutch exchanged New Netherland to the British for the South American colony of Suriname in 1664, the transfer of loyalties to the British Crown was complete (Gregory 1994).

The British renamed the region “New York” and subdivided it into ten counties. Long Island comprised three of those counties: Suffolk in the east, Queens in the center and the northwest, and Kings (Brooklyn) in the southwest. Queens was an agricultural county with five townships: Newtown (now Elmhurst), Flushing, Jamaica, Oyster Bay, and Hempstead. At the consolidation of Greater New York in 1898, Queens County was divided into two counties, the smaller, eastern portion becoming Nassau County, incorporating Oyster Bay and most of Hempstead and the larger, western portion becoming what is now the borough of Queens (Gregory 1994).

Physical features bounded the three townships of Newtown, Jamaica, and Flushing on the landscape, influencing the social divisions of the communities and the development of transportation and trade. Newtown and Flushing lay north of the Hill Harbor terminal moraine that runs the length of Long Island and were separated from each other by Flushing Bay and the salt marshes along Flushing Creek (now under landfill at Flushing Meadows–Corona Park). In 1800 the first bridge was constructed across Flushing Creek, finally connecting Newtown and Flushing.
Jamaica, the county seat, lay south of the moraine and from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century had better transportation to, and thus trade with, Brooklyn. In between, most of the land was open farmland or wetlands. The 1790 census recorded 5,393 inhabitants among the three townships, including 1,095 slaves (Peterson and Seyfried 1995, 966).

In 1839 Astoria, located in northwestern Queens near the East River, was the first Queens County village to be incorporated since the seventeenth century. Throughout the 1800s additional villages were founded along the north shore of Long Island, from Ravenswood, across the East River from Manhattan, into Nassau County. The construction of the Long Island Rail Road began to connect these communities. The line from Brooklyn to Jamaica opened in 1839, and the extension to Newtown, the area that is now Woodside, and Hunter’s Point commenced service.
in 1861 (Gregory 1994). All through the nineteenth century, however, the only way to travel to Manhattan was by one of the East River ferries (Lieberman and Lieberman 1983; Karatzas 1990). Although the economies of Queens County villages became more integrated and increasing numbers of Manhattanites were moving to Queens, the lack of a direct connection between the islands inhibited real estate speculation and development (Karatzas 1990; Gregory 1994).

That all changed with the decision to construct the Queensboro Bridge. Construction commenced in 1901, and the bridge opened eight years later, creating a direct connection between 59th Street in Manhattan and Jackson Avenue (now Northern Boulevard) in Long Island City, Queens. Another type of connection was spurred in 1887 by William Steinway, who moved the family’s piano factory from Midtown Manhattan to Astoria in 1906 (Lieberman and Lieberman 1983), when he financed the construction of a subway tunnel under the East River from Grand Central Station on 42nd Street (Karatzas 1990). The tunnel was completed in 1907, but, because of political battles, the first trains did not pass through it until 1915. This line became the Number 7 train. A second tunnel extended the 3rd Avenue elevated line and the 53rd Street lines into Queens, providing service into Astoria and eastward toward Jamaica and Flushing. The elevated line into Astoria and the Number 7 line connected at Queensboro Plaza, an elevated transfer station above the Queens base of the Queensboro Bridge, where passengers could also transfer to trolley cars.

The planned construction of the public transportation infrastructure, accompanied by improvement of the east–west roads that had historically connected Queens villages and by a strong New York economy, opened Queens to speculative real estate development at the turn of the twentieth century. Rapid population growth resulted from these new residential developments. In 1900, the borough's populace numbered 152,999, a population that nearly doubled within a decade to 284,041. By 1920, after several of the development projects were well established, the population had grown to 469,042, a number that more than doubled over the next ten years to 1,079,129 (Peterson and Seyfried 1983, 9). Of critical importance was Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities of To–morrow ([1898] 1945). The book had inspired a movement among developers, and the available open land in Queens allowed for garden cities. Forest Hills Gardens and Sunnyside Gardens were planned according to Howard's model (Pomeroy, Cusack, and Jackson 2001). Jackson Heights introduced a new component to the planned garden city: the garden cooperative apartment community.

**The Garden City as an Urban Development Model**

New York City is rarely discussed among planners as a model for planned urban growth (Kasinitz 1995, 86). A bird’s-eye view of Queens would give the impression that the borough’s chaotic quilt of incongruous street patterns may have resulted from a lack of coherent planning. Infill construction during the 1950s did result in adjacent neighborhoods whose grid patterns were at awkward angles to each other.
However, several of the borough's pre–World War II neighborhoods were planned developments, adaptations of Howard's "garden-city" model.

Howard believed that "town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization" ([1898] 1945, 48). He argued for developing new sustainable cities that synthesized what he saw as the best of both urban and rural life (Howard [1898] 1945; Stein 1966; Richert and Lapping 1995; Hall and Ward 1998)—his ideal of "a human-scaled community, compact and diverse in itself, embedded in a green, natural environment" (Fishman 1998, 127). When Howard originally proposed the garden-city model in 1898, many cities in Europe and the northeastern region of the United States faced serious housing and public health problems resulting from overcrowding in old tenement buildings. Those cities were often surrounded by undeveloped open land or available farmland, and Howard saw planned development of the lands as the ideal solution for deconcentrating urban populations without losing the critical community components of cities. Various developers saw the new borough of Queens as an ideal site for adaptations of the garden-city model.

The two Queens developments that have received the most scholarly attention are Forest Hills Gardens and Sunnyside Gardens (Figure 1). Sponsored by the non-profit Russell Sage Homes Foundation, Forest Hills Gardens was developed by Clarence Perry as a railroad commuter suburb in Queens (Pomeroy, Cusack, and Jackson 2001). Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage, philanthropist and widow of the tycoon Russell Sage, originally approved the building of Forest Hills Gardens to provide good-quality, affordable housing to middle-class and working-class families who desired to leave the crowded confines of Manhattan apartments and live in single-family homes (Gottlieb n.d.). The plan included parks, tennis courts, and houses set back from the street, allowing for lawns and gardens. But only middle-class to upper-class residents could afford the large, Tudor-style homes, and later political movements solidified the neighborhood's resistance to the influx of working class and poor populations of color (Sennett 1995).

Unlike Forest Hills Gardens, Sunnyside Gardens was successful in attracting working-class families to a suburban commuter development in Queens. Developed by Charles Stein between 1924 and 1928, Sunnyside Gardens synthesized Howard's ideals of the marriage of town and country with a preexisting grid pattern. Stein (1966, 25–27) adapted his plans to constraints imposed by the Borough Engineer's Office to keep a rectangular block structure. Row houses were constructed adjacent to one another on three sides of a block, allowing for semiclosed, shared gardens in the center of each block. He later constructed the Phipps Garden Apartments on adjacent land that was originally intended to be part of Sunnyside (p. 88). The urbanist Lewis Mumford, a longtime resident of Sunnyside Gardens, believed that Stein "did more than any other single person in America to realize in practice what Ebenezer Howard first set forth" (Parsons 1998, 129). Though laid out in a street plan very different from the one originally envisioned by Howard, Sunnyside
Gardens was and continues to be a sustainable, mixed-income garden community with a viable local economy.

A much less studied adaptation of the garden-city model is that of Jackson Heights. Unlike Forest Hills Gardens and Sunnyside Gardens, Jackson Heights was envisioned initially as an elite community of cooperative garden apartments populated by the upper class of Manhattan who desired formal English gardens but not the responsibility of tending them. The housing was never intended for the working class or the poor, and active steps were taken to inhibit their entry to the community. Ironically, of the three garden-city adaptations, Jackson Heights is becoming the most “mixed income” and is the most ethnically diverse.

**Jackson Heights**

The development of Jackson Heights was the vision of Edward Archibald MacDougall, the driving force behind the incorporation of the Queensboro Corporation, a real estate development firm, in 1909. He was the corporation’s first general manager and within the decade became its second president. The Queensboro Corporation began purchasing farms and undeveloped land north of Elmhurst (formerly Newtown), between Astoria and Flushing Bay. The area had no streets other than the well-traveled roads connecting Astoria, Newtown, and Flushing. MacDougall began by grading and paving streets and constructing sewers and sidewalks. Because the goal was to appeal to Manhattanites desiring to suburbanize without leaving the city, high-quality infrastructure was essential for attracting both investors and buyers.

The original plan had been to construct concrete-slab model homes similar to those Thomas Edison had constructed in his planned community of Edison, New Jersey. In order to distinguish the development from neighboring Elmhurst, MacDougall christened the area “Jackson Heights” after John Jackson, a descendant of one of the original Queens families and a leader in transportation development in the borough. Jackson Avenue, later renamed “Northern Boulevard,” served as the northern border of the development. The term “Heights” was added to the development’s name to take advantage of the prestige from which Brooklyn Heights had benefited, a label justified by the slightly higher elevation of the development relative to Elmhurst due to glacial topography (Karatzas 1990).

The development of Jackson Heights did not follow a master plan but seems to have resulted from evolving visions of ideal suburban communities. Early buildings were either multistory apartment buildings or two-story row houses similar to ones the Queensboro Corporation had constructed in Elmhurst and Woodside. These early buildings were built near Northern Boulevard, the only major transportation artery at the time. The construction of the elevated train, the Number 7 line, opened the entire area to development; and, when the 53rd Street lines were extended farther eastward into Queens to improve commuter access between Manhattan and Forest Hills, MacDougall persuaded the railroad planners to construct a
transfer point at 74th Street and Broadway, at which commuters could also connect to the elevated Number 7 train (Figure 2).

With the expansion of the subway system, MacDougall could develop his vision for Jackson Heights as the first garden-apartment community in the United States. Daniel Karatzas (1990, 29) argued that the term “garden apartment” was coined for Jackson Heights and was used as early as 1917 in reference to the Queensboro Corporation’s first major apartment complex, the Garden Apartments, later called the “Greystones” (Figure 3). The name was changed in 1925, and its status went from rental to cooperative. This fourteen-building, Gothic-style complex is not a true garden-apartment complex, which would have gardens in the front and rear. The Greystones are recessed from the sidewalk and have small gardens in the front of each building, giving a garden-like appearance. They lack the formal gardens of MacDougall’s later developments. Instead, the shared public space for the Greystones is 80th Street, because the complex’s buildings line opposite sides of the street instead of occupying a complete block, as did the later garden-apartment complexes.

The post–World War I housing shortage encouraged MacDougall to expand his vision for the Jackson Heights development project. The second major phase of development came with an innovative financing plan: selling cooperative garden apartments. Several buildings on Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan had been sold as cooperatives, or “co-ops,” in the late nineteenth century, but the concept never really took off. MacDougall chose to introduce this form of tenancy to Jackson Heights and initially met with success. Tenants purchased both their apartments and a share of the mortgage and maintenance of the building. The private gardens were an added feature unavailable to Park Avenue or Fifth Avenue residents.

To create an elite suburban atmosphere, MacDougall designed a number of low-density complexes that featured large apartments and formal, enclosed English gardens. The first of these was Linden Court, constructed in 1919. In contrast to the Greystones’ connected buildings, Linden Court’s buildings were elaborate: They were separated from one another by small garden walkways, and they surrounded a large, central formal garden. These innovations marked a major shift in complex development in Jackson Heights (Karatzas 1990).

Several complexes took on a thematic design that determined their facades, roofs, and structure. An example of this is the Chateau (Figure 4). Built in a French Chateau style, this 1923 complex designed by A. J. Thomas, the Queensboro Corporation’s primary architect, continues as a co-op building with a private English garden. The complex’s buildings line the east and west sides of the block, and the gardens run the length of the block between the two rows of buildings. The gardens have formal gated entrances, statues, fountains, and sculptured benches and are accessible only to residents.

The booming economy of the 1920s led to the construction of larger and more elaborate apartments. The largest and most elaborate were the Towers (Figure 4),
which ranged in price from $18,000 to $25,000 and were thus among the most expensive housing units in all of New York City at the time. The seven-room, three-bathroom apartments at the top end were larger and more expensive than many single-family houses. Like the other complexes, the 'Towers' enclosed gardens run the length of the center of the block and are rich with statues, fountains, and benches. The intricate wrought-iron entrances to the gardens are guarded by statues of griffins, adding to the aura of exclusivity that was the goal of the developers.

MacDougall wanted to create an exclusive city within a city, so he included parks, tennis courts, a nine-hole golf course, and a community clubhouse in the development. Along 82nd Street he constructed a shopping center, the English Gables, whose design gave the street a European village atmosphere. To meet the demand for single-family and two-family homes, MacDougall designed houses that maintained the
FIG. 3—The Greystones (formerly the Garden Apartments) line the east and west sides of 80th Street in Jackson Heights, Queens. (Photograph by the author, spring 2002)

FIG. 4—The Chateau Apartments, in the foreground, were designed to evoke the image of a French villa. The Towers, in the background, were the largest and most elaborate of Edward MacDougall’s apartment complexes in Jackson Heights, Queens. (Photograph by the author, spring 2002)
The row houses in the foreground were constructed with English village-like facades. Edward MacDougall’s architects used a variety of facade styles in Jackson Heights, Queens. In the background is an example of infill construction, a recently built senior-citizen assisted-living facility. (Photograph by the author, spring 2002)

English garden motif. Along some streets he constructed villa-like houses; on others, row houses (Figure 5).

New York City’s new zoning regulations prevented industrial development in the area, thus maintaining the neighborhood as distinctly residential. The costs of the apartments and the exclusionary covenants prohibiting sale or rental to blacks, Jews, or Catholics—the latter a euphemism for immigrants—in the original deeds created an attractive community for white middle-class and upper-middle-class Protestants desiring to suburbanize without the long commute to communities farther east on Long Island, in New Jersey, or in Westchester County, New York, just north of New York City. The plan assumed that the economy would continue to expand and that population growth in the city would maintain the demand for elite real estate (Karatzas 1990).

One of the oldest churches in Jackson Heights is the Community United Methodist Church, at 35th Avenue and 81st Street just south of the Chateau (Figure 2). It was founded in 1919 to serve the spiritual needs of the area’s non-Hispanic white Protestant population. St. Mark’s Episcopal Church was founded eight years later, with its sanctuary close to the Towers. The Roman Catholic parish of St. Joan of Arc, the first Catholic parish in the United States to be dedicated to a French saint, was established a year later. However, due to political challenges among the local parish, the diocese, and the developers, construction of the parish’s sanctuary, across 81st Street from the Methodist Church, was not completed until 1952.
THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

The stock market crash in 1929 and the real estate stagnation in the 1930s initiated the transformation of Jackson Heights. Unoccupied apartments became very difficult to sell. Prices were halved, as were the sizes of many of the apartments. Many of the Towers’ larger seven-room apartments, for example, were divided into three-room and four-room apartments. Tenants who lost their jobs or capital had to either sell or default on their apartments. As the affluence of the residents declined, so did the quality of the neighborhood’s retail and other services.

World War II brought a very tight housing market. Vacancy rates of rental units declined significantly, but the economic strength of the Queensboro Corporation lay in new construction. Even though housing construction boomed again after World War II, the real estate market in Jackson Heights did not regain its former value until the 1990s. Lower-cost, less-elaborate, higher-density rental apartments filled in the areas that had been parks and tennis courts. Even through the 1960s and 1970s, the cost of the remaining seven-room apartments in the Towers was substantially lower than it had been during its peak in the 1920s. Not until the 1990s did Jackson Heights begin to benefit from the skyrocketing housing costs in Manhattan by attracting potential buyers looking for large luxury apartments within a reasonable commute to Midtown. In 2003, available seven-room cooperative apartments in the Towers were typically advertised for $400,000 to $500,000, far less than comparable apartments in Manhattan and with convenient commutes to downtown.

Post–World War II housing construction in nearby Nassau County, coupled with Robert Moses’s highway construction projects in northern Queens (Caro 1974), also affected Jackson Heights. With the infill construction of the 1950s and 1960s, Jackson Heights was no longer the suburb it had been a few decades earlier. Many of the adult children of original residents chose to move farther out into the suburbs, especially because, by then, highways, parkways, and the Long Island Rail Road connected Midtown Manhattan to new suburban housing tracts. This contributed to vacancy rates and a lag in the economic recovery of Jackson Heights.

The depressed real estate market became concerned more with making sales to those with the resources to buy than with the ethnic and religious preferences of the developers. The original exclusionary covenants rapidly became moot, and the seeds of ethnic diversity were sowed in the neighborhood. The first groups to break through the exclusionary covenants were Jews and Irish Catholics. The former were also making inroads into Forest Hills Gardens; the latter, into Sunnyside and Woodside.

The 1924 National Origins Act had restricted immigrant source countries to those with significant representation in the 1910 census, thus overwhelmingly favoring northern and western European countries. The earlier Chinese Exclusion Acts and Gentlemen’s Agreement had closed off immigration from China, Japan, and Korea, and the National Origins Act extended these restrictions to the “Asia-Pacific Triangle”; that is, the majority of Asian countries. No numerical limitation was placed on Latin American immigration, but small numbers of Latin Americans were settling in New York prior to World War II. The decade-long Great Depression
also deterred new immigration. Thus, despite migration of Jews and Irish Catholics to formerly closed Queens communities, the area’s ethnic makeup changed relatively little until the 1950s.

The 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act opened the door to previously excluded immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and from Asia but retained numerical limits based on national origin. It established a preference system based on professional and skilled-labor categories designed to meet the needs of the post-war economy. Unlike previous acts, this one established numerical limits on Western Hemisphere immigration, but the largest source of Latin American migration to New York at that time was from Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory not subject to immigration restrictions (Kraly and Miyares 2001).

The 1965 Immigration Reform Act transformed immigration, favoring family-based categories over professional ones—though retaining the employment-based categories—and removing national-origin limits. The act also removed family reunification visas from the total number of visas awarded annually (Kraly and Miyares 2001). Thus an immigrant from any country in the world who qualified for a professional or skilled-labor visa could ultimately arrange for the immigration of his or her entire family. This law transformed the ethnic geography of the United States, but few areas were as affected as Queens and, within Queens, as neighborhoods like Jackson Heights, with available housing.

In the 1950s, middle-class Colombian entrepreneurs seeking to escape the chaos and violence in their homeland began coming to New York in growing numbers. The large, and by then affordable, apartments in Jackson Heights could accommodate the extended families typical of many Latin American immigrants. Cubans escaping the tyranny of Fulgencio Batista’s regime and, later, Fidel Castro’s communist government also settled in Jackson Heights. These early waves of Latin American immigrants and refugees came with entrepreneurial experience and often with the capital needed to establish businesses. Commercial establishments along Roosevelt Avenue between 74th Street and 90th Street (primarily Colombian) and 82nd Street (primarily Cuban) began to take on a distinctly Latin flavor.

Passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act coincided with the wave of out-migration to suburbs farther east on Long Island by young adults who had been raised in Jackson Heights (Karatzas 1990). Large apartments at affordable rents or purchase prices attracted new waves of Latin American immigrants, as well as immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. The vacancies created by suburbanization were filled increasingly by immigrant families from every corner of the world, although, even as late as 1974, a field study of Jackson Heights conducted by Columbia University described the area as a “largely white, middle-class neighborhood” (Friedman and Bell 1974). The area was primarily occupied by white Europeans and white South Americans. Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans were still unwelcome, so they tended to settle in the neighboring areas of Corona and East Elmhurst. The greatest changes came in the 1980s and 1990s with the diversification of the Latin American population and the arrival of the South Asian community and economy.
A Transformed Ethnic Landscape

The Immigration Reform Act of 1965 was a watershed act in terms of the population and ethnic dynamics of the United States, particularly of Queens County. Although the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952 had reopened the door to Asian immigrants, quotas of a mere 105 visas per country were set for most countries in that region. The 1965 act eliminated those quotas and created a system of percentages of total visas awarded according to family-based and employment-based preferences. Because few Asians qualified for family-based visas early on, the first waves of “new Asians” were educated professionals and entrepreneurs. Latin American entrepreneurs from countries with little previous immigration also entered under the employment-based preferences. Once they received permanent-resident status, they could sponsor family members for either family reunification visas or family-based preference visas (Kraly and Miyares 2001). Because this act coincided with the availability of affordable housing near public transportation in various Queens neighborhoods experiencing out-migration to more easterly Long Island suburbs, the ethnic transformation of the borough, and of its component neighborhoods, gained momentum.

Table I shows the changes in racial composition, Hispanic origin, and nativity of Queens County from 1950 to 2000. Although the percentage of foreign-born residents varied over this fifty-year period, what is most evident is the decline in the percentage of “whites” (which may include Hispanic whites), the growth of the Hispanic population (of any race), and the major changes in the percentage of Asian residents. Table II shows changes in racial composition and Hispanic origin from 1980 to 2000 in the census tracts that make up Jackson Heights. The changes over this twenty-year period are comparably dramatic and are clearly reflected in the neighborhood’s economic and social streetscapes.

Queens experienced dramatic population growth during the 1990s—more than 14 percent—while the population of Jackson Heights grew by nearly 25 percent. As Table I shows, a significant proportion of that growth can be explained by either new immigration or internal migration of immigrants. Approximately 46 percent of the Queens population was foreign born in 2000, whereas in Jackson Heights the foreign-born population accounted for nearly 63 percent of the residents. This compares with only 32 percent for the other four boroughs of New York City. Seventy-five percent of the foreign born in Jackson Heights arrived after 1980, compared with 72 percent for all of Queens and 71 percent for the other boroughs.

Table III lists the changes in selected national-origin groups between 1990 and 2000 for Queens County and Jackson Heights. The borough and the neighborhood experienced key shifts in ethnic makeup. This suggests that Jackson Heights currently serves as a multiethnic transition neighborhood, facilitating the initial years or decades of adjustment for new immigrants who, in many ways, can still be defined by economic status rather than by ethnicity.

What has drawn such a diverse immigrant population to the area is the availability of large, affordable apartments in close proximity to public transportation
Table I—Changes in Race, Hispanic Origin, and Nativity in Queens County, New York, 1950–2000

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<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>1,551,849</td>
<td>1,809,578</td>
<td>1,986,473</td>
<td>1,891,325</td>
<td>1,951,598</td>
<td>2,229,379</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent white</td>
<td>96.54</td>
<td>91.46</td>
<td>85.55</td>
<td>71.46</td>
<td>57.92</td>
<td>44.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent black</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>8.06</td>
<td>12.98</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>21.70</td>
<td>19.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<td>12.24</td>
<td>17.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent othera</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>9.77</td>
<td>20.39</td>
<td>36.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Hispanic</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>11.86</td>
<td>16.91</td>
<td>24.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent foreign born</td>
<td>18.57</td>
<td>51.70</td>
<td>20.99</td>
<td>28.60</td>
<td>36.23</td>
<td>46.13</td>
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a “Other” comprises all who were not enumerated as white or black prior to 1980; after 1980, the category refers to all who self-identified as other than white, black, or Asian.


Table II—Changes in Population, Race, and Hispanic Origin in Jackson Heights, Queens County, New York, 1980–2000 (Sum of Census Tracts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOTAL POPULATION</th>
<th>WHITE (%)</th>
<th>BLACK (%)</th>
<th>ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER (%)</th>
<th>OTHERa (%)</th>
<th>HISPANIC (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>30,937</td>
<td>85.22</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>24.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>30,820</td>
<td>72.71</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>12.99</td>
<td>12.06</td>
<td>33.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>38,132</td>
<td>56.04</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>16.04</td>
<td>25.04</td>
<td>50.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a “Other” primarily comprises those who self-identified as other than white, black, or Asian, including those of mixed racial heritage.


(Miyares and Gowen 1998). Coethnics from whom job information can be obtained as well as the presence of ethnic economies are also continuing draws to the neighborhood. A certain amount of steering seems to be occurring in the housing market (Miyares and Gowen 1998), but real estate agents describe it as ethnic/national origin gatekeeping with little or no intent of malice, as opposed to the historic racial and religious housing discrimination. A growing number of middle-class immigrants who are purchasing real estate as investment property prefer tenants of the same or similar national origin, also contributing to the growth of particular populations.

The transportation infrastructure and the major commercial streets facilitated the expansion and now diversification of the business district. By the 1990s the social and economic landscape of Jackson Heights had been completely transformed, from the exclusive old-stock European, middle-class and upper-class roots to one comprising an ethnic mosaic matched in few other places in the United States. Although original elements such as the English Gables and the garden cooperative apartment complexes are still present, this is no longer a neighborhood in which the former Manhattan elite stroll through parks leading to tennis courts and golf courses not available in Midtown.
Table III—Selected Ethnic Groups in Queens County and Jackson Heights, New York, 1990 and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>QUEENS 1990</th>
<th>QUEENS 2000</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>JACOBSON HEIGHTS 1990</th>
<th>JACOBSON HEIGHTS 2000</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>1,951,5</td>
<td>2,229,37</td>
<td>14.23</td>
<td>57,133</td>
<td>71,308</td>
<td>24.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,130,3</td>
<td>982,725</td>
<td>-13.06</td>
<td>36,363</td>
<td>35,617</td>
<td>-2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>423,43</td>
<td>446,189</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>2,299</td>
<td>2,074</td>
<td>-9.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Asian</td>
<td>238,28</td>
<td>391,500</td>
<td>64.30</td>
<td>9,639</td>
<td>12,220</td>
<td>26.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>87,001</td>
<td>139,820</td>
<td>60.71</td>
<td>3,660</td>
<td>3,824</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>49,970</td>
<td>62,130</td>
<td>24.33</td>
<td>1,867</td>
<td>1,338</td>
<td>-28.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>24,691</td>
<td>30,520</td>
<td>23.61</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>53,939</td>
<td>109,114</td>
<td>102.29</td>
<td>1,782</td>
<td>3,395</td>
<td>90.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12,786</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11,210</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hispanic</td>
<td>371,32</td>
<td>556,605</td>
<td>49.90</td>
<td>24,434</td>
<td>40,211</td>
<td>64.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>12,794</td>
<td>55,481</td>
<td>333.65</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>5,547</td>
<td>788.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>94,395</td>
<td>108,661</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>2,206</td>
<td>2,557</td>
<td>15.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>18,406</td>
<td>12,793</td>
<td>-30.50</td>
<td>1,632</td>
<td>1,109</td>
<td>-32.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>52,309</td>
<td>69,875</td>
<td>33.58</td>
<td>4,522</td>
<td>4,242</td>
<td>-6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>7,597</td>
<td>7,379</td>
<td>-2.87</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>19.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduran</td>
<td>3,607</td>
<td>5,020</td>
<td>39.17</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-27.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaraguan</td>
<td>2,773</td>
<td>1,656</td>
<td>-40.28</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>-54.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvadoran</td>
<td>10,893</td>
<td>13,798</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>63,224</td>
<td>60,298</td>
<td>-4.63</td>
<td>6,473</td>
<td>7,075</td>
<td>9.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuadorian</td>
<td>35,412</td>
<td>57,716</td>
<td>62.98</td>
<td>3,360</td>
<td>6,169</td>
<td>83.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peruvian</td>
<td>14,875</td>
<td>15,957</td>
<td>7.27</td>
<td>1,338</td>
<td>1,285</td>
<td>-3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Other Hispanic&quot;</td>
<td>32,237</td>
<td>106,427</td>
<td>230.14</td>
<td>1,710</td>
<td>8,686</td>
<td>407.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Particularly on weekends, sections of Roosevelt Avenue are transformed into a Latin American city. Because both the residential and the entrepreneurial populations are so diverse, however, the scene does not take on the characteristics of any particular city. One is in Andean South America on one block, in the Caribbean on the next, then on to Mexico, then to South America's Pacific coast. The businesses are taking advantage of the combination of transportation access and the use of Spanish as a common trade language to ensure economic success. Business owners use toponyms and cultural symbols to identify source countries, resulting in businesses named for places such as Cali, Guayaquil, or Puebla. National flags and crests are common on store awnings, and the colors of national flags are incorporated in the signage. Stereotypes such as the Colombian campesino and the Mexican sleeping under a saguaro cactus are also incorporated into the signage. As the number of Mexican businesses grows, so has the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in signage and store awnings (Miyares 2004).

Transnational connections are maintained through the numerous locations at which one can make international telephone calls, send money orders or packages, or arrange for travel. Signage in storefronts reflects a desire to serve all Latin Ameri-
Fig. 6—Delgado Travel’s headquarters is the largest single enterprise located on Roosevelt Avenue under the elevated Number 7 train in Jackson Heights, Queens and has become one of the largest travel agencies in New York City. (Photograph by the author, spring 2002)

Fig. 7—A growing number of Mexican businesses are opening along Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens. This branch office of Delgado Travel, about five blocks from the main headquarters, is targeting the Mexican market. (Photograph by the author, spring 2002)
can countries simultaneously. The largest of the travel agencies, Delgado Travel, an Ecuadorian company, has its main office on Roosevelt Avenue, as well as a Casa de Cambio that facilitates currency exchange for residents and visitors alike (Figure 6). Delgado has several additional offices in Jackson Heights (Figure 7), as well as throughout New York City.

A growing informal economy of food and drink vendors (homemade tamales, churros, and traditional fruit drinks), toy shops, clothing stores, and sundry other enterprises also has an increasing presence along Roosevelt Avenue. The informal economy tends to represent the most recent arrivals. Currently it is dominated by the Mexican community, the third-largest and fastest-growing Hispanic community in New York, after the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.

Along Roosevelt Avenue one also finds the now-ubiquitous Korean entrepreneurs. Although highly concentrated residentially in Flushing, Korean entrepreneurs can be found in all business districts of New York City. In Jackson Heights, many Koreans have either established their own businesses or have purchased commercial real estate and leased stores to Latin American merchants. At 77th Street and Roosevelt Avenue, Koreans and Mexicans share a small, two-story shopping center that integrates their businesses in synergistic ways. Above TacoLandia, a Mexican taco stand, for example, one finds Ko Seguros, a Korean-owned insurance agency targeting a Spanish-speaking clientele. In the same complex, Buena Suerte Botanica, a shop specializing in the candles, statues, and herbs necessary for practicing traditional religions and syncretistic Latin American Catholicism, hosts a Korean tarot card reader.

From Roosevelt Avenue, one can travel around the corner to 74th Street and immediately enter “Little India.” The sudden change in ambiance and landscape is striking. On Roosevelt Avenue the trade language is Spanish, Latin music is playing loudly, and the colors and flags of each entrepreneur’s home country are visible everywhere. On 74th Street one is immediately struck by the smell of curry, by the sounds of accented English, Hindi, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi, by saris and turbans, and by stores filled with gold from Gujarat.

Little India was born in the 1980s and continues to expand along 74th Street and on 37th Avenue, one block north of Roosevelt, from 76th Street to 72nd Street. Although only settling in small numbers in Jackson Heights relative to their greater residential concentrations in Richmond Hill, Queens, Indian entrepreneurs leased or purchased vacant storefronts and began to establish an economic enclave bordering the incipient Latin American district. They transformed a former X-rated movie theater into a theater specializing in “Bollywood” feature films. Restaurants specializing in Indian cuisine are prevalent. Among them is the Jackson Diner, formerly a mediocre general-menu diner that was converted to one of the most highly rated Indian buffets in all of New York City. Gujarati gold vendors line 74th Street, as do Bollywood video and music stores. Grocery stores such as Patel Brothers specialize in Hindu, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Afghani products, attracting shoppers from these communities in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Travel agencies
and locations at which one can make international telephone calls and send packages and money orders are as common as they are on Roosevelt Avenue, but the advertised countries are those of the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia (Figure 8), not Latin America.

Around the corner, on Broadway and 37th Avenue, is a small Korean economic strip designed to serve the Korean population that lives in Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, as well as Koreans who work in the area. The signage and items for sale are almost exclusively in Korean, unlike the Mexican-Korean combined shopping center a few blocks away on Roosevelt Avenue.

The most diverse commercial area in Queens is the section of Roosevelt Avenue that serves as the border between Jackson Heights and Elmhurst. Farther west along the avenue the businesses become increasingly Filipino, then Irish, and Korean in the direction of Woodside and Sunnyside. West on Broadway begins the transition into Greek and Italian Astoria. Eastward on Roosevelt Avenue, toward Flushing, one approaches New York’s Koreatown and the Taiwanese Chinatown.

The ethnic transformation is also evident in the area’s churches. St. Joan of Arc Roman Catholic Church has always served a multilingual immigrant population, and now the mainline Protestant churches also reflect the ethnic diversity in the neighborhood. St. Mark’s Episcopal Church has services in both Spanish and English. The Community United Methodist Church holds services in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean and hosts the Indian Church of Jackson Heights, a 2002 change. The space it occupies was for many years the site of the Jewish Center of Jackson Heights, a congregation that now leases space at a nearby Sizzler restaurant. A growing number of storefront Spanish-language evangelical and Pentecostal churches are also emerging along Roosevelt Avenue.

**The Dynamics of Neighborhood Change**

During the recessionary years of the 1970s, New York was among the cities that declined in both population and economy, particularly in manufacturing. New York City was no longer a place where large numbers of unskilled or semiskilled immigrant laborers could find work in the preexisting manufacturing economy. Changes in immigration laws in 1952 and 1965, however, shifted both the source regions and skill levels of immigrants. Many immigrants no longer have to work their way into the middle class over at least one or two generations. A large percentage of the new immigrants come as educated professionals and entrepreneurs, with the human and financial capital to immediately enter the middle class. They tend to settle in neighborhoods with high vacancy rates, large, affordable apartments or houses, access to public transportation, and available storefronts in which immigrant entrepreneurs can establish businesses (Millman 1997). Jackson Heights is one such neighborhood.

The original vision for Jackson Heights was for an exclusive upper-class, old-stock European community who desired the benefits of English country living without leaving the city. When MacDougall and the Queensboro Corporation first began
to develop Jackson Heights, Queens was still predominantly open space. MacDougall had a vision for the future, but he could not control it. His success in developing quality housing in multiple forms with numerous social amenities close at hand spurred further development and the beginnings of the urbanization of that part of Queens. As the population of the city grew, so did the demand for new housing, particularly in those areas with open land and access to public transportation. The initial plan for Jackson Heights allowed for extensive infill construction as the housing shortage outweighed the demand for tennis courts and golf courses.

Jackson Heights was originally planned in an era of economic expansion and optimism. In the 1910s and 1920s, few anticipated the possibility of a stock market crash and subsequent collapse of the real estate industry. Neither did the neighborhood's planners anticipate that those with the means to ensure their economic survival would have been those excluded from original entry: Jews and Irish Catholics. The anti-immigrant sentiments and legislation in the 1920s could never have predicted the changes in immigration that began three decades later.

Without ever intending it, and with significant efforts to prevent it from happening, Edward MacDougall and the Queensboro Corporation laid the foundation for what has become one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States. The transformation of Jackson Heights began fifty years ago, when early suburbanization coincided with the beginnings of large-scale, middle-class immi-
migration and with a depressed housing market. The housing had been intended for middle-class and upper-class residents desiring large, high-quality apartments and houses and the convenience of public transportation. The first wave of new immigrants fit the class profile despite the change in ethnic origin.

Nearly all Latin American and Asian immigrant groups are represented in Jackson Heights’ business districts and in its residential population. But with each new wave of immigration Jackson Heights continues to reinvent itself. Thus it is impossible to say what the future holds for this neighborhood. Much of Jackson Heights was declared a historic district in 1993 (Kasinitz, Bazzi, and Doane 1998), and most of the older apartment complexes have been declared landmarks by the city, thus protecting their structures in a somewhat static state. Yet the resident population is dynamic and will probably remain so into the future, possibly retaining its current character of ethnic hyperdiversity as opposed to becoming an ethnic enclave dominated by any one national-origin or regional group.

Note

1. For a more detailed history and description of the Jackson Heights Historic District, see Karatzas (1990).

References


