

NYC family finds their lost dog after 5 months — at a pet adoption event



Ex-NYPD cop arrested for taking bribes from robbery crew targeting Asian-...



Video shows moped rider crash while being pursued by NYPD, tackled and arrested



OPINION

Where Bronx housing went awry

By Eileen Markey

New York Daily News • Feb 02, 2022 at 5:00 am



 Expand



The Twin Parks fire, which cost 17 people their lives, has gripped the heartstrings of the city and the nation.

It's a concrete tragedy, one people can get their heads around. But it's not the whole story. The fire was fueled by decisions made a decade ago and a far broader abandonment of the public good.

Legislators have leaped for ways to prevent a similar tragedy from reoccurring. They focus on rules around space heaters and self-closing doors or proactive housing inspections.

But the tragedy goes back further than the failure of the self-closing door that sent choking smoke to a higher floor. It started before tenants felt the need to augment the heat with dangerous space heaters. It goes deeper than the sale of the building in 2020 to a trio of investors, including a member of Mayor Adams' transition team, who were buying up properties in unstylish Bronx neighborhoods, secure in the knowledge that there is a lot of money to be made in poor- and working-class people's homes.

The Twin Parks fire started when we gave over a crucial social function to the market. The market doesn't work for providing housing in New York City. If it did, we wouldn't have nearly half a million people in public housing, 45,000 people in city shelters and **one in seven** kids in the Bronx living in a shelter, a family member or friends' couch or a car. If the market worked, we wouldn't have **one in three Bronxites** paying half their income in rent.

Twin Parks, like every other building in New York City, some time ago stopped being a place people live and became a mechanism for **acquiring capital**. People still live there, but that isn't really the purpose of the building. The building exists, really, as a means of transferring public money to private individuals.

It's a neat trick, and perfectly legal. Using tax breaks, loan guarantees and a variety of subsidies, the state cajoled a private owner into keeping rents affordable. The developer got help paying for the building, earned a management fee and collected a fine rent roll that was inflated and secured by Section 8 federal housing vouchers.

In 2013, just as state Mitchell-Lama regulations designed to keep rents affordable in the building were about to expire, Twin Parks was sold from its initial owners to Cammeby International, a firm that manages **\$13 billion** in real estate. It passed

In 2013, just as state Mitchell-Lama regulations designed to keep rents affordable in the building were about to expire, Twin Parks was sold from its initial owners to Cammeby International, a firm that manages **\$13 billion** in real estate. It passed through the **NYC Housing Partnership**, an entity that exists as a middleman to broker affordable housing. The Partnership sold Twin Parks for \$20 million to Cammeby, which is run by investor Rubin Schron. Schron, who once put in a bid on the Empire State Building, who owns apartment buildings, nursing homes and a **portion of Industry City**, may not be particularly interested in providing housing. But he is good at developing wealth.

Investors know there is money to be made in the Bronx — as long as you get the state to subsidize as much as possible. Given that rent rolls are low and rent increases are controlled, it also helps to keep maintenance costs down, though [there is no clear picture](#) of how responsible a steward of the property the current owners were.

And so, with the public's help, Schron bought Twin Parks NW at a price I've calculated of roughly \$59,000 per unit. Seven years later the value of those apartments had more than doubled. He sold to the current owners for \$130,000 per unit, realizing \$8 million. I can't estimate how much profit they took in.

The Bronx and fire: It makes people jump. Takes Bronxites on a flashback to the years of abandonment and arson, when landlords who didn't simply walk away from their buildings — and the taxes they owed on them — hired torches to set them aflame because the insurance payout for a burnt building was greater than what the building could be sold for.

Twin Parks wasn't arson, but it was a kind of abandonment. The state walked away from an important idea when it decided the best we could do to preserve people's homes was cajole private investors into safeguarding a public good.

Twin Parks and other developments built under the state's Mitchell-Lama initiative were a big idea, a response to the housing crisis of the post-war years. We're in another housing crisis. We need big thinking again.

An estimated **7,000 units** of Mitchell-Lamas in the Bronx are set to expire in next five years. And another 14,000 by 2035. We need them as stable homes, owned by their residents or managed by nonprofit groups whose actual goal is maintaining decent homes, not making a profit.

Markey, the editor of "Without Compromise," an anthology of the work of muckraker Wayne Barrett, is an assistant professor of Journalism at Lehman College, CUNY.