Selective Service Meets Massive Resistance

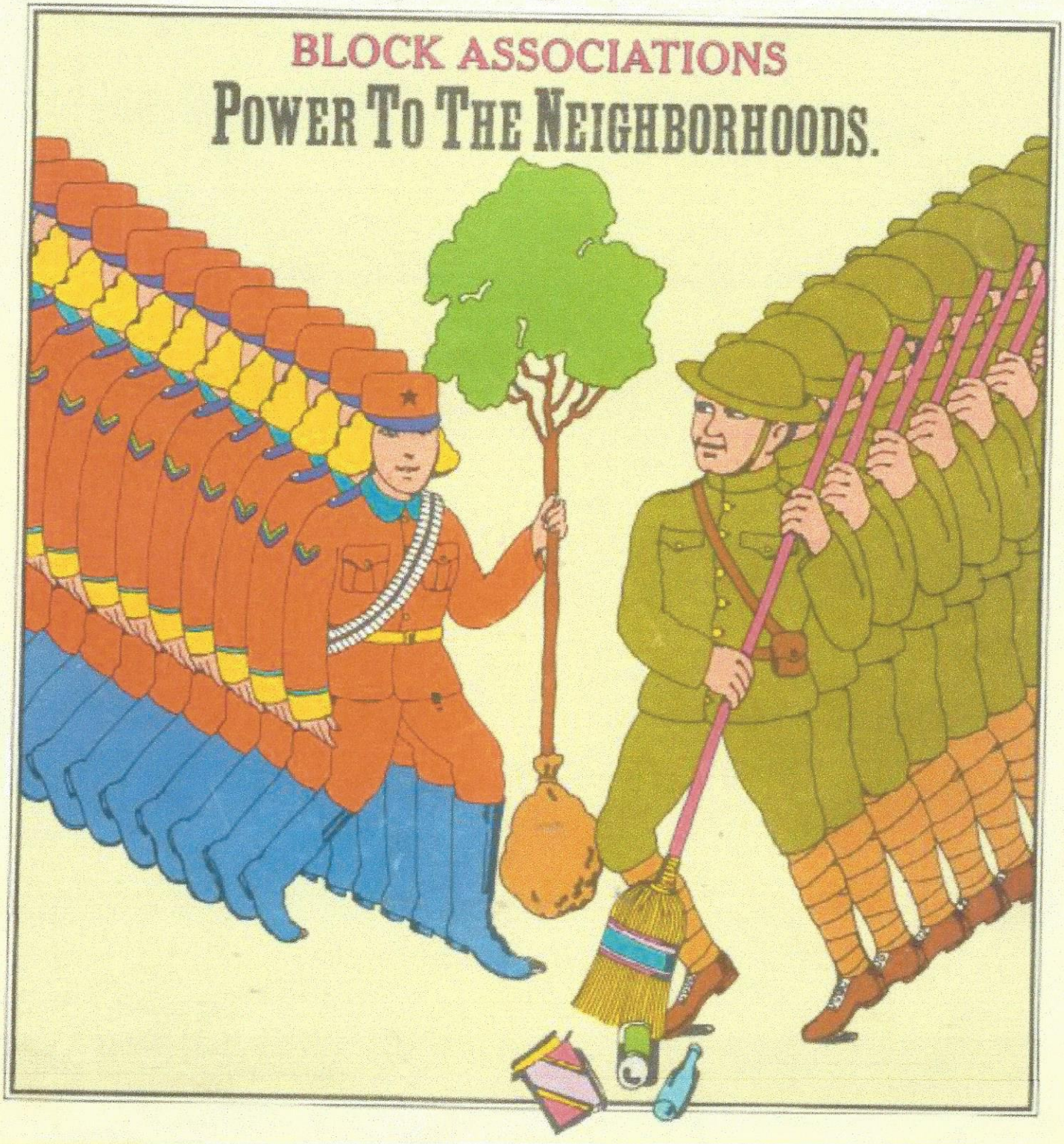
Getting a Fair Shake from the Moving Man

One Man's War Against Hoving's Master Plan

40 CENTS

JUNE 29, 1970

NEW YORK



New York

Block Associations: Power to th

While some block associations seem like clubs of architecture fanatics, they are still the best weapon against powerlessness.

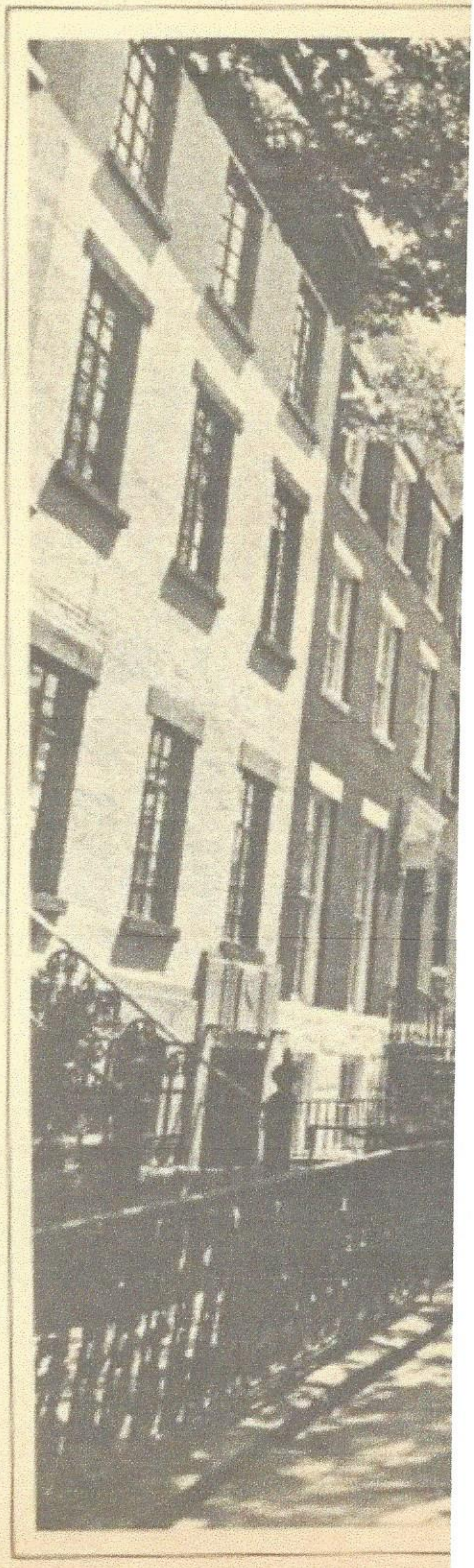
The collapse of the old-style New York political clubs in the 1960s marked the disintegration of a whole social order and the passing of a unique and rather remarkable political system. Often corrupt, discriminatory and ridiculously inefficient—all too often "Irish Socialism" went no further than a scuttle of coal for the Widow Feeney and a word in the judge's ear on behalf of a good boy fallen among bad companions the fact remains that the failure of the traditional club system was a first-rate calamity. With all their faults, the clubs did invaluable service as local centers of government and as channels of communication with the administration; best of all, they were a way of getting around the bureaucracy, or at least they created the illusion that they were a way of getting around it, which amounts to much the same thing.

With the breakup of the old ethnic neighborhoods and the influx of an alien, basically rural population of poor blacks and Puerto Ricans, the club system fell apart. Population shifts eroded the clubs' constituencies and the Lindsay administration, which owed them nothing, destroyed their relevance. It is a measure of the total collapse of the system that Mario Procaccino, not Paul O'Dwyer, was its last, best hope. The result was a spreading vacuum and a sense of utter powerlessness. In this context, many observers have seen the recent growth of block and neighborhood associations as by far the most promising new development.

Four factors are necessary to create an effective neighborhood and block association in New York City: a small and relatively stable population, a high incidence of resident home ownership, a community of interest, and a common enemy. It also helps to have allies near by. In Brooklyn, for example, the long-established and powerful Brooklyn Heights Association has proved to be an invaluable spokesman (to say nothing of example) for the multitude of block and neighborhood groups that have proliferated in the nearby renovation districts in recent years.

In Manhattan, such organizations have long existed in Greenwich Village and Murray Hill, as public officials have frequently discovered to their dismay. (In the 1950s a coalition of Village groups handed that municipal juggernaut, Robert Moses, his first major defeat when he attempted to run a highway through the middle of Washington Square.) More recently, as middle- and upper-income people have bought and renovated West Side brownstones in substantial numbers, powerful and articulate block associations have sprung up, but by and large Manhattan is not fertile ground for small, local groups. The population is too vast, too dense and, in most areas, too transient. The basic unit of concern for most Manhattan people is not the block but the building in which they live, and they tend to view the surrounding neighborhood largely in terms of shopping opportunities and the crime rate. Attempts by various city agencies to establish neighborhood organizations in East Harlem and the Lower East Side did little but establish fresh layers of bureaucracy.

The most ambitious attempt so far to encourage block associations in the city has been Operation Better Block. Funded jointly by the Bristol-Myers Company and the city, but privately administered, it helps blocks organize and makes them aware of available municipal services. Orientation meetings are held for block association officers, and a grant of $400 in seed money provides the basis of an association treasury. At the end of the year, prizes of up to $1,000 are awarded to the most successful blocks. This is not peanuts, as any neighborhood officer will tell you, and since Operation Better Block was established in 1968, some 360 blocks (only about 10 per cent of which had pre-existing organizations) have joined the program. The number is expected

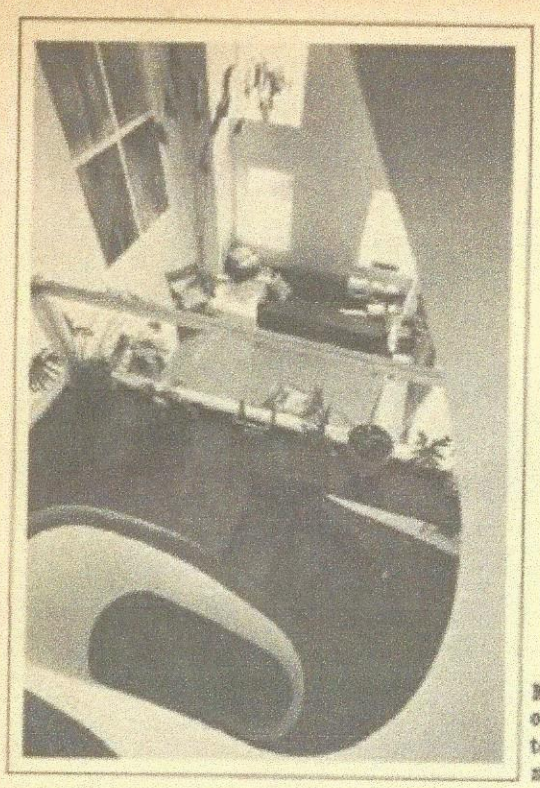


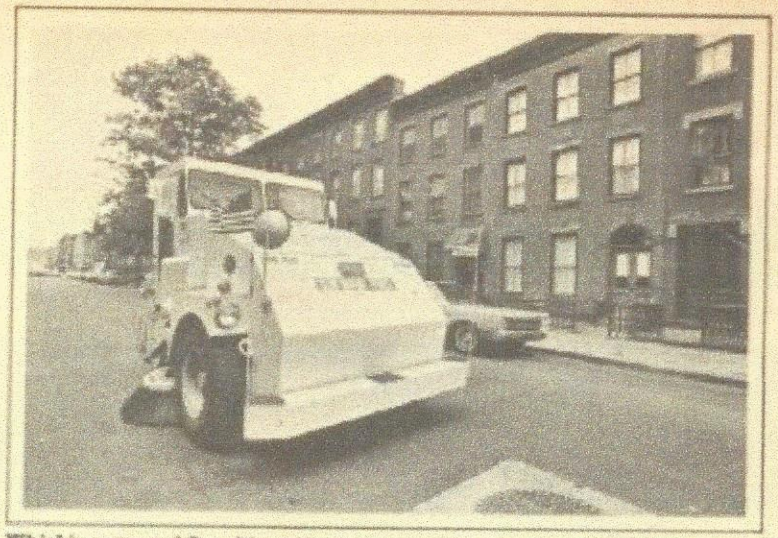
Photographed by Leonard Sonnd

Neighborhoods

By L. J. Davis

Sycamores on Dean Street, Boerum Hill: "Products of Brooklyn's incredible renovation boom, local organizations have become a powerful element in the life of northwest Brooklyn."





Whisking around Brooklyn: it's easy to supplement Sanitation Department services with special clean-up block campaigns.

Nevins Street renovation: once a Victorian townhouse, then a tenement-with-barbershop, now back to elegance.

"There was drama and hope in the very idea of a brave, fighting neighborhood association going to bat against city agencies."

to rise to 500 in all boroughs by the end of 1970.

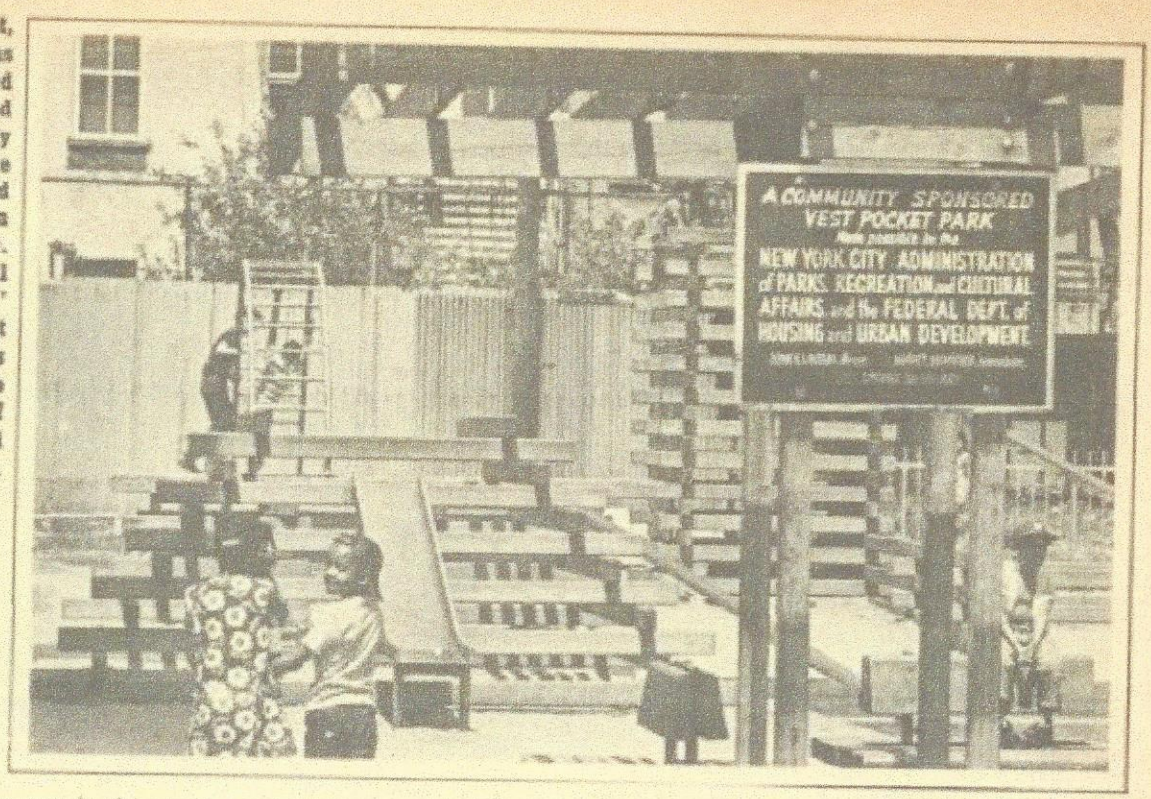
The long-term effect of all this remains to be seen. Block associations and neighborhood groups in the Bronx have yet to do anything to dispel that borough's reputation for civic impotence, and with the exception of highways on Staten Island and snow in Queens, local groups in the suburban boroughs have yet to show their mettle in any dramatic way. It is in northwest Brooklyn that neighborhood organizations have really come into their own. There—in the renovation districts in the Heights, the Hills, the Slope, Carroll Gardens and Fort Greene, and in the Bedford section of Bedford-Stuyvesant—highly vocal and often amazingly successful local groups have sprung up. Products of Brooklyn's incredible renovation boom, plus growing black self-confidence combined with a sympathetic city administration, local organizations have become a powerful element in the life of northwest Brooklyn. Some, like the Vanderbilt Avenue Block Association, have achieved remarkable results. In other areas, such as Boerum Hill, the effect of the neighborhood association has been mixed.

The Boerum Hill Association is the principal neighborhood organization in the district immediately south of the downtown Brooklyn business district. It contains somewhere between 350 and 400 members (nobody seems to know for sure), the vast majority of them white homeowners, very few of whom have lived in the area for longer than five years. As far as neighborhood groups in renovation areas go, it is as good as most and better than some, and can stand as a pretty fair example of the type.

The association was formed early in 1963, when a group of about 50 people met in the parlor of Miss Helen Buckler's house on Dean Street. They were virtually the last remnant of the once-fashionable area's middle-class population. White, solidly bourgeois and tending toward middle age, they had seen their neighborhood of four-story row houses and respectable apartment buildings turn into one of the city's worst sumps of poverty and human despair. Miss Buckler had brought them together to suggest that they form a neighborhood association, an organization that would work to improve existing conditions (which certainly could not get much worse), while attempting to attract new middle-income residents. Miss Buckler herself had only recently moved to the area from Brooklyn Heights, and she was convinced that other people could be similarly enticed by the availability of cheap, large Victorian houses. Her suggestion was met with the distinctly muted enthusiasm of people who have heard a lot of good ideas and read a large number of smart plans without ever seeing anything either good or smart result from them.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the year an organization of sorts had come rather tentatively into being, largely because a few people took up the idea and stuck with it. They wisely decided to change the name from North Gowanus (Gowanus has always had a bad press) and decided to cover a relatively compact, architecturally unified and heavily residential area. Unfortunately, in their enthusiasm they also laid claim to the Fulton Street shopping district, the government buildings on Livingston Street and the parking lots on Schermerhorn—a move that somewhat lowered their credibility in the eyes of outsiders. In any event, they had a name, a few informally-elected officers and a set of clear if ambitious boundaries. There was no formal constitution. Forming a neighborhood association is one thing, however; making it work is quite another.

"We wrote a lot of letters to various city departments," says William Muller, a lawyer who was born in the pleasant three-story townhouse on Dean Street where he and his wife still live. "Occasionally we got some action, but most of our gains were short-term. We might be able to get a vacant lot cleaned up,



Pacific Street, between Nevins and Third Avenue: Named unofficially by the neighborhood "The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Playground," this vest-pocket park was largely the result of neighborhood action.

but there was no way in the world to prevent people from filling it up with garbage again. It was really the sudden influx of young middle-class people from Manhattan that saved the neighborhood, not the association."

It was not until 1965 that the association felt strongly enough established to collect dues from its members. It met three or four times a year in the basement of Holy Family Episcopal Church on Atlantic Avenue, heard an occasional speaker, and generally marked time.

"In those days," says Muller, "the executive committee *was*, in effect, the Boerum Hill Association. The people who came to the meetings were just along for the ride."

The executive committee consisted of the usual president, vice-president, treasurer and two secretaries, more or less self-appointed. If by chance a post became vacant, the committee chose a replacement and asked for a vote of ratification at the next general meeting. It always got one. In addition to the officers, the executive committee consisted of anyone else the body asked to sit in on its meetings, the heads of any subcommittees that had been set up, and the wives of most of the above. It was a ramshackle and arbitrary group that could justly claim to represent nothing but itself, but in retrospect it is hard to condemn it. It enabled concerned citizens to coordinate their efforts, and it gave them the clout of a large—if largely spurious—organization. It also attracted attention, not only to itself, but to the houses. As young people from Manhattan began looking over the area, the association became a good selling point. There was drama and hope in the very idea of a brave, fighting neighborhood association standing up to slumlords and going to bat against city agencies.

"The neighborhood association in the slums appealed to a repressed sense of adventure in the new middle-income homeowners," says Mike Armstrong, current BHA president. "It offered them collective power, an opportunity for direct action, continual excitement. It gave them a chance to do something tangible in the city. The place was such a mess in those days that any little victory—against the Sanitation Department, against a slumlord—was immediately and dramatically apparent. You got the feeling that you were actually winning against the city."

Late in 1965 the association felt strong enough to draw up a constitution and hold formal elections. In actual practice, elections changed very little. The executive committee has remained pretty much the same.

Despite formidable difficulties the association has scored some notable successes in the past five years. Garbage collection is immeasurably better, police protection marginally so. The Buildings Department has been prevented—often by picketing—from tearing down abandoned but salvageable houses. Several hundred sidewalk trees have been planted, a nursery school has been subsidized, house tours are held annually, and while the Boerum Hill Association is not exactly a name to conjure with, it is no longer taken lightly by the city government. It has won a zoning improvement for the south side of State Street but not the north side, and it has had no luck at all in its efforts to win a city landmarks designation.

In a political and civic vacuum, the association served to create an illusion of solidarity among the widely disparate individuals who entered the neighborhood after 1965. Its meetings brought together people whose only common interest was the renovation of their houses and the safety and cleanliness of their streets—three causes which are frailer bases for cooperation than they might seem. Moreover, virtually all the lower-income Negroes and Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood were excluded, although through no deliberate policy—it was simply inevitable. From the first, the tacit goals of the association were narrow and specific: to renovate houses and clean up the slum. Praiseworthy as these goals may seem, their realization depended on the removal of some 12,000 poor people, which has, in large measure, taken place, masked by the polite fiction that the association was a *neighborhood* organization when, in fact, it was nothing of the sort. The organization, founded by middle-class homeowners, set out to attract more middle-class homeowners. Its very success has brought out the centrifugal tendencies that always lie at the heart of a group of this sort. Not only have the remaining Puerto Ricans begun—too late—to try to organize independently, but serious tensions have appeared within the BHA itself.

"What the hell do these people talk about when they finish talking about

"In one incredible week the three associations had succeeded in wiping out the local narcotics traffic. And they made it stick."

their houses?" an outsider once asked. It is a moot question. All too often the answer has been that they go for each other's jugular. The truth is that the mere fact of home ownership—even Victorian-home ownership—does not constitute a real community of interest. Factions are continually forming within the organization—often based on nothing stronger than mutual hatred of some third party. Uneasy alliances are continually forming and breaking down, and a tradition has grown up very similar to one hallowed in the old Holy Roman Empire: every time a new president is elected, the entire membership rises in revolt against him, whether it voted for him or not. The success of his term rests largely on his success in putting down the insurrection.

A classic example of the kind of mess that can result from weak executive control occurred a couple of years ago, when the executive committee supported a lower-income housing proposal, the planning committee (which is appointed by the executive committee) opposed it, and the vice-president, who had been handling the negotiations with the city, left the state to campaign for Eugene McCarthy. In his absence, the planning committee unilaterally repudiated everything that had been agreed upon, and by the time the executive committee found out what was going on the project had been scrapped.

The most lasting result of the affair was the reinforced conviction among local Negroes and Puerto Ricans that the renovators want to get rid of them — a conclusion that happens to be correct, despite the fact that people who fought the project were not consciously thinking about Puerto Ricans and Negroes at all. They were thinking about 19th-century architecture, and how they didn't want any of it torn down. It was a victory of esthetics over need, symptomatic of a kind of architectural fanaticism that strikes middle-class people blind to everything but houses. The sad fact is that although most BHA members do not especially dislike Negroes or Puerto Ricans (the fight against the lower-income project was led by some of the most vocal and insistent liberals in the association) they often seem to consider them dispensable.

Mike Armstrong is trying to turn the association in a more realistic direction. "Boerum Hill isn't a neighborhood," he says. "It's part of a neighborhood that also includes housing projects and tenements and factories. We have got to break away from the parochialism we've been locked into for the last five years: We have to make meaningful contact with the other people in the neighborhood, or one day we'll regret we didn't. And then it will be too late."

Armstrong has devoted his year in office to "making contact with other groups and re-establishing our credibility." Making contact has been easy—in Brooklyn there is a meeting of one kind or another almost every night—but re-establishing credibility has been hard, especially in view of the public-housing fiasco. A helpful issue came to hand when the city attempted to tear down 70 lower-income brownstones on St. Marks Place. The proposal was defeated by a coalition of groups in which the BHA was strongly represented, and the association was at least partly restored in the esteem of its neighbors.

It seems doubtful, however, that affairs will ever progress much further than that, good intentions notwithstanding. Only a major issue can draw the diverse groups of North Gowanus together, and then only briefly. On a day-to-day basis, the relations of BHA members with local Negroes and Puerto Ricans are characterized by the indifference of the former and the wariness and mistrust of the latter. In practice, the cultural gap between the well-educated middle class and their poor neighbors is virtually unbridgeable. There is no guarantee that the BHA will continue Armstrong's policies. Judging from past experience, there is at least an even chance that his successor will reverse them. As far as Boerum Hill's future is concerned, the only sure thing is that neither the renovators nor the poor are going to go away and leave each other in peace.

Organizing Under Operation Better Block

☐ Three or more block residents must obtain a minimum of 100 pledges of cooperation (or one or two signatures per house, whichever comes first).

☐ The embryonic association should then submit a written proposal to OBB outlining block projects, which can range from major clean-ups and repairs to less essential (but desirable) planting and repainting.

☐ If the project outline is accepted, OBB will provide $400 seed money, detailed plans and organization suggestions.

OBB claims that almost any block can be transformed for $1,000 ($600 of which must be raised by the residents, through block festivals, auctions, donations and pledges). This sum, administered by a reasonably well-run block organization, is enough for a vest-pocket park, or a small army of neighborhood children to supplement regular Sanitation Department efforts (at $1.60 an hour, if they cannot be induced to provide their services gratis), or major replanting, plus window-boxes and repainting.

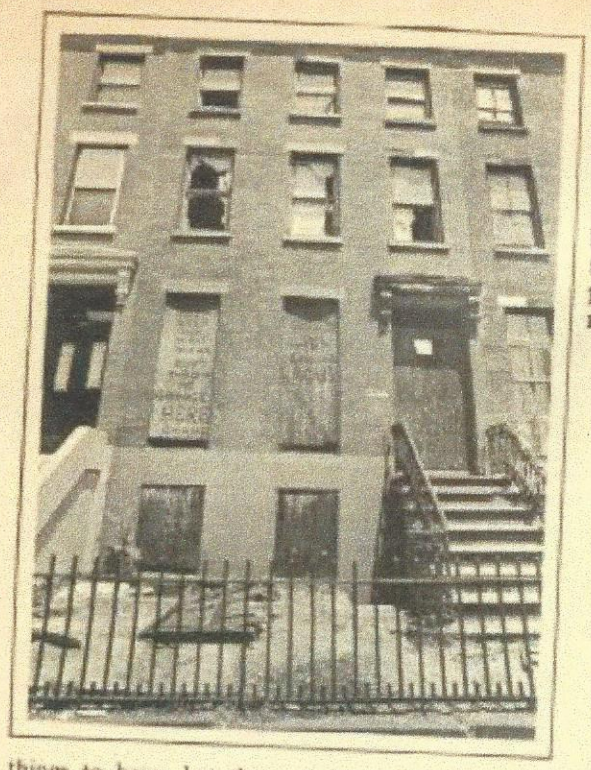
OBB has published a *Guide to Block Organization* with tips for starting and maintaining a block association. For a free copy write or call:

Operation Better Block
51 Chambers St.
Room 604
New York, N.Y.
566-3600

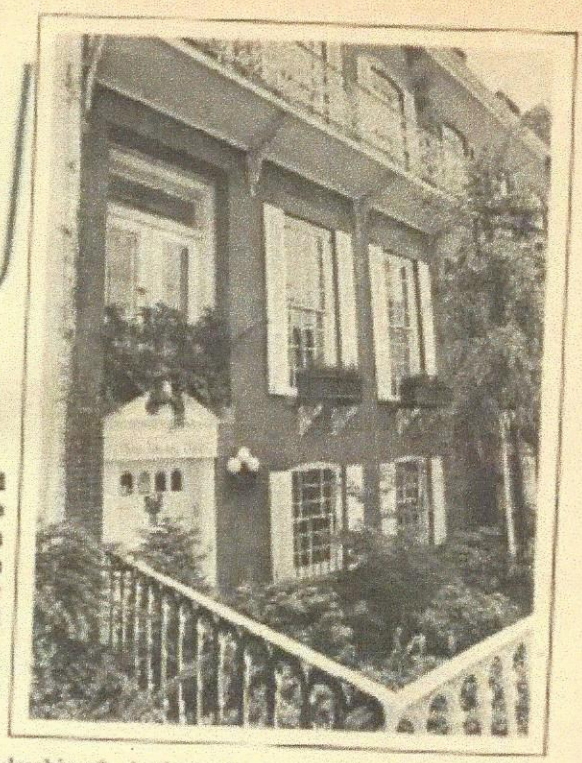
The Vanderbilt Avenue Block Association a few miles away on Clinton Hill is an interesting contrast to the BHA. The formal constitutions of the two groups are nearly identical, but the similarity ends there. The Vanderbilt Avenue Block Association is an entirely different kind of ball game and it may be the most effective organization of its kind in New York City.

The association covers the two blocks of Vanderbilt between Gates and Greene, a stretch of predominantly owner-occupied brownstones, most of which have been converted for multiple occupancy. The block's population is about 60 per cent Negro and 40 per cent white (principally first- and second-generation Italians), and the percentages of home-ownership are about the same. Most of the residents grew up together or have known each other for the best part of their lives. The block association has about 50 active members who pay $1 a year in dues; counting families of members, it represents a substantial majority of the people in its area.

The association was formed in the winter of 1967 at a meeting in the old Church of the Messiah and Incarnation on Greene Avenue. "Those first few meetings were mainly social gatherings," says an early member. "We were just getting ourselves together, and we didn't have much self-confidence. The word was out that Lindsay was encouraging block associations and they were good



Vision of a better block—Pacific Street, between Bond and Nevins: a typical Anglo-Italianate brick-front 1855 townhouse poised for renovation.



Neighborhood pride on State Street, between Third Avenue and Flatbush: completed renovation in a row of 19th-century townhouses.

things to have, but that was about as far as it went."

The association's first major project—entered into rather hesitantly—was to arrange a bulk pickup with the Sanitation Department, and the following spring, 22.7 tons of refuse were hauled away in a single day from basements, back yards and abandoned houses. The same spring, a tree-planting campaign was begun. "Trees and bulk pickup might sound like relatively tame stuff," says Lewis Carville, current president of the association, "but they proved a big point: that our association could get results. For the first time, a lot of people realized that it was possible to exert some measure of control over what happened on the block." Two bulk pickups are currently made every year.

The association had a relatively quiet time of it for a year and a half. It began a beautification program with the help of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and brought about significant changes—favoring brownstone preservation—in the Atlantic Terminal Renewal Project rehabilitation code. Captains who function as a kind of combination town crier and sheriff were appointed for each block. Each captain's job is to stay abreast of the situation on his block, keep the executive committee informed and pass the word if there are problems. He tries to keep residents informed of available services and special projects and generally keeps tabs on people.

Things remained quiet until the summer of 1969, when a sudden influx of junkies threatened to plunge the neighborhood into anarchy. Before the situation got completely out of hand, the association, then under the leadership of James E. Jones, banded together with two similar organizations on Clermont and Clinton Avenues and dramatically declared the whole area a Narcotics-Free Zone, where drugs would not be sold and junkies would not be tolerated. An emergency answering service was set up and, faced with a written ultimatum, the police were more or less coerced into sweeping the neighborhood clear. The local state assemblyman suddenly remembered on which side his bread was buttered, buildings that housed junkies were emptied and closed, and in one incredible week the three block associations had succeeded in wiping out the local narcotics traffic. Not only that, they made it stick. In the context of New York, their accomplishment is nothing short of magical. It is hard to realize that only a couple of years before, planting a tree was a big deal.

TAC patrolmen still work the neighborhood regularly, and the people are glad to have them. "We made it very clear to the cops from the beginning of the zone that enthusiastic law enforcement is not synonymous with hassling black people," says Carville. "One of the big mistakes that activists in other neighborhoods make is to try and set up their own bureaucracies. That sort of effort is not only time-consuming but futile. In the long run it's easier and far more effective to browbeat existing municipal bureaucracies into doing their jobs. It's also more fun. Actually, there's nothing very amazing about the Sanitation Department collecting garbage and the police enforcing the law and protecting the citizens. What's amazing is that other neighborhoods don't make them do it."

Vanderbilt Avenue is, in effect, a small, functioning democracy. The Boerum Hill Association—like most neighborhood groups in renovation districts—has tried to cover all the ground of a municipal government. Its weakness lies in the fact that it lacks a government's powers of enforcement and patronage. Since it cannot deliver the goods but only use its influence, it is unable to control its members, while at the same time a large part of the area is not represented at all.

Much of the Vanderbilt Avenue Association's strength lies in its more democratic and compact structure, but it also sees its function differently—not as a government but as an advocate of the needs of its members. As a result, it has fewer illusions about the limits of its power. For issues affecting the larger Clinton Hill community, it relies on the Pratt Area Community Council, of which it is a component organization. It has even been wary of trying to expand the zone.

"Washington Avenue has asked to come in," says Carville. "We're willing to give them a try, but if it turns out that the people up there can't give us the same kind of totally committed support we get elsewhere in the zone, we'll pull out. We can't afford to squander our prestige or waste our skills; if we falter just once, the whole zone will collapse and we'll be right back where we started from. That means we've got to have the consent and help of the people before we'll move an inch. You can't impose a thing like this from outside; it's got to come from the people." ■