PICCED: a history

By Bernard Friedberg

The Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development is a technical assistance and advocacy planning organization. Its staff works with civic groups and grass-roots community organizations, providing free professional services to its "clients."

The Center acts as a bridge between the community and government agencies seeking community-preferred solutions to the physical, economic, social, and environmental problems of the community. The services provided the client, whether a study of land use or a complete architectural plan, are intended to balance the relationship between government and people by giving the community the technical expertise to share in the decision-making process.

Center is Brooklyn-Minded

The Center, working primarily in Brooklyn, is currently providing planning and architectural design assistance to community groups in Northside, Coney Island, Park Slope, Red Hook and South Brooklyn. A team of environmental designers is helping a number of areas to re-purpose abandoned buildings for use as neighborhood day care and senior citizen facilities, and a wide-ranging public education program is offering specific information on current projects and general information on developments in the field of housing, health, education, and the environment.

How It All Began

The Center, established in 1963, is in many ways a product of housing legislation in the late 1940s and early 1950s and social legislation of the 1960s. Much of this legislation, such as the Federal Housing Act of 1964, provided for full citizen participation in all aspects of physical and social redevelopment of deteriorating urban areas.

Until 1961, however, when a redevelopment plan for the western part of Greenwich Village in Manhattan was defeated by an informed and aroused community led by Jane Jacobs, citizen participation had not been a reality in New York City. Following the "West Village" experience, city planners became conscious of the need to consult with communities on urban renewal questions, and as a result the renewal process came to a virtual standstill.

Citizens Helped to Participate

In 1962 Pratt Institute's Department of City and Regional Planning responded to a community request to prepare a plan for rehabilitating housing in the Cobble Hill section of South Brooklyn. The plan was prepared as a student project, but though sound it was eventually rejected by the community it was intended to serve. The message was clear to the planners: citizens were participating but needed more information, as well as trained leadership to deal effectively with urgent renewal problems and opportunities.

The Center Is Born

It was in this context of urban renewal stagnation, absence of skilled leadership, and inadequate public information that Professor George M. Raymond, Chairman of the City and Regional Planning Department, submitted a proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for a grant to establish an urban extension center under the auspices of Pratt Institute that would provide technical assistance, information services, advocacy planning, and leadership training to communities requesting it. In 1963 the Fund awarded a three-year grant and the Center was created. Pratt thus became one of the few educational institutions involved in the solution of community problems and
is the only one still active.

The Center's goal then as now was to provide communities with tools to fight their own battles more successfully. These tools — information, trained leadership, ability to negotiate with government agencies — are augmented by the technical expertise of the Center's full-time staff, trained students, and Pratt faculty members.

How the Center Functions

The Center-community relationship usually begins with a request from a community group for assistance in solving a critical local problem. In response the Center will then provide any appropriate combination of services within its capabilities. Often interconnected and overlapping, these services can be broken down into:

Technical Expertise — The Center furnishes skilled individuals to advise community leaders, civic organizations, and public and private agencies on their particular problems so that more rational decisions can be made. The Pratt technical assistant's function as "participant educators" and work with the client group as long as necessary to develop its capabilities for independent action. Establishment of a productive working relationship between client and assistant is the key to a successful project.

Ministers Seek Help

A specific example of technical assistance offered by the Center can be found in its first major activity. In 1964 an organization of Brooklyn ministers representing a cross section of Bedford-Stuyvesant churches asked the Center to undertake a study to determine the effect of a nearby urban renewal project on the deterioration of their own area. The Center prepared and published the requested report. Its impact was significant: a series of open community meetings was held to discuss the issues raised and a second request was made for the Center to investigate alternatives to the City's renewal proposal.

The Center, in cooperation with community organizations, conducted a series of field trips to other cities with active urban renewal programs, produced a flow of informational materials, and sponsored meetings and conferences to further inform residents and community leaders. Through the Center's work, community leaders gained enough technical expertise to pursue their group's own goals, eventually resulting in the establishment of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the nation's first community-controlled neighborhood revitalization organization.

Seeking to Save Homes

The Center's involvement with other communities follows this pattern. The staff of the Center is currently working actively with organizations in Northside and Coney Island. In Northside, an old but vital ethnic community was threatened by the expansion of a manufacturing plant. Residents were faced with destruction of their homes and with relocation. The Center was requested by community representatives to prepare an alternative plan that would be a compromise between the needs of the community and the manufacturer — allowing plant expansion with minimal displacement of residents.

The compromises reached in Northside led to important changes in the City's methods of dealing with relocation, replacement housing, tax abatement, and zoning. Area residents now have a strong voice in the redevelopment of their neighborhood and realistic options for the future.

New Regulations Applied

These new City regulations are being applied in solving a similar problem in Coney Island, where residents in an older area, with the Center's assistance, have developed arrangements with the City that will preserve the character of the neighborhood and still allow for the urban renewal process to continue.

Another example of the Center's technical assistance program is its work in the Columbia Street Containerport controversy in South Brooklyn. Large-scale demolition of a tightly knit community to make room for a new port facility was effectively prevented by the intervention of Center staff on the side of the community and the development of alternative plans for new housing, minimal relocation, expansion of port size, and increased job opportunities for local residents.

Aid to Gowanus and Brownsville

Two projects are involving Center staff in the rehabilitation of existing housing at the present time. In Gowanus, assistance is being offered in the design of low-rent cooperative apartments with attention to creative use of open space. In Brownsville, a comprehensive program for the temporary relocation of fire-displaced families includes architectural and interior design for housing and day care facilities and community spaces, as well as negotiations with City agencies and private contractors.

Communities as Partners

Community groups do more than merely invite the Center into a neighborhood: they actually serve as partners, providing community organization skills, knowledge of the area, physical space, and the day-to-day hard work of implementation. The Center has worked with such groups as the Conselyea Street Education Action Center and Northside Community Development Council in Northside, Neighborhood Improvement Organization in Coney Island, La Casa Neighborhood Service Center in the Columbia Street area, and Colony-South Brooklyn Houses in Gowanus and Brownsville.

In all these efforts the work of the Center has resulted in public policy changes that affect not only the communities involved but other communities that may be faced with such expansion planning in the future.
All Groups Have a Say

Advocacy Planning — The Center operates on the premise that all groups who will be affected by the solution of a problem are entitled to expert counsel and to influence the final decision. In most instances, this means the Center is giving community groups and whole communities that technical expertise to counter or supplement that of government. There is a definite element of advocacy planning in the Center’s participation in Northside, Coney Island, and Containerport controversies, but advocacy planners often serve other functions.

For example, using data gathered in a comprehensive survey of vacant land and abandoned buildings, the Center developed a program of scatter-site housing and vest-pocket parks linked to community needs. The staff established site-selection criteria and design and construction techniques. It has been involved in the creation of more than 3,000 units of housing and two dozen vest-pocket parks.

The Story of CNBC

The design and implementation of the plan for Central Brooklyn Neighborhood College was affected by the Center working closely with area representatives and organizations to meet the needs of residents seeking a second chance at higher education. The college was community-run and had no fees or entrance requirements. It was consciously designed to alert public and private institutions to the dearth of opportunities for minority people in higher education.

By the time it disbanded in 1970, it had served more than 1,600 students; more than 100 faculty volunteers from several colleges and community agencies had participated. Development of street academies, the SEEK program, open admission at the City University, and a variety of special programs for adults eliminated the need for the college, but its existence had had a direct impact on individuals and institutions concerned with education.

Hospital Expansion Studied

In the health field, the Center is working with the Cobble Hill, Park Slope, and Fort Greene communities. In Cobble Hill and Park Slope the problem is physical expansion of area hospitals without demonstrated programmatic need. The Center is designing alternative physical development plans and analyzing the health care delivery systems as they apply to both neighborhoods. In Fort Greene, the Center is consulting in the preparation of a health facilities study to determine necessary expansion of services at Cumberland Hospital.

In the environmental field the Center assists existing and developing action groups and block and tenant associations to develop environmental activities and programs. This includes aid in the design and operation of recycling centers, preparation of environmental education materials including school curricula, and specific data gathering on ecological problems.

How Leaders Are Trained

Leadership Training — The leadership training program of the Center has evolved from relatively formal efforts — such as lectures and seminars for community residents — to one of experiential learning in which participants receive on-the-job training with Center staff. Workshops are conducted on specific problems as they arise. The goal of the Center’s training activities is to produce an informed community leadership capable of dealing with government agencies and expanding private institutions, evaluating programs, and offering alternative solutions. Many participants in this program have taken major leadership roles as staff and board members of city, state, federal, and private agencies involved in community development.

Good Reading for Communities

Information Service — A major deterrent to effective community action has been the absence of accurate, readable materials bearing on physical and social change. To meet this need the Center publishes manuals, guides, and general educational and reference materials on health, housing, neighborhood improvement, environmental protection, and education. In the past the Center has published a monthly newsletter and assisted a coalition of community groups in the production and distribution of a monthly newspaper.

The Pratt Guide to Housing and Renewal for New Yorkers, now in its second printing, is a major contribution to civic groups, neighborhood organizations, and individuals who need to find their way through the government maze to appropriate sources of information and assistance. STREET, a bimonthly Center publication, covers a wide range of urban environmental issues and is written to appeal to a variety of interest groups. All publications except the Guide are distributed free to community organizations.

Over the years the Center has sponsored citywide conferences on subjects of timely interest. These conferences have drawn a spectrum of speakers and participants and have had a measurable impact on public policy. Conference proceedings have been published and distributed widely.

The Center’s Philosophy

In all its activities the Center has attempted to be a “third force” acting between community and government. The provision of equalizing expert counsel is essential to this function as is the formation of coalitions within and among communities over common issues. Coalition building has increasingly become a Center priority. A new ethnic awareness and the establishment of organizations advocating ethnic concerns has provided a broader base from
which to launch social action and community development programs and achieve maximum community involvement.

The Northside and Columbia Street issues are examples of the methods used by the Center in the creation or reinforcement of coalitions designed to seek real solutions to defined urban problems. These two neighborhoods represent a cross section of ethnic, racial, and economic groups whose goals—centering on improvement of the quality of urban life—are nevertheless the same. The realization that goals are shared has led to the formation of intercommunity coalitions focusing on issues of common concern.

**Makeup of Pratt Center**

The Center Staff — The Center utilizes a unique combination of professionals and pre-professionals to staff its array of programs. These resources include a permanent staff of eight, 30-40 Pratt students each year, and Pratt faculty members. Professionally oriented students are attracted to Pratt, and those working with the Center, whether in work-study programs, social action courses, or on special class assignments, are well qualified as participant educators and capable of providing quality assistance to their assigned groups.

Volunteers from the Pratt faculty provide specific consultative assistance — short and long term — to community organizations and represent the spectrum of academic disciplines at the Institute.

Where the Money Comes From

Funding — The Center was created with a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in 1963 and has been funded by a variety of foundations, corporations, and government agencies in its ten-year history. In addition, the Center occasionally accepts contract work for a fee, such as the current Brooklyn-Columbia Development Plan under subcontract to a private architectural firm. Contract services are kept to a minimum, however, as they take valuable staff time otherwise available without charge to community groups.

Pratt Institute is committed to the Center and provides space, administrative expenses, the salaries of participating faculty, and deficit financing.

**Where Does It Go From Here?**

The Future — As government agencies assume the responsibility for day care, drug rehabilitation, senior citizen activities, and educational alternatives, the role of the Center lessens in those areas. But new needs and problems continue to arise, and the need for technical assistance and information parallels these new developments. Health care, housing, revenue sharing, and environmental issues continue to warrant attention. New organizations are forming to deal with these problems, and new leadership must be trained so communities can be adequately represented in the decision-making process.

The Center will continue to provide professional expertise to minority communities and to expand services to working class ethnic communities. It will continue its community education services and its publications. It will continue to act as a third force, independent of government and committed to solutions to the problems of urban decay, substandard housing, inadequate public services, unemployment, poor transportation, chaotic land use, and limited recreational facilities.

**CENTER MARKS FIRST DECADE**

In celebration of its first decade of service to the community, Pratt Center put on an exhibition June 11 — July 5 featuring some of its accomplishments. The show at the Pratt Manhattan Center, 46 Park Avenue, included continuous videotape and slide presentations and photo displays, notably a collection of photos of Brooklyn’s Northside community taken by freelance photographer Jamie Eisenberg.

In addition to the visual offerings, the Center also sponsored three workshops at the Manhattan Center, bringing together experts in various fields and community workers who wanted to share their expertise. The first workshop was on Communities and the Press, with such media people as Peter Freiberger of the New York Post, Gary Gilson and Roseann Alessandro of Channel 13, and Celene Krauss and Barbara Bingham of Brooklyn Heights’s Township newspaper, as well as members of the Pratt Center staff and community people.

Dealing with Communities and Foundations, the second workshop investigated ways in which community organizations can seek funding. Participants included Kathleen Roberts of the Fund for the City of New York, Coco Eiseman of the New York State Council on the Arts, and Nathaniel Harris of the First National City Bank.