

THE UPPER EAST SIDE: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE OF FIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

In October 2015 FRIENDS released “The Upper East Side: A Framework for the Future of Five Neighborhoods,” a planning and zoning study that identifies specific development risks threatening community integrity in the neighborhoods of Lenox Hill, Yorkville, East Harlem, Carnegie Hill, and the Upper East Side in the wake of inappropriately scaled, poorly sited, and non-contextual high density development on the horizon as the Second Avenue Subway’s opening draws near.

FRIENDS supports smart growth in New York

City, including the careful placement of higher-density development at transit hubs and along broad north-south avenues and major east-west streets. However, it is also clear that we need thoughtfully prescribed zoning regulations controlling use, bulk placement, and height, to mitigate the impact of development on light, air, open spaces, historic resources, and local character of the Upper East Side. The report, prepared with the assistance of BFJ Planning, examines the parts of the Upper East Side that are most vulnerable to these forces, particularly the eastern avenue corridors and low-rise mid-

block areas. The Study Area comprises the entire land area from East 59th to East 110th Streets, from Central Park to the East River. The report identifies the **essential elements that provide a sense of place** and the **factors in current zoning that support individual character** found in these neighborhoods. It also examines the **specific development risks that threaten community integrity** and **identifies strategies** that would work best to balance continued growth with preservation for the future quality of the urban environment.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The Upper East Side comprises distinct neighborhoods. Apart from the “Gold Coast” neighborhoods bordering Central Park are the modest neighborhoods east of Park Avenue which have always been and remain a diverse, family-oriented, and affordable area. With their attractive five-story walk-ups situated along tree-lined streets with local “mom and pop” shops nestled below, the eastern neighborhoods of Yorkville and Lenox Hill are two of Manhattan’s most walkable and comfortable neighborhoods.

Rich in immigrant history and human-scaled fabric, these neighborhoods have historically been diverse, modestly scaled, and may be among the last relatively affordable places to live in Manhattan today. However, residents clamor for seats in public schools, tables at public libraries, and standing room on the cross-town bus. This is a thriving, vibrant area that is already desperate for expanded or improved community services. Below are several key planning issues in these neighborhoods.

LIVABILITY

Without historic district designation, the eastern portions of the Study Area rely on hard-won contextual zoning to maintain the human-scaled character on the midblocks, while higher-density development is shifted to the wider streets and avenues. This balance is key to the livability of the area.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

38% of parcels on the Upper East Side contain affordable units, but they must be preserved for this area to remain affordable and livable for all residents. Between 2007 and 2014, CB8 saw a net loss of 26% of affordable units compared to a loss of 6% citywide. During that period, nearly 1,600 buildings lost rent-stabilized apartments. Of those, 70% were east of Third Avenue, illustrating the alarming loss of affordability in our area.

DIVERSITY

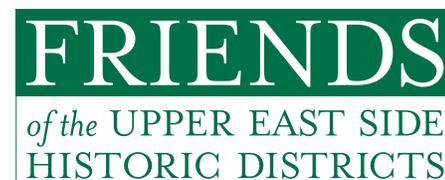
These neighborhoods are characterized by income diversity and a dense population aged 62 and older. Unmitigated change has the potential to displace these vulnerable populations.

SCHOOLS

Public schools in these communities are at or over capacity, and cannot accommodate additional growth. The Department of Education has no additional elementary schools in its capital plan for the Upper East Side. Any population increase will further burden this strained system.

OPEN SPACE

Less than 1% of land area on the Upper East Side is comprised of park and open space, compared to 14% citywide. This amounts to less than 1 acre of parkland per 1,000 people in the Study Area. Many of the open spaces are poorly maintained or underutilized Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS).



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OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to plan for growth, control the consumption of public services by increased density, and ensure that the Upper East Side remains home to people from a diversity of income levels, we make these 12 recommendations:

1. Preserve and Protect Contextual Zoning.

Low-scale building stock, especially in the mid-blocks of Yorkville, creates a pedestrian environment. These “valleys” are mixed in with the “hills” of the taller avenues.

2. Maintain Existing Densities.

Current zoning permits some redevelopment along avenues and wide streets. Therefore we recommend no changes to overall density on the Upper East Side.

3. Create New C1-9X Contextual Zoning for Avenues.

Avenues in the Study Area currently zoned R10 (or equivalent C1-9) should be rezoned to require that new tower construction is limited by height and required to be built on a contextual base which blends in with existing low-scale structures, like the tenements which dominate the avenues.

4. Restrict the Height of Buildings to 210 Feet.

Avenues in the Study Area should require a height limit of 210 feet for new construction.

5. Limit Zoning Lot Mergers.

To decrease possibility for supertalls to be constructed on the Upper East Side, we recommend a pilot restriction on the size of zoning lot mergers. We also recommend greater transparency and public information when zoning lot mergers occur.

6. Protect Affordable Housing.

There is a long history of affordable housing (rent-regulated, subsidized, and public housing) on the Upper East Side. This must be maintained to ensure livability for a broad range of households in the future. New development should replace in-kind any units lost due to redevelopment, and all units should be permanently affordable. We support recent anti-harassment legislation protecting tenants. We also recommend legislation to make a public inventory of rent-regulated units in order to facilitate their protection and replacement in case of redevelopment.

7. Investigate Financial Opportunities for Property Owners.

We support relief for private owners of rent-regulated housing to assist in operation and maintenance, such as tax credits, revolving loans, or grants to ensure the safety and efficiency of their buildings and to reduce redevelopment. We recommend a study examining operation and maintenance costs incurred by owners of buildings with rent-regulated units in the Study Area.

8. Revisit “Zoning for Quality and Affordability.”

As proposed, the City’s plan does not guarantee increased quality or affordability of new construction, only that it will be taller and denser. We recommend a more fine-grained neighborhood approach rather than a one-size-fits-all policy.

9. Ensure Small Businesses Thrive.

Small businesses are the best way to ensure a diversity of services and help preserve neighborhood vitality and sense of place, especially in the eastern portions of the Study Area. We support the Manhattan Borough President’s initiatives to prevent expiration of ground-floor retail use and reform commercial rent tax. We also recommend regulations which promote active and varied retail frontages, as developed by the Department of City Planning on the Upper West Side.

10. Implement Open Space and Infrastructure Improvements.

Much of the minimal open space in the Study Area is in the form of poorly maintained and underutilized Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS), sometimes known as bonus plazas. We recommend a study of existing POPS, and a new program to incentivize upgrade, enforce regulation, and review redesign. Active open space such as the East River Esplanade should be prioritized over passive open space.

11. Require Community-Based Planning around Station Areas.

The arrival of the Second Avenue Subway will increase market demand around the new stations. We recommend the Department of City Planning launch a community-based planning process around the station areas to ensure that new development contributes positively to the neighborhood and does not proceed in a piecemeal fashion. In addition to height and density, community plans could address light and air, public realm improvements, community school and traffic impacts, and good urban design principles for these areas.

12. Create 197-a Plan(s) for the Upper East Side Study Area.

In considering a future framework for the Upper East Side Study Area, we recommend FRIENDS work with other community groups to encourage Community Boards 8 and 11 to create or update 197-a Plans for their respective jurisdictions. This would allow the Upper East Side communities to engage in a participatory planning process and reach consensus on a wide variety of issues related to the objective of preserving the best of the Upper East Side neighborhoods while accommodating growth in the long term.