

LINDA – Fieldnotes – 7 February 2007

Subject: West Harlem Local Development Corporation weekly meeting

Location: Manhattan Pentecostal Church

Time: 6:25- approximately 8:15

Written on 2/8/07 and 2/11/07

Eckson and I were invited to this meeting by Pastor Grattan, with whom I spoke on the phone on a cold call, and with whom we planned to speak with two days later. He is one of the board members, chosen to represent local churches. His church provides the meeting space.

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Prior to Meeting

Preliminary fact-finding about the evolution of the West Harlem Local Development Corporation (WH LDC) to find out to what extent it is connected to local government. Found this website on community boards:

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http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/html/cb/cb_main.shtml

The WH LDC was authorized and supported by Community Board 9 (CB9). The Manhattanville area lies within Community District 9. The borough president names half of the 50 board members, and the city council members who represent the district names the other half.

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On the way

Eckson and I arranged to meet at 6pm for the 6:30 meeting, since I wanted to get there on time. I was running late after talking with a student. Around 6:15 Eckson and I walked over to the church from my office. We began an animated conversation about racial politics and land reform in South Africa, a conversation that continued almost until the meeting started.

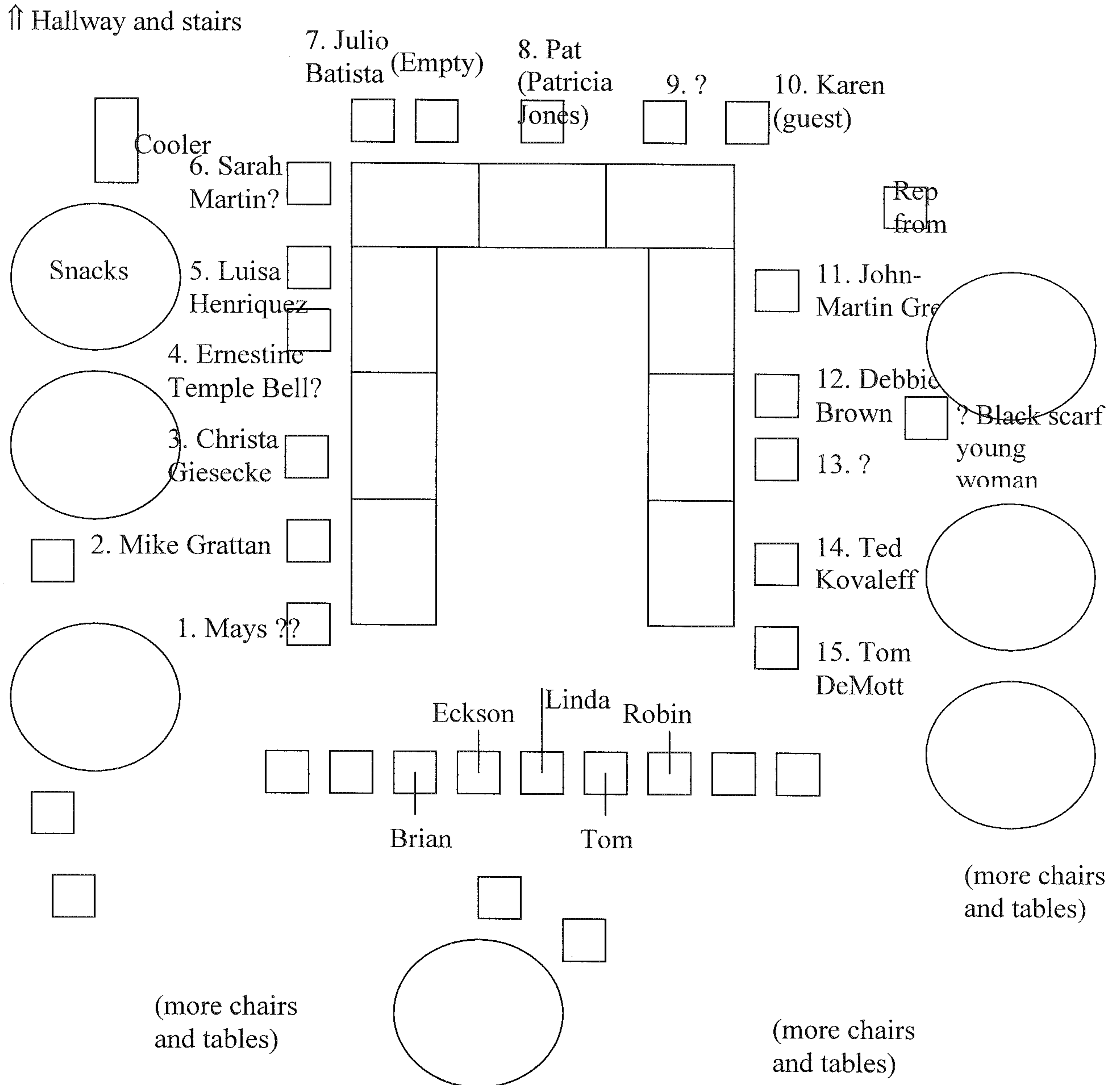
We quickly found the church, which is on the north side of 125th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. Two young men, both African American, were trying to get into the building when we arrived. One of them tried to open one of each set of doors (4?) leading into the lobby of the church, which looked relatively well-appointed, before successfully opening a door that led up a flight of stairs. We followed them, not sure whether we were going to the meeting.

Pre-meeting

Upstairs we found four women sitting at a set of tables arranged into a U-shape, taking up about 1/3 of a large room filled with tables and chairs. They were sitting together along one side. The four board members present when we arrived included a dark-skinned

middle-aged woman, two women who could be called African American, and an older white woman. I did not notice whether anyone was talking before we arrived. Certainly the four of us drew notice.

I asked Eckson sotto voce if we should ask them if this was the meeting. One of them, I can't remember which, asked if we were "the public" and gestured us toward a row of chairs arranged on the open end of the U.



This sketch is not to scale, nor am I sure about the number of tables (rectangular or

round). However, it does show the clumps of people that developed as people came in and selected their seats. Some of the board members sat close together, whereas others sat with a great deal of space around them. For example, four of the women sat closely together, except for Pat [who seemed to be apparent chair] and Debbie Brown. [I do not know whether it was important that these two women wore fur hats, while at least two of the four are tenant activists and not high-powered former corporate professionals. Pat is listed on the website as a CPA and former managing director at JP Morgan and Debbie as Vice President of Private Banking at City National Bank.] The men at both ends of the U were also sitting closely together, with a man on each end offset just beyond the edge of the tables. [The overall impression was of marginality, that there was not quite enough room for these members when others sat with plenty of room around them.]

The row of chairs, where Eckson and I sat down, quickly filled with “the public.” All other squares denote filled chairs. There were other chairs and tables around the room, but I did not count how many there were. Small squares denote chairs that other members of “the public” selected.

With the four board members already seated (plus Pastor Grattan presumably elsewhere in the building) and the two men who arrived before us, Eckson and I were the eighth and ninth people to show up to the meeting. After being told to sit at the chairs designated for “the public,” Eckson and I chose seats, exchanged greetings with the two young men who selected seats at the end of the row, and continued our conversation.

Since Eckson and I were involved with our conversation, I did not pay close attention to which board members arrived when, although I noted who selected which seats in the row reserved for the public. I remarked to Eckson that it turned out well that we were running late, and he explained in South Africa the difference between being “on time” versus “on the clock,” which he indicated was a white expression. I asked him if he had heard the expression “CP time,” or “colored people’s time.”

The nine “public” seats quickly filled long before a “quorum” of board members arrived. Others not on the board began to take seats around the room. Some of them exchanged effusive greetings with board members, particularly one young white woman with a long black scarf around her neck over a black sweater.

I also did not pull out my notebook until well after other “public” people had begun taking notes.

“The Public”

An older white man with a long moustache [who gave me the impression of being “grizzled” and unkempt] set his things next to me. We exchanged greetings, and he exchanged greetings with the young men on his other side. One of them asked him, “Nice weather, huh?” He laughed. Temperatures were in the teens and low twenties, down to zero with wind chill, lower than usual for this time of year. Eckson and I continued our conversation.

As more people straggled in, the older white man handed out a flyer to “the public.” This flyer, presumably from the Coalition to Preserve Community, begins, “Since the public is not allowed to speak, on behalf of the Coalition to Preserve Community, we request this written statement be made part of the public record.” After he returned to his seat, I leaned over to him and asked something like, “So people are not allowed to speak.” He explained that he had been coming to these meetings and people not on the board were not allowed to speak. I did not engage him further. Of the three names at the bottom of the flyer, the only “male” name was Tom Kappner.

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We also get a newsletter from the Blackberry Productions Theater Company, a folded 8.5x22” sheet in black and white. An excerpt from an interview printed on the back reads, “BP seeks to reach the sector of the community that is not exposed to theater.”

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In the meantime, board members and “the public” continued to straggle in. An older, balding white man arrived soon after Tom Kappner and sat down on Eckson’s other side, in the far seat. A young black woman selected the seat between Tom Kappner and the two young black men. Two other white men sat between Eckson and the balding man, an older man and a young man in a suit, notable since most of the audience members were in sweaters and slacks or other casual clothing. This filled the seats set aside for the public. [Later, when I learned that the young black woman and the older white man sitting next to Eckson were student at professor at Fordham, I noted that they had not sat together. Robin came in first and selected a seat between seats that were already filled.]

Other “community members” took seats around the room. [This made it difficult to observe many of them, since they sat behind my range of vision.] An older white woman came in and sat behind me before the meeting started. The young woman with the black scarf sat behind the U, on the right side.

[I found it notable that there was not much chatting among board members before the meeting began. Most people did not greet one another effusively. After entering, they seemed to greet one or two people, select a seat, and sit quietly. This made me wonder about intra-Board politics and relationships.]

The two white men on Eckson’s left began chatting. The two black men on my right had chatted when they first arrived and stopped before the meeting began. There was little interaction between the board and the public.

Getting Started

A little after 7 pm, an African American woman, prominently seated in the middle of the U, began the meeting. [I want to write, “called the meeting to order,” given the formality of the proceedings.] This woman would later refer to herself as “Pat” when taking votes for adding a new board member. The website lists a “Patricia Jones” as the representative for Community Board 9M, which convened the LDC. [Later I would read

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in the CB9 newsletter, the *West Harlem Herald* that I picked up in the CU meeting, that Pat Jones led the task force that developed Plan 197-a.]

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Pat began by announcing that they had a “quorum,” which seemed to be 12 board members out of 19 posted on the website [possibly more or less, since some people were still standing and I was not sure which were board member and which were not]. More board members trickled in throughout the meeting. She took roll. [I caught most of the names during the roll call, and confirmed some of the names when people addressed one another by name throughout the meeting.]

Pat asked if people had any changes to the minutes, presumably from the previous meeting. It seems that board members are given the opportunity to make “corrections” to the minutes before they are distributed. [I obtained a transcript of the minutes from the first meeting in September, but minutes from subsequent meetings have not been posted on their website.] A middle-aged white man recognized as “Tom” spoke. Then Pat asked Mike Grattan about some minutes [I’m not sure from what meeting]. He assured her that they were “almost done” and that “you’ll get those tonight.”

Agenda

Pat then announced that there were two items on the agenda. Some board members looked down in front of them. [This seemed to indicate that printed agendas had been handed to them, but not to “the public.”] She asked who would give an overview [of what, I did not hear], “to increase awareness or familiarity, with existing documents.”

[What Eckson and I found hilarious afterwards was that we had no idea what they were talking about for most of the meeting. Was this overview for the board only? Both of us found the meeting largely incomprehensible, a different “language” with which we were not familiar. I had just learned the acronym “CBA” since I had recently read the first 20 pages of the minutes from the first public meeting on September 30, 2006, when there was a concerted effort to involve the public and help them understand the proceedings. At this first meeting, there was a Spanish translator, and Pat Jones gave a brief history of the LDC and their purpose in negotiating a CBA with Columbia. Apparently, the meeting was also held downstairs, in a presumably larger space, with food (not sure if this was more generous than the chips and bottled beverages provided at this meeting.)]

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A white middle-aged male wearing a suit and tie, #9, gave the initial overview. What the overview was about I did not know. Eventually he introduced Karen, whose last name I did not catch, as a lawyer. I did not catch any more details about her. She talked a bit about the history of CBAs [Community-based Agreements, but I do not recall anyone explaining what CBA stood for]. While she spoke #9 got up and fidgeted [and did throughout the meeting, as noted.] Karen stated, “What we’re doing is probably really going to be groundbreaking? [voice rose at end of sentence] Because what I’ve seen with your committee groups, it goes well beyond other CBAs.”

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At the end of her presentation there were some questions from the board members. Julio asked something about Columbia’s non-profit status, and other board members also asked

questions. The Black Scarf woman raised and lowered her hand several times during the exchange. My notes read, "Young woman on side raises her hand for a moment, puts it down. Starts to raise hand again, touches her hair, puts hand down." She does this again later in the meeting. [She knows individual members of the board; what is her role here, particularly since non-board members are not allowed to speak?] Tom DeMott also spoke forcefully, and seemed to be concerned with the proceedings given the "magnitude of change"—a word provided by Board Member #9 when Tom's words seemed inarticulate.

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With the difficulty of understanding what people were talking about, I began taking notes on what people were doing, what they were wearing, etc. Most of the people sitting in the public row were taking notes. Board member #9 yawned openly at the same time as me [that is, he made no effort to yawn discreetly, as I did]. Some board members took notes, others sat quietly. There was very little side talk among the board during the meeting. Most of the men are in shirts and ties. One wears a leather jacket over his shirt and tie and three wear suit jackets. Two men wear sweaters, one with jeans and a brown turtleneck (John) and the other with khakis and tennis shoes (Tom). The women exhibit a similar range of casual to professional. Pat wears jeans with a black shirt and velvet scarf. Another wears a suit with Timbaland-like boots, peanut butter-brown and thick with rubber soles. Three of the women wear fur hats.

A mention of the Bronx, and a development called Terminal Market??

Around 7:25 the young man in the suit two seats down from Eckson left the meeting. He exchanged farewells with the older man next to Eckson as he got dressed for the cold. He put on a vest, two scarves, and an overcoat before picking up his laptop briefcase. He was the only member of the public to leave early before getting kicked out around 8pm. Tom DeMott followed him out and returned shortly. [A board member, Julio, would also leave early, before the open session ended around 8pm.]

Only half of the board members spoke without being spoken to, that is, without Pat requesting a report or vote: Pat, Krista, Julio, #9, Karen, #13, Tom, and later, John. Board member #14 made asides without addressing the board directly.

At some point in the exchange, Karen [the lawyer] says, "We are all of us, you and us together, are in a world where there is no road map. And we don't want to (inaudible) screw up."

Karen also says later, "Columbia has a lot of resources that we hopefully will be able to tap into." At this, Julio nods towards Krista's direction. [I am not sure what resources this refers to.]

This seemed to set off underlying tensions. Tom DeMott mentioned the Audubon Ballroom and how "they made promises," "negotiations with our brothers and sisters uptown and then stilted them." [I did not know at the time that the Audubon was where Malcolm X was assassinated, that Columbia was at one point involved in plans to raze

the building over the objections of groups that wanted to preserve the building. I do not know what expression I wore, but I have in my notes that “the lawyer looks at me.”]

The chair nodded and said, “I agree with you.” The lawyer replied, “Enforcement is going to be critical” with “a partner you don’t trust.”

At 7:35 Luisa, coughing, gets up and goes to the men’s bathroom just off the hall. She doesn’t shut the door all the way or turn on the light. #6, sitting next to her, looks after her.

At 7:36 #9 gets up again to get more water from the cooler. Grattan also gets up to get water. He goes back to the table, grabs his empty juice bottle, disposes of it, then goes to the snack table, gets a paper plate and pours snacks onto his plate. [This gives me an opportunity to express my boredom and to seek out distractions. Also, when people root around in the cooler or get snacks, the noise further prevents me from hearing what is said.]

People are tossing around a term, Uhler process? [Later I learn, ULURP]. John asks, “If we’re conceiving of a school or media center, museum, ___ for the community, do those fall under the Uhler?” Somebody responds that those fall under CBA.

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Reports from Committees

Pat then asked for reports from committees. She mentioned that “Neither Jeanine or Susan are here from the education committee.” Robin, the young black woman sitting in the public section, gave a presentation outlining community concerns on education. A law student at Fordham and participating in the Community Economic Development Clinic, she prepared a report on her work with tenant leaders on education in terms of the expansion: what other universities are doing, and concerns about whether people in the community would actually be served in terms of education with the proposed math/science middle and high school. She prepared a handout and largely read from it.

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Meanwhile, Julio passed around a sign-in sheet that asked for the public’s names, affiliations, and email addresses.

Board members asked Robin questions, such as, “What’s a learning corridor?” and “What grade did you get?” She seemed embarrassed when she replied that she did well, and, “My professor is here,” while gesturing toward the man sitting next to Eckson [who I would later meet, Brian Glick]. Luisa stands and says hello, presumably to him.

Pat asks for other reports. John reports on Arts and Culture, lamenting, “I left my notes on the computer,” while waggling his fingers in front of him. This committee had met at the Dance Theater of Harlem. [Who sits on these committees?]

Tom chaired the housing committee. He complained about the designation of Manhattanville as an “unsanitary area” and other offensive words. He got some nods from around the table. Apparently the last meeting got cancelled because of the cold. #6, perhaps Sarah Martin, spoke up to say, “Make sure to tell the community members... [didn’t catch] Otherwise you’re wasting their time.” A couple people then echoed that they did not know the meeting was cancelled, including Professor Brian Glick. He complained, “No one told my students either, who made the trip up.”

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Transportation committee. [No notes on this]

Preservation. To laughter, Krista reported: “I had a meeting with myself at five o’clock.” People asked her, “Was it a good conversation?” “Did you get agreement on everything?”

Pat: Neither Arthur nor Maritta are here. [Not sure what committee they chair.]

Jobs and training
Economic

Julio got up and put on his coat just before 8pm. Immediately afterwards, Maritta walked in to greetings of “good timing.” People looked at her expectantly as she took off her coat and set it on the chair between Pat and Julio. Pat commented that they could let her take off her coat. Maritta reported that her committee met, then said, “I will go into it further at closed session.” She went to greet Black Scarf Girl effusively.

Pat asks, “Old business?” When nobody responds, she asks, “New business?” She pauses a moment, then continues that there is a representative from State Senator Perkins’ office, Cordelle Cleare. This is a dark-skinned young woman who sat behind the board, near Black Scarf Girl. Pat suggested that she “make a motion that Ms. Cleare be voted into the Board? Anybody second?” Somebody, a male, seconded, and the board proceeded to vote her in. Somebody called for Julio and he popped back into the room to ask what was going on and then to vote yes. Somebody abstained, I do not know who.

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Another board member, Susan, walked in at 8:04 as Cordelle was introducing herself. The website lists a Susan Russell as Chief of Staff for NYC Council Member Robert Jackson. She is white. She took Batista’s seat. Cordelle spelled her name for people and gave out her email address: cclare@senate.state.ny.us.

At 8:06, Pat announced that this “ends our open session” and asked “our visitors” to leave. Tom DeMott got up and started talking to Brian Glick, the Fordham professor. Eckson got up and started towards the door. Glick then engaged me in a conversation, and seemed quite pleased. He insisted on introducing me to Robin. He gave me his card and Robin wrote down her contact information for me and had me write mine. I motioned Eckson over, then Pat came by. Glick took this as a greeting, but she shoed us out. Glick joked with her that we could continue our conversation outside. She walked away.

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While walking down the stairs Glick enthused to Robin about having “found these guys,” meaning Eckson and myself, before he remembered that he had left his scarf upstairs. I asked Robin about the class, which she corrected me was a “clinic.” She introduced herself to Eckson, “I don’t think we’ve met.” Glick came back down and promises were made for future correspondence.

I peeked into the lobby of the church, a large and gleaming space. There was a reception desk, two chandeliers made of regular-sized light bulbs, shining off-white linoleum or tile, and several dark green easy chairs.

While walking home, Eckson and I joked about not understanding what the Board was talking about. Eckson said he doubted his English language ability, and I complained about acronyms and jargon. Eckson mentioned legal terminology. Eckson compared the strangeness to TC classes, supposing that outsiders would also have a hard time understanding what people are talking about in class.

[Overall, a strong sense of disconnection from the LDC Board, that they do not make it easier for people who do not know the specifics of their work to engage. That is, not conversant in the jargon of urban planning, land use, local governance, and legal matters I found it hard to understand or care about what was happening. This was, of course, not a “community meeting” but an opportunity to watch the Board at work.]