



Why Are There 1,723 Vacant Buildings in Manhattan?

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The Harvard Club hosted a discussion about abandoned housing and homelessness.

By Eileen Markey

Abandoned housing in Manhattan? Really? Tell me where, I've got my hot plate ready.

It's hard to believe there are vacant buildings in New York's still insane real estate market, but [a recent survey](#) by the self-advocacy organization Picture the Homeless and the [Manhattan Borough President's Office](#) found 1,723 vacant buildings and 505 unused lots right in the heart of the Big, rent-gobbling Apple.

According to Picture the Homeless' Homeless People Count, those buildings and lots could house 24,000 apartments, enough to put a roof over the heads of all 35,000 people in the city's shelter system.

A forum hosted by the [Drum Major Institute](#) brought together a panel of housing experts and pols to discuss why vacant buildings remain so when hundreds of people crowd the city's shelters and rental income for landlords is ever increasing—and what can be done to turn vacancy into homes.

The Drum Major forum—part of its Marketplace of Ideas series—at the comically fancy schmancy [Harvard Club](#) was shaped around Boston Mayor Thomas Menino's aggressive policy of surveying and rehabilitating abandoned properties there.

Since 1997 Beantown has identified and turned around 18,000 units of housing, in more than 600 buildings. A quarter of them are labeled affordable and a few hundred were set aside for homeless people, Menino said.

Of course, the numbers in NYC are potentially way larger. The challenge here is different too, panelists said. Widespread abandonment is hardly the problem it was in the 1970s and '80s when anti-urban federal home loan policies made it easier for landlords to walk away from—or torch— properties than to maintain them. Back then the city had a portfolio of 100,000 foreclosed properties, said Brad Lander, director of Pratt Center for Community Development. All but a few of those have been rehabilitated or turned over to community organizations that rehabbed them.

The problem today is warehousing, property owners who figure the longer they wait to sell or repopulate their building the more money they'll make, said Carlton Collier, executive director of Parodneck Foundation, a non profit that provides technical, financial and organizing assistance to tenant controlled housing and other community development efforts. In addition to sitting on properties until the wave of gentrification lifts their price, landlords might be hoping to get their properties out of rent regulation by leaving them vacant long enough.

Most of the vacant properties identified by Picture the Homeless were in upper Manhattan, which block by block is falling to the rich. And unlike in the 1970s and 80s, most of the buildings are up to date on their taxes.

Once upon a time many now untouchable NYC's neighborhoods were filled with abandoned residential buildings. Starting in the Koch administration the city's challenge was to get vacant, tax delinquent buildings used, for anything. The issue today, panelists said, is making sure new and rehabbed housing is affordable.

“Now the city needs to find a way to address these tax current properties,” Lander said. “We need to find the next big initiative.”

Collier cautioned that discussions of affordability needed to be more specific. "Affordable for who?" he asked. "We have condos on 145th Street going for as low as \$300,000 for a studio and they call that affordable," he scoffed. "We need to look at what incentives we can put in place to encourage housing for people at less than 60 percent of the median income. [As Bloomberg's housing policy currently operates] We are building housing for people who are at median income or above." HUD calculates the median income for an NYC family of four at \$54,000.

To begin repopulating the vacant properties Picture the Homeless and Stringer's report both call for a citywide census of vacant buildings, changes to tax laws so that vacant buildings would be taxed as commercial property as a disincentive to speculative warehousing. They also recommend requiring landlords to register their vacant properties with the city, stating their plans for the building. Vacant land above 110th Street is currently taxed a rate far below that for the rest of the borough. Charging the same taxes

on vacant land throughout the borough would discourage speculative warehousing and encourage landlords to make use of their space, the reports argue.

When landlord abandonment threatened neighborhoods across the city HPD took action, eventually turning around 100,000 eyesores. The issue today is no longer buildings owners can't afford to maintain, but empty ones owners find worthwhile to keep vacant on the promise of higher rents next month or next year. Taking a census of vacant buildings and making it less attractive for property owners to keep them empty won't solve the crises of affordability and homelessness, but it will at least address the obscenity of empty buildings while people sleep on sidewalks.

Until the vacant apartments are reclaimed, maybe people can stay at the Harvard club.