

# Case Study: Community Mapping, Right to the City-NYC

## Background on Organization and Issue

Right to the City NYC is a local chapter of Right to the City national alliance and is composed of twenty base-building, community organizations, research groups and other allies in New York City. The alliance aims to build a united response to gentrification and neo-liberal development policies in NYC and to a build collective movement to promote and create community-based economic development policies.

Over the last several years, during the housing boom, NYC saw the rapid development of luxury condominiums, many in neighborhoods where low-income people live. Due to the economic crisis, many of these luxury condominiums were left vacant. Some have been forced to stop construction because their financing has dried up, while others have been unable to sell units and are falling behind on their construction loan payments. Despite all of this new construction, the number of housing units that are affordable for low- to middle-income families has decreased precipitously. From 2002 to 2005, the city lost more than 205,000 units affordable to the typical household. Accordingly, NYC is left with many vacant units of housing but these units are not available or affordable to those most in need of housing. Many of the neighborhoods where RTTC members live are full of these recently developed condos that have unsold units or are completely empty. RTTC-NYC conducted a community mapping project to identify where the vacant condos are located; examine the current state of these condos and determine how NYC can convert these condos into low-income housing.

Below is a description of the RTTC Condo Count, based on the Participatory Action Research Guiding Framework (see Tool 2.1 and 2.2).

## WHAT....

### Were the organizing goals connected to this research?

- To show number of unsold and vacant units in luxury condos in specific NYC neighborhoods;
- To highlight number of vacant luxury units versus number of vacant units affordable to low income people;
- To educate members of RTTC-NYC groups about type of development occurring in NYC neighborhoods;
- To educate elected officials and media about type of development occurring in NYC neighborhoods, particularly low-income communities of color;
- To increase affordable housing in NYC.

### Overall questions did RTTC want to answer through their research?

- What is the state of vacant and stalled residential buildings in low-income communities?
- How are vacant condominiums and stalled construction projects affecting low-income communities?
- What policies helped contribute to this problem?
- What opportunities exist to convert vacant condos into low-income housing?
- What are the most effective policy and financing options to convert them?

### **Information did RTTC need to collect to answer these research questions?**

- Block and lot numbers and addresses of vacant condos;
- Size of buildings, number of units, vacancy rates and cost of units;
- Information about the buildings developers, construction companies and financiers;
- Background information about targeted neighborhoods;
- Potential policy and funding mechanisms to convert vacant condos into low-income housing.

### **WHY....**

#### **Is this research useful or important for RTTC?**

- Internally: The condo research project provided valuable information to assist the coalition in campaign development. The collective project also helped to strengthen the RTTC alliance through increased interaction between member groups.
- Externally: The research helped RTTC become part of the conversation about the future development of New York. RTTC used the report and results to hold several meetings with elected officials and the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD) to educate them about high-end development in target neighborhoods. Media coverage stemming from the report release educated the general public about excessive condo development and gentrification.

### **WHO...**

#### **Are the stakeholders in this issue?**

- Low-income community members that live in the targeted neighborhoods in NYC and those in need of affordable housing.

#### **Is RTTC trying to influence?**

- The Mayor, City Council, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

### **HOW...**

#### **Did RTTC gather information (what methods did they use)?**

- RTTC decided they wanted to physically map the luxury condos as a way to demonstrate the rampant gentrification occurring in the target neighborhoods. Organization members canvassed and identified over 250 vacant condo buildings with an estimated 4,000 empty units. The results were shown on maps in the final report and helped visually show the spread of luxury condos. Community mapping also engaged a high number of community members, who walked the streets of their neighborhoods, sharing ownership of the research and building buy-in for the campaign.

#### **How Research Supported RTTC's Organizing Efforts**

RTTC-NYC released the preliminary findings during a rally in Brooklyn, launching their campaign to convert vacant condos to low-income housing. After extensive secondary research, RTTC-NYC then released a full report and conducted a tour in Harlem of several vacant condos, highlighting the exorbitant prices, the length of time on the market, and the significant tax arrears owed to NYC. This event garnered much press and gave RTTC hard numbers to take to elected officials and push to convert the condos into affordable housing. The policy research also enabled RTTC to come up with several scenarios for converting condos into low-income housing and eventually led RTTC to hone in on Community Land Trusts as the focus of the Alliance's campaign.