Building Community in *Kleindeutschland*:
The Role of German Immigration in Shaping
New York City’s Seventeen Ward

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Introduction

A Sense of Place: The East Village as an Historic Urban Landscape

It is hard to explain how a district so close to the financial, governmental, and corporate centers of one of the world’s greatest cities has persisted for some 150 years as a zone housing people of very modest, even marginal, means, apparently insulated from the tremendous forces of change which washed around it.
— Janet Abu-Lughod

The great flow of immigrants arriving from Northern Europe in the decades after 1840 brought tremendous changes to the growing cities of New York and Brooklyn. Prominent among these were the exiles that arrived from Germany, and they made New York one of the largest centers of German culture in the world. Between 1855 and 1880, only Vienna and Berlin had larger populations of ethnic Germans, and, in American terms, if New York's German enclaves had constituted their own city, according to historian Stanley Nadel, it would have been the fourth most populous urban place in the United States in 1860.

This thesis examines the influence of German migration on the physical fabric of New York between 1848 and 1901 in Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward, an area that comprises the East Village today. The analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of the history of a group of architects and builders that have been little studied, and who made important contributions to shaping

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community life during a transformative period in the city's growth. Much of the urban fabric that
distinguishes the contemporary neighborhood is a product of German immigration during the
nineteenth century, especially the area’s distinct character as a working-class residential district.
Moreover, the array of dwellings, commercial structures, and institutions that were designed and
constructed for the needs of the German immigrants has continued to provide a vital infrastructure
as they have been adapted by successive generations of inhabitants.

The following chapters examine aspects of German-American building activity that underpinned
the subsequent evolution of the neighborhood in the twentieth century. Chapter One investigates
the impact of nineteenth-century German immigration on residential real estate development and
how it produced a dense tenement district whose fabric would become the dominant characteristic
of the neighborhood. Chapter Two examines the meeting halls and social clubs built to house
German voluntary organizations in order to illustrate how immigrants used these buildings to
shape community, create meaning, and navigate the nuances of a new life in a foreign country.
Finally, Chapter Three explores the meaning and values inherent in this historic built fabric
produced by and for German-Americans as understood by the later residents of the neighborhood
and describes the efforts of tenant organizers to preserve social cohesion and a sense of place in the
face of postwar urban renewal. This research allows for a better appreciation of how a distinct
German-American building culture helped to shape the modern American city, and provides a
window by which we can also better understand the role of immigrants in the formation of a
vibrant urbanism. Furthermore, this narrative suggests that the traditional tools by which historic
preservation safeguards historic buildings may be inadequate for places like the East Village where
social and economic values also underlie the visible surfaces of the vernacular urban landscape and
endow it with special meaning.
In the nineteenth century, New York’s *Kleindeutschland*, or Little Germany, was originally contained within the city’s Tenth, Eleventh, Thirteenth, and Seventeenth Wards. The boundary of this investigation will be the Seventeenth Ward, limited by Fourth Avenue, Fourteenth Street, Avenue B, and Rivington Street.\(^3\) Four compelling qualities of the study area guided the delineation of this boundary and are explored in subsequent chapters. First of all, beginning in the 1840s, much of the Seventeenth Ward was specifically developed to accommodate the influx of German migrants and many of the community’s first purpose-built churches, social clubs, and institutional buildings were clustered here. Secondly, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Seventeenth Ward was the “newest, least industrial, and best residential portion” of the four wards, and it remained a German-American enclave long after the other wards had been abandoned to successive immigrant groups.\(^4\) Most importantly, the area is especially distinguished by the large number of nineteenth-century buildings that remain extant and that form a defining element of the neighborhood’s character. The majority of the surviving Federal-style townhouses, multi-family tenements, commercial structures, and institutional buildings were either adapted by or constructed expressly for the German-American community. And lastly, the threat of slum clearance and urban renewal measures against the historic fabric catalyzed the emergence of citizens’ groups in the neighborhood after the Second World War. This organized resistance helped to inaugurate a new participatory and decentralized approach to urban planning for the City of New York; its emergence raises interesting questions about the embedded values and attributes of place that are the most meaningful to people about where they live. These four characteristics helped to limn the boundaries of the study area within the Seventeenth Ward, and compelled this

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\(^3\) The ward system in Manhattan was established in 1686 and survived as a political and administrative boundary until 1857, when wards were replaced with districts. Wards were maintained to delineate school and census enumeration areas through 1896, after which the municipal school system was centralized. Although they served no political function after this time and were never formally abolished, wards were delineated in city charters through 1938, after which they ceased to be referenced. See Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of New York*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1377.

\(^4\) Nadel, 35.
investigation to go beyond architectural distinction to make a case for the social and cultural value of the everyday, speculative buildings that inhabit the streetscape.

Historic preservation provisions in the City of New York are well suited to assess the built environment of the Seventeenth Ward and recognize its continued relevance to society. Indeed, the ward already contains two historic districts within its boundaries — the Saint Mark’s and East Tenth Street Historic Districts — and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has calendared a vote in June 2012 to consider a new East Village/Lower East Side Historic District that would comprise 300 additional buildings. In addition, there are several individually protected landmarks in the ward as well. While the city’s preservation laws do help safeguard important historic urban fabric, the explicit preservation of the social structure and more intangible aspects of heritage that contribute to an area’s sense of place is not achievable or is neglected by these means.

While often difficult to delineate precisely, a sense of place can be understood as an amalgam of qualities and characteristics — social, cultural, environmental, and aesthetic — that furnish a location with meaning. According to geographer J.B. Jackson, “It is place, permanent position in both the social and topographical sense, that gives us our identity.” Social and economic values are integral to this identity, even though they often evolve over time as residents’ feelings of belonging or stewardship may change. Norwegian architectural historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz emphasized the importance of the meaning and intangible qualities of place and how these elements are supported by the physical structure of the built environment in his discussion of the concept of genius loci: “The essential purpose of building (architecture) is therefore

5 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 152.
to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment.”

A recent survey sponsored by the Knight Foundation and Gallup emphasized the importance of these intangible attributes that contribute to the power of place. Published in 2010, the Soul of the Community Survey asked nearly 43,000 participants in twenty-six America cities to rank the most important characteristics of their cities of residence. The study attempted to understand the qualities that create meaning and attachment between people and the places where they live. The results indicated that the most salient factors for creating social cohesion and bonds between residents and their communities were not economic motivators like the availability of jobs, commercial opportunities, or even safety, but, rather, those elements intrinsically related to the character of place and quality of life: “an area’s physical beauty, opportunities for socializing, and a community’s openness to all people.”

As one historian observes, “Public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular expressions.” Many scholars have written about the power of everyday urban landscapes like the Seventeenth Ward and the meaning that ordinary people derive from them, and yet urban landscapes still often remain a challenge for the traditional historic preservation toolkit to steward and interpret. James Marston Fitch has written about the tensions inherent in neighborhood revitalization and historic preservation efforts within the urban context. He cautions that a delicate

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balance must be struck so that rehabilitation does not exacerbate existing inequalities by causing the displacement of residents through gentrification: “Thus, the regeneration of such districts involves meeting simultaneously two quite different sets of the requirements: the conservation of the physical fabric of the quarter (i.e., the container) and the protection of the interests of the population (i.e., the contained).” Historian Robert Hodder has similarly examined the effect of preservation practice “on the physical form and social geography” of the urban realm in his study of the postwar planning agenda in Savannah, Georgia. He persuasively links city-sponsored rehabilitation efforts from the 1950s and 1960s with the displacement of low-income and African-American residents. The author also chronicles the subsequent efforts of the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project to realign preservation goals in order to retain both the urban fabric and the existing socio-economic character and racial diversity of the city’s historically African-American Victorian District.

The evolution of preservation practice has led to an increased awareness of the social construction of historic landscapes. The recent emergence of the historic urban landscapes approach offers new ideas on how to manage development and tailor it to the individual priorities of particular communities, and, thereby, respect historical patterns, the meaning of space, and social connectivity. This perspective is a valuable lens by which to examine the influence of German immigrants to the Seventeenth Ward because it highlights how the value of urban heritage is as much about social traditions and relationships that people bring to the city as it is about buildings and spaces. Furthermore, according to Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, the framework recognizes that:

12 For example, see Hodder, 372-82.
Fundamentally, it is local communities who make places — not architects or designers. Local communities integrate natural and cultural components of any given locale through their daily practices and behaviour, their beliefs, traditions and value systems, into a singular experience, which can only be truly appreciated when participating in that practice. A place acquires its identity through the continuous historic process of negotiating between different groups and communities.\(^\text{13}\)

While this attitude may appear to preclude the preservation of physical fabric, it highlights the important social and cultural processes that produce and continue to shape the urban condition. The value of urban heritage in the Seventeenth Ward lies in the complexly woven geographies that are created between built fabric and spatial organization, formal and informal uses, the flow of residents and visitors, historical memory, and the manner by which these are expressed. As Bandarin and Van Oers determine, “It is as much about the urban form and architecture, which make a crucial contribution to its character and articulation, as about social patterns and cultural traditions embedded in the historic city.”\(^\text{14}\)

Born of the modern urban conservation movement and influenced by the field of human geography, the concept of the historic urban landscape was first introduced to heritage practitioners during a series of expert meetings sponsored by UNESCO that led to the issuing of the Vienna Memorandum in 2005. It attempted to derive a framework by which to more holistically manage change on an urban scale and approached the contemporary city as an ever-evolving landscape rather than as a discrete ensemble of monuments or sites that needed to be preserved in stasis.\(^\text{15}\) UNESCO eventually agreed upon a definition of the concept in early 2010, and a final Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes was approved later that year. In addition to the built environment and land-use patterns, the definition understood the urban area


\(^{14}\) Ibid, 108.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 195-96.
“as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes [that] includes social and cultural practices and values, economic processes and the intangible dimensions of heritage as related to diversity and identity.”¹⁶ So defined, historic urban landscapes recognize the dynamic nature of the urban realm and are intended to provide a holistic framework for heritage management that is integrated with planning for social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Moreover, this approach responds to the challenges that urban areas face from the pressures of unmanaged growth and development, gentrification and displacement, which can erode a sense of place and community identity, as well as the integrity of physical urban fabric.¹⁷

According to Cuban preservation architect Gustavo F. Araoz, president of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the adoption of new “heritage categories” by the 1990s, such as cultural landscapes and vernacular sites, was evidence of a profound transformation in preservation practice that acknowledged the cultural values embodied in “both material fabric and immaterial characteristics in a site.”¹⁸ This paradigm shift led to the increased recognition and protection of intangible heritage by professional preservation organizations and the passage of measures like the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1993 and the Declaration of San Antonio in 1996. Araoz aligns the historic urban landscapes model with preservation’s trajectory toward the intangible and considers the new approach a response to the dynamic and evolutionary nature of urbanism itself:

“[This approach] would expand the values inherent in historic urban districts to include its dynamic historic patterns of evolution and change, thereby shifting the objective of conservation

¹⁶ UNESCO, Revised Draft of the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (November 10, 2011), Section I, 8-9. See also Section 11: “The historic urban landscape approach aims at preserving the quality of the human environment, enhancing the productive and sustainable use of urban spaces while recognizing their dynamic character, and promoting social and functional diversity. It integrates the goals of urban heritage conservation and those of social and economic development. It is rooted in a balanced and sustainable relationship between the urban and natural environment, between the needs of present and future generations and the legacy from the past.”

¹⁷ Ibid, Section II.

from preserving the authenticity of material form to protecting the historical processes and patterns of urbanization."

The historic urban landscapes model has implicitly inspired the study of Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward that follows, which aims to reveal some of the historic connections between the built environment of the Seventeenth Ward and the intangible values that are inherent within it. It acknowledges that the material legacy of German immigration is an exceptionally significant aspect of the neighborhood’s value, but alongside this, that other characteristics and patterns are also important to consider, such as the area’s function as a crucible for working-class and immigrant life. The study will examine discrete aspects of the neighborhood — the residential dwellings and social clubs built for the German-immigrant community and how later inhabitants of the study area ascribed value to what they inherited.

The area of the Seventeenth Ward that comprises the East Village today has been a residential quarter for working-class individuals and immigrants for over 150 years, remaining so partly because of the built infrastructure created by and for German-America. The historic urban landscapes model suggests a lens by which to acknowledge aspects of the neighborhood such as affordability, adaptability, resilience, and social cohesion, which were the very qualities valued by later generations that are not otherwise maintainable by traditional preservation approaches. This new framework suggests the enormous possibility of finding ways to integrate the preservation of historic structures while perpetuating the values that give them meaning, while also increasing social equity for some of the city’s most historically marginalized communities that may be threatened by displacement and encroaching gentrification. As public historian Ned Kaufman

19 Ibid.
writes about the challenge of preserving the character of New York City’s working-class neighborhoods:

The best policy will be the one that protects affordable housing and the character of affordable neighborhoods; that stabilizes the physical fabric of neighborhoods and sustains the economic chances of people who live in them; and that shows a decent regard for people’s lifeways and their history. A policy that meets these goals will serve the ends of both social justice and historical memory.  

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Chapter 1

Building Community in *Kleindutschland*: German Migrants and Speculative Real Estate Development in Mid-19th Century New York

Once I thought to write a history of immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.
— Oscar Handlin

The great exodus of migrants arriving from Northern Europe in the five decades after 1840 had a profound impact on the built landscape of the growing city of New York. Prominent among them were those exiles who arrived from German states and made the city one of the largest centers of German culture in the world. This was the most significant and sustained migration flow that the United States had yet known as a nation, and, thus, the dynamics of how it transformed the built environment of Manhattan offers broad lessons about how the immigrant experience has helped to palpably shape the modern American cityscape and create the sense of place that we recognize today.

German immigration to New York between 1845 and 1890 had a profound impact on residential real estate development within the city’s Seventeenth Ward, an area bounded by East Fourteenth Street, Rivington Street, Avenue A, and the Bowery. Block surveys and building research focused on a series of ten blocks in the southwestern corner of the ward, from Houston Street to East Fifth Street and the Bowery to First Avenue. (Figure 1.1) They reveal the three ways that the German

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community that thrived in this area contributed to a vibrant urbanism: as residents and inhabitants, as speculative real estate developers, and as practitioners in the building trades.

The following narrative is arranged chronologically and traces the real estate development of the study area using select case studies drawn from the existing building stock to illustrate key historic transitions. An influx of German and other immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century created a severe housing shortage in the city, and areas north of Houston Street were quickly transformed into new residential districts. Many existing single-family dwellings were converted for multiple occupancy and a first generation of purpose-built multi-unit tenements was constructed. Foreign-born architects, master builders, and craftsmen, increasingly financed by German-American capital and investments, shaped much of this built fabric using skills and expertise gained abroad. Residents of the Seventeenth Ward and members of the building trades that worked within it helped to create the conditions that inspired New York’s housing reform ordinances and, later, were instrumental in implementing measures to improve the living conditions of the working classes. In these roles — as tenants and landlords, and as designers and laborers — immigrants gave form to the civic life and public culture of one of New York’s most dynamic neighborhoods and much of the physical character of German New York remains as testimony to this today. This built fabric provides a unique sense of place and continues to serve as a crucible and muse for succeeding waves of New Yorkers, both newcomers and long-time residents alike.

**Dutch Settlement and Early Residential Development**

The study area had undergone many years of development prior to the arrival of German-American migrants. During the period of Dutch settlement, most residents of New Amsterdam lived in a dense cluster at the lower tip of Manhattan Island, a location that afforded both greater defensibility and ease of access to the wharves and quays that linked the vibrant port to a
flourishing transatlantic network and mercantile economy. North of the settlement, at least fourteen large farmsteads or “boweries” were established by Dutch settlers along with a few plantations and smaller private landholdings.² Now considered part of the East Village, much of the eastern portion of the Seventeenth Ward that makes up the study area was acquired by director-general Petrus Stuyvesant in March 1651 and consisted of his home farm and three boweries which lay east of the Boston Post Road. (Figure 1.2) These holdings remained in the Stuyvesant family until the nineteenth century. In addition to and carved out of the Stuyvesant tracts was an additional parcel known as “Schout’s Bowery” that entered into the hands of Phillip Minthorne and his heirs by 1732.³

By the close of the eighteenth century, many of the working farms north of the city were sold and subdivided to become summer retreats for the wealthy.⁴ After the Revolution, between 1795 and 1815, the value of real estate in the city soared, increasing over seven hundred percent, and the population of Manhattan tripled to over 96,000 residents. Consequently, many large estates north of the urban core were surveyed, subdivided, and developed into residential districts.⁵ Beginning with the Goerck Plan of 1796, the municipal government took steps to control the organic and unregulated northward expansion of the city. Municipal action culminated in the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811 that imposed an orderly, rectilinear grid of numbered streets and avenues on all of Manhattan Island from the city’s existing edge up to 155th Street.⁶ In the area that would become the Seventeenth Ward, most of the tracts that comprised the Minthorne farm and the Stuyvesant property were developed in accordance with this new plan and those streets at variance with it

⁶ Ballon, 22-41.
were closed. However, in 1830, the Common Council deemed a diagonal portion of Stuyvesant Street to be worthy of retention “both for Public convenience and for the accommodation of a large and respectable Congregation attending Saint Mark’s Church, as well as the owners and occupants of several large and commodious dwelling houses… all of which would be destroyed, or rendered of little value, if that street were closed.”

According to historian Charles Lockwood, the city opened up Second and Third Avenues between 1812-16, followed by Eighth through Twelfth Streets by the late 1820s. The surrounding blocks were subsequently subdivided and developed by the Stuyvesant heirs and the area briefly became one of New York City’s most desirable and elegant residential districts. Public officials encouraged elite residential development by approving the conversion of streets into “enclosed” blocks by allowing the imposition of restrictive covenants, and, also, by permitting the adoption of new street-naming conventions in order to distinguish certain select addresses as fashionable and distinct. By 1830, many of the city’s most affluent rows lay nearby and to the west of the Stuyvesant tracts, between Broadway and the Bowery, including La Grange Terrace on Lafayette Street and DePau Row, Carroll Place, and LeRoy Place on Bleecker Street. One block to the north, Bond Street was also notable for its fine Federal-style row houses.

A number of extant buildings within the study area reveal the style and quality of this elite residential development. The Stuyvesant heirs, for example, sought to capitalize on the growing real estate market by engaging Thomas E. Davis in 1831 to develop East Eighth Street between Second and Third Avenues as Saint Mark’s Place. Davis constructed two terraces of grand, three-

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8 Ibid.
9 Blackmar, 164.
10 Ibid; see also Lockwood; 42-45, 79-81.
and-a-half story row houses in the Federal style on generously sized lots with ample front yards.\textsuperscript{11} As one newspaperman commented, “The fashionable end of town is now decidedly at Washington Square, and the surrounding neighborhood from Bleecker Street to Albion Place. The elegance and beauty of this section cannot be surpassed in the country.”\textsuperscript{12} Also opened up for development by the Stuyvesant heirs in 1831, Albion Place was a block of twelve patrician, three-and-a-half story, Federal row houses on the south side of East Fourth Street between the Bowery and Second Avenue. (\textbf{Figure 1.3}) Early residents included philanthropist and social reformer Anson Green Phelps; his partner, metals-ware manufacturer Elisha Peck; wholesale-produce merchant James Renwick Gibson; city alderman General Anthony Lamb; Presbyterian pastor and theologian Richard William Dickinson; prominent Dutch Reform minister Thomas Edward Vermilye; insurance lawyer Henry M. Wreaks; banker Clinton Gilbert; and the spouses, children, servants, and lodgers that resided with them.\textsuperscript{13} An anonymous writer to the \textit{American Whig Review} described how the speedy development of this genteel enclave and its display of wealth and taste inspired feelings of awe and unease. “I used to rub my eyes and wonder whether I was in the New World or the Old,” he wrote, “and was afflicted with the uncomfortable sensation of the man who went to sleep in the mountains, and waking up after a twenty years’ nap, opened his eyes under a Republican government, although his slumbers had begun under royal rule.”\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Hamilton-Holly House Designation Report, LP-2157 (October 19, 2004). See also Blackmar 195–96.
\item \textit{Morning Herald} (May 12, 1835), quoted in Stokes, volume five, 1732.
\item The first owners of 6 and 7 Albion Place were Elisha Peck and Anson Green Phelps, whose partnership under the name of Phelps & Peck dealt in the metals trade and the importation of copper, tin, and iron. Their houses (now at 66–68 East Fourth Street) were purchased by the New York Turn Verein and raised to four full stories and converted into the organization’s clubhouse. See Chapter 2. The Lamb residence at 5 Albion Place (now 64 East Fourth Street) also survives, albeit significantly altered. For a full list of residents in 1841, see the advertisement for the \textit{New-York Penny Post Directory}, \textit{New-York Tribune} 1:138 (October 12, 1841). 3. For information about Phelps & Peck, see Charles Eliot Fitch, \textit{Encyclopedia of Biography of New York} (New York: American Historical Society, 1916), 245–46 and Walter Barrett, \textit{The Old Merchants of New York City} (New York: Thomas R. Knox, 1885), 246–49. Phelps also owned eleven lots on East Fifth Street between Second Avenue and the Bowery, which he developed with row houses in 1830–31 and leased for rental income.
\item “Disadvantages of Being Born in One’s Own Country,” \textit{American Whig Review} 7:3 (March 1851, 210–11).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Residential construction grew apace in the city north of Houston Street in the decade after 1825. One-term mayor Philip Hone, son of an immigrant German carpenter, commented in his diary that in the spring of 1835 “[t]he rise of lots in the upper part of the city goes on without interruption from any cause, foreign or domestic.”15 Historian Elizabeth Blackmar estimates that typical brick or brick-fronted row houses during this period cost between $2,000 and $3,500 on lots that ranged in price from $500 to $1,000; frame structures were incredibly rare. These dwellings could comfortably accommodate a single family, their servants, and occasionally boarders.16 According to the records of the Board of Assistant Aldermen, the Seventeenth Ward had 1,287 vacant lots in 1830, the second highest total in the city, and absorbed a population increase of over 103% between 1825 and 1830 to 14,901 persons; during the same time, the assessed value of land increased by sixty-seven percent.17 A surge in residential development for those with the means and ambition to afford new dwellings was incited by the availability of vacant land so close to the city center.

The Creation of Tompkins Square Park

David H. Burr’s 1839 map of the expanding city indicates that the blocks west of Second Avenue and south of East Third Street were developed first, following the familiar northward trajectory of real estate speculation in Manhattan and avoiding the fetid salt marshes and poor quality land that lay between these blocks and the industrial development and shipyards along the East River.18

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17 Ibid, Table 4. The assessed value increased from $2,320,200 to $3,874,900. The study area was bounded within the Eleventh Ward until 1837, when the Seventeenth Ward was carved out of the area between Avenue A, Rivington Street, the Bowery, and East Fourteenth Street.
(Figures 1.4-5) The swamp was sold to the city in 1834 by John Jacob Astor for $93,000 and was left vacant by the Common Council with the intention of developing a wholesale public market on the site. The market plan was soon abandoned and a site bounded by East Seventh Street, Avenue A, East Tenth Street, and Avenue B was set aside for use as a public park. Following the earlier precedents set by the establishment of Washington Square and Saint John’s parks, the creation of Tompkins Square was intended to transform the derelict site, known colloquially as “the Dry-Dock” because of its proximity to the East River shipyards, into a fashionable enclave not unlike the elegant residential rows to the east along Saint Mark’s Place and Second Avenue, and, optimistically, to recuperate the public funds invested in its creation through higher taxes on the surrounding property. A report to the Board of Aldermen cautioned that should the improvements “be delayed for an indefinite period, then indeed will this already unfortunate part of the Island be doomed to utter despair, and the expenditures which have already taken place in the filling of streets and avenues be deemed in a measure useless.” Much to the dismay of real estate speculators and public officials, the Panic of 1837 intervened instead and the resulting economic depression deflated New York’s housing bubble and halted housing construction in the city for several years. Beginning in 1845, the first pair of what would become a substantial row of fine townhouses was built on East Tenth Street on the north side of the park, probably by the mason and builder James C. Whitlock. By that time, however, the neighborhood was just beginning to feel the influence of a tremendous demographic shift that would transform the entire district surrounding Tompkins Square and set the pattern for the future development of the Seventeenth Ward.


20 Board of Aldermen, Document No. 7 (June 9, 1834), in Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, volume 1 (New York: The Board), 54.

21 Blackmar, 203.

22 The full southern frontage of the block from 293 to 395 East Tenth Street was designated as an historic district in 2012. See New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, East Tenth Street Historic District Designation Report, LP-2492 (January 17, 2012).
Immigration, Changing Demographics, and the Rise of Speculative Real Estate Development

The economic benefits of the Erie Canal led to a near doubling of the population of New York City between 1825, when the canal opened, and 1840. During the following decade, the population increased again by over sixty percent due to the arrival of foreign immigrants, mostly from Western Europe, who came because of political revolutions, economic hardships, and agricultural collapse. By 1860, New York City could claim a total population of 813,669, of which over forty-seven percent was foreign-born. 23 Peculiar customs and unfamiliar languages made these newcomers easily recognizable to native New Yorkers. As early as 1835, German-born jurist, educator, and political philosopher Francis Lieber could comment on the dynamic and cosmopolitan urbanism of the polyglot Empire City, “I heard, close to me, four languages at once — English, German, French, and Spanish, which, with the addition of Italian, you may hear almost any day, in Broadway, at the hours when it is most frequented.” 24

A significant number of the immigrants who arrived between 1848 and 1880 were from the German speaking areas of Europe, and they had a profound effect on urban public life in New York. These people arrived in the U.S. in three distinct waves. The revolutions of 1848–49 mixed with simultaneous agricultural failures during this period led the first wave of individuals and families to emigrate from the German states to the U.S. (Figures 1.6-7) While political refugees were only a small percentage of this first wave of immigrants, the rapid rise to prominence of this

23 See Tables 6 and 9, Ira Rosenwaike, Population History of New York City (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972); 36, 42.
vocal sub-group led this entire generation of arrivals to be classified as “Forty-eighers.” 25 By 1860, one out of every ten Germans in the country lived in Manhattan, and historian Stanley Nadel’s research has revealed that the majority of the migrants that settled in New York originated from the southwestern German states, especially Bavaria.26

The second great wave, from 1865 to 1879, came largely in response to the political tensions that accompanied the unification of Germany after the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, and it was dominated by emigrants that originated from Prussia and other northeastern states. Continuing German migration peaked again in the decade after 1880; this wave was demographically similar to the preceding one, but involved even greater numbers of people, some 55,000 between 1864 and 1879.27 The German-born population in New York City rose steadily from 119,964 in 1860 to 151,203 in 1870 and 163,482 in 1880.28 Taken together, the great exodus of German-speaking migrants made greater New York one of the largest centers of German culture in the world. Indeed, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, only Vienna and Berlin had larger populations of ethnic Germans than New York and Brooklyn contained together. Historians estimate that by 1880 German-American inhabitants in New York comprised thirty-one percent of the city’s total population.29 These people brought ideas about building and community structure with them from their native lands that significantly transformed the built form and character of the Seventeenth Ward and provided a fertile ground for innovation and transnational exchange. (Figure 1.8)


27 The lack of American and German census data from the period that details nativity has hampered efforts to parse and quantify this group. Nadel, *Kleineutschland*, 33–30; see also Figure 2, 46.


29 Nadel, *Kleineutschland*; 1, 81.
Enormous numbers of Irish immigrants were also arriving in New York at this time, and the surge in new residents put an unprecedented strain on the city’s already over-taxed housing stock, particularly within the area known as Five Points and the Lispenard Meadows property of the old Trinity Church farm. 30 “Thousands and tens of thousands are compelled to exist from day to day under the constant, crushing pressure of... terrible sufferings resulting directly from the miserable houses in which they live,” reported one newspaper in 1847. 31 The economic depression that followed after the Panic of 1837 lasted into the early 1840s and wrecked havoc in New York’s building trades and construction industries, further exacerbating the existing shortage of vacant housing units available to the working classes and newly arrived immigrants. Severe overcrowding resulted, and was alleviated in part by the widespread subdivision of existing single-family housing stock into multi-unit dwellings to accommodate dozens of inhabitants. 32

The Slow Transformation of a Fashionable Residential District

The Seventeenth Ward absorbed many arriving immigrants and eventually grew into Manhattan’s primary German-speaking enclave. The change in the study area’s demographics and the consequent transformation of its housing stock to suit the new population took place in stages, first through the rental of homes by absentee owners, then by the alteration of existing single-family dwellings to house multiple households, and finally by the construction of successive generations of purpose-built multi-unit residential buildings next to and in place of the area’s original low-scale development.

Social reformers in the early 1850s noted the effects of immigration on the city’s housing stock:

30 Blackmar, 173.
31 Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer (January 13, 1847). Quoted in Blackmar, 183.
32 Blackmar, 183-85.
In the lower wards there are thousands of poor persons, but comparatively few buildings suitable for accommodation. Most of the houses are those which were formerly occupied by the wealthy who have removed up town; and now in their dilapidated state, many of them are tenanted by miserably poor Irish and German immigrants. Large rooms have been divided by rough partitions... [and the] circumstances in which [the inhabitants] live make fearful havoc of health and life.\textsuperscript{33}

In a class-divided urban landscape, landowners and property developers were keen to maximize their profits and economic advantages. They invested resources into the creation of respectable residential blocks in order to attract a wealthy clientele, but a healthy return on their investment depended upon the maintenance of amenities and the preservation of their developments’ genteel character. Historian Elizabeth Blackmar explains that the monetary worth of land typically did not appreciate in value as quickly as residential building stock aged, and so, therefore, guaranteed income increasingly depended upon the collection of rents. She writes that “[t]he very deterioration of old buildings reduced landlords’ tax and maintenance costs; and subdivision for more tenants increased rents.”\textsuperscript{34} (Figure 1.9)

The residential blocks along Second Avenue below Fourteenth Street retained their patrician character throughout much of the antebellum period, even as German-speaking people became an ever-increasing part of the community’s composition. Although many older residents relocated to uptown districts near Madison Square and the mid-Thirties by the start of the Civil War, they kept their downtown houses as income-generating rental properties. Census records and contemporaneous reports in the popular English-language press indicate that Second Avenue retained a certain faded gentility even as late as the 1880s.\textsuperscript{35} As one visitor to the city commented:

[It] is almost the only exception among the avenues. Early in the century it was what Fifth Avenue has become to-day, the fashionable residential avenue; and even yet some of the old Knickerbocker families cling to it, living in their roomy, old-

\textsuperscript{33} Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, First Report... (New York: John F. Trow, 1853), 7.
\textsuperscript{34} Blackmar, 173.
\textsuperscript{35} See Lockwood, 197-99.
fashioned houses, and maintaining an exclusive society, while they look down with
distain upon the parvenues [sic] of Fifth Avenue.³⁶

A good example of the conversion of dwellings to rental properties comes from a row of seven
ample row houses constructed in 1836 on the south side of East Third Street near Second Avenue.
Probably built as a speculative investment by the firm of Hubbard & Casey, dealers in hardware
and building supplies, these houses were constructed six years after Peter Nichols and his partners
developed the city’s first non-sectarian burial ground, the New York Marble Cemetery, in the
interior of the block.³⁷ Five of the dwellings are extant today, 30 to 38 East Third Street, and, in
large measure, display much of their original Federal grandeur. (Figures 1.10-11) Set back from
the pavement, the stately brick residences are three bays wide and rise three stories in height over a
raised basement. With their tall windows, stone lintels, and columned entrance porches, the
structures still project an air of respectability despite the depredations of time.

Lawyer Augustus Floyd, the grandson of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was an
original occupant of the row. He lived with his two African-American servants at 38 East Third
Street until 1849, when he retired to his birthplace at Yaphank in Suffolk County.³⁸ The U.S.
Federal Census for 1840 indicates that Floyd resided in prosperous and genteel company: Joseph T.
and Elizabeth Sweet, the municipal superintendent of streets and his wife, lived nearby at 28 East
Third Street with their children and two boarders. Other residents included a stockbroker, a bank
president, a U.S. Army captain, an agent, an accountant, and a druggist, as well as their families,
three additional boarders, and ten Irish servants. Jane and Jacob Stettheimer, an importer and dry
goods merchant, and their children are likely to have been the first German residents on the block,

³⁷ Hubbard & Casey’s offices were at 34 Broad Street. Block 458, Lots 26–38, Assessed Valuation of Real Estate
Records, 1789–1979. Municipal Archives, City of New York. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission,
³⁸ Franklin Bowditch Dexter, Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College, volume 6 (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1912), 654–55. See also U.S. Federal Census for 1840.
along with their German boarder (or possibly servant) Helene Steinhardt and her young
daughter. As evidenced by a spell of regular advertisements in the New-York Herald, many of the
dow’s discriminating occupants continued to take in boarders throughout the 1850s and charged
annual rents of $250 for suites of two to three rooms, a sum which required prospective tenants to
have an income of at least $1,000 per year, something only attainable by professionals or highly
skilled artisans. In comparison, four blocks south, Friedrich August Zischka, who emigrated from
Dresden to New York in 1857, spent sixty percent of his meager $3/week earnings to rent one
room for himself and his family at 187 Forsythe Street at $90 per year. “We do not do so well,” he
wrote to his brother soon after his arrival, “even the potatoes are very expensive.”

By 1870, four of the seven row houses on East Third Street were single-family residences, while
the remainder of the group had been altered to become multiple dwellings. An article from
Harper’s Weekly described the common practice of conversion and subleasing that these buildings
represented:

The owners of real estate rent their dwellings with the privilege of subletting to
“middlemen” who re-let them. … Most of the houses thus let are the old family
mansions in which resided the present owner’s parents or grandparents; now,
located in neighborhoods which have grown unfashionable, they are abandoned for
Fifth Avenue houses, and thus criminally rented to persons who abuse the privilege
of subletting, and who crowd them with dozens of families though originally
constructed for only one.

The census enumerator for 1870 recorded a mixture of inhabitants who were, while generally
middle-class, decidedly less affluent than that recorded in previous enumerations. A civil engineer,

39 U.S. Federal Census for 1850.
40 For a discussion of rental and income figures for this period, see Blackmar, 194. Representative advertisements
can be found for 36 and 38 East Third Street in the New-York Herald (March 22, 1857), 6 and (December 25, 1861), 6.
41 Letter from Friedrich August Zischka to his brother (January 10, 1857), Nordamerika-Briefsammlung,
Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Handschriftenabteilung (FBG NABS) Accessed March 27, 2012:
http://www.auswandererbriefe.de/regionalebriefe.html
a widow, a butcher, and a dry-goods merchant occupied the four single-family houses that remained, along with their spouses, children, one boarder, and three servants. The other dwellings were divided into apartments, with seemingly one unit per floor. Of these, the former Floyd residence at the corner of East Third Street and Second Avenue was inhabited entirely by German immigrants, housing seven adults and two children from Bavaria, Hamburg, Prussia, and Saxony. By the end of the decade, all of the dwellings in the row save one were converted into apartments and seventy percent of the inhabitants were identifiably first- or second-generation German-American. (Figure 1.12)

The Emergence of the Pre-Law “Tenant House”

The shameful manner of constructing houses intended for renting demands a remedy. Laws should be passed, and inspectors of buildings appointed with arbitrary power, to prevent the erection of these man-traps. I have noticed, especially in the eastern section of the city, blocks of new buildings so slightly built that they could not stand alone, and, like drunken men, require the support of each other to keep from falling.

— Philip Hone

Increased immigration and the resulting strain on the city’s working-class housing stock led to the speculative construction of the first purpose-built dwellings for multiple tenancy. These “tenant houses,” or tenements as they came to be known, first appeared in the 1830s, but became increasingly common in the following decade. Among the earliest known purpose-built multi-family dwellings in New York are two examples built on Corlears Hook in the Lower East Side: the four-story “single-decker” constructed by James P. Allaire on Water Street in 1833 to house workers employed in his marine-engine shop and the ten, five-story, “model” tenements that

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43 U.S. Federal Census, 1870. The building trades were well represented in this group, e.g. a civil engineer, a carpenter, and two architects, including Charles Kinkel at 38 East Third Street. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of his work for the New York Verein and other commissions. Other occupations represented include cigar maker, lithographer, printer, piano manufacturer, dry goods clerk, and two female schoolteachers.

44 U.S. Federal Census, 1880.

45 Philip Hone, August 6, 1850, in Bayard Tuckerman, ed. The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851, volume 2 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1889), 387.
Christian Bergh financed and built ten year later on his family’s landholdings at Scammel and Water Streets.\textsuperscript{46}

During this period, there was little regulation of building construction in the City of New York. The Department of Buildings was not created until 1860, and the first legislation to regulate the construction of tenements was not passed until seven years later.\textsuperscript{47} Municipal inspector and housing reform advocate Dr. John H. Griscom blamed unregulated private building and the expanding prevalence of absentee landlords for many of the city’s housing ills and unsanitary conditions. His 1845 report described the unsustainable circumstances under which many working-class families lived and, furthermore, accused immigrant real estate speculators of exploiting their foreign-born brethren for greed and profit:

The system of tentage [sic] to which large numbers of the poor are subject… must be regarded as one of the principal causes, of the helpless and noisome manner in which they live. The basis of these evils is the subjection of the tenantry, to the merciless inflictions and extortions of the sub-landlord. A house, or a row, or court of houses, is hired by some person of the owner, on a lease of several years, for a sum which will yield a fair interest on the cost. … The tenements, in order to admit a greater number of families, are divided into small apartments, as numerous as decency will admit. Regard to comfort, convenience, and health, is the last motive; indeed, the great ignorance of this class of speculators (who are very frequently foreigners and keep a grog shop on the premises) would prevent a proper observance of these, had they the desire.\textsuperscript{48}

After 1850, multi-family dwellings were developed on many of the Seventeenth Ward’s unimproved lots. Among the first purpose-built tenements were those constructed on the site of the Methodist burying ground on the corner of Second Avenue and East First Street. In 1851, the


combined pressures of real estate development and a history of cholera epidemics led the city to prohibit the creation of new cemeteries in Manhattan and to forbid new burials south of Eighty-sixth Street. This legislation led the trustees of the Seventh Street Methodist Episcopal Church to relocate all interments to Cypress Hill Cemetery in rural Brooklyn and open up its burying ground to development, much to the dismay of the congregation. “The whole action of the Trustees was induced by a desire for gain,” one parishioner accused the vestry at a community meeting in Heritage Hall, “They wished to remove the bodies … that the land might be sold for building-lots.” 49 Cleared of its “encumberances,” the trustees expected the property to fetch nearly $60,000 in the market for speculative development. 50 (Figures 1.13-15)

In 1855, despite public opinion to the contrary, the trustees voted to subdivide the cemetery into one dozen lots valued at $2,500 each, and, within a year, twelve “first-class” four-story tenements were constructed from 14 to 24 East First Street and 17 to 27 Second Avenue, each appraised for approximately $4,700.51 A mere two bays wide, the buildings were designed to maximize profits instead of comfort. Incredibly narrow, they measured 58’ deep and had a street frontage of only 16’8”, leaving little provision for fresh air or natural sunlight within interior rooms. By the 1880s, the surviving buildings had a total population of 206 persons, eighty-eight percent of which were either first- or second-generation German-American, and an average of 20.6 inhabitants resided within each four-story tenement. 52 Four of the twelve buildings survive today, and they exhibit numerous alterations: 27 Second Avenue is the most recognizable of the group and has been much

52 Enumerations for 17-19 Second Street could not be located. In addition, all of the residents of Extra Place, a mid-block lane, were enumerated as living at 14 East First Street, and, therefore, were not included in the calculations to service these totals. See U.S. Federal Census for 1880.
modified; its neighbors at 21-25 Second Avenue were reduced in height, given new facades, and converted for use as a cinema and commercial establishment in 1913.\textsuperscript{53} (Figures 1.16–18)

The entire block was described at length within the 1865 \textit{Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens’ Association}, a monumental publication by a reform group that undertook a comprehensive survey of living conditions throughout the city. The document’s authors analyzed with great thoroughness (and in lurid detail) each of the city’s twenty-nine “Sanitary Inspection Districts” and included a remarkable degree of architectural description and first-hand accounts. Astoundingly, the report stated that over sixty-eight percent of the city’s population, a total of 480,368 inhabitants, lived in substandard conditions within 15,309 tenement houses in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{54}

At the time of inspection, the block contained sixty-six buildings and was largely inhabited by German immigrants. Fifty-one structures lined the perimeter streets, these being primarily dwellings with retail establishments located along the Bowery and at the corner of Second Avenue and East Second Street. Fifteen additional buildings were found in the interior of the block, accessed by a twenty-seven-foot-wide alley known as Extra Place. (Figure 1.19-20) There were no public sewers within the alley, nor along the entire length of Second Avenue between Houston and East Third streets, and but one private sewer was shared by the entire row of tenements from 17 to 27 Second Avenue.\textsuperscript{55} Sanitary inspector Robert Newman described the “foul” and “insalubrious” block at length:

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{53} Alteration permit no. 1864–1913.
  \item\textsuperscript{55} Citizens’ Association, 147–48.
\end{itemize}
The crowding of the buildings — almost entirely without yards, and consisting of an exterior line of dwellings, surrounding an immense packing-house, a slaughter-pen, various shops, and a foundry — is such to preclude proper external ventilation on the one hand, while those interior structures and the business pursued in them are sources of offense against sanitary laws. … [T]here are five alleys, and one prolonged cul-de-sac, which being narrow and enclosed on all sides and directly behind rear tenant-houses, and upon the south side faced by the high walls of a provision-packing house, has become a gross nuisance — a cloacal depot, into which are promiscuously thrown slops, garbage, and exuviae, until it has become a fountain of typhoid infection.56

According to Newman’s calculations, the inhabitants of Extra Place lived in dwellings that provided as little as forty-four square feet of living space per person. He also reported that the mortality and morbidity rates on the block were exceptionally high, noting that many residents exhibited symptoms of a host of infectious diseases, including cholera, typhus, and diphtheria.57

Charles Stelzle, a third-generation German-American, lived in Extra Place with his mother and sisters approximately ten years after the Citizens’ Association report was written. (Figure 1.21)

In his autobiography, he recalled this period without nostalgia:

[I]t was the noisiest place imaginable. Even I, healthy, noisy boy that I must have been, noticed the constant shouting and quarreling among the people [in the court]. Nearly everybody who lived there seemed to be drunk about half the time. The first day that we moved in, a drunken woman wandered into the bedroom; when my mother tried to get her out, she swore frightfully. I remember how shocked I was. I had never heard a woman swear before.58

Despite the appalling conditions, the inhabitants of Extra Place desired to imagine a different and more prosperous future for themselves. As Stelzle compassionately observed, the little alley off First Street near the Bowery, “in which the houses are tumbledown, ramshackle, decayed, was originally called ‘Extra Place’ by the city; but its name has been changed to ‘Riverside Drive’ by

56 Ibid, 160.
57 Ibid, 162-63.
the tenement dwellers in this diminutive street, a name which means the world of luxury to them.”

### The Development of Kleindeutschland

The attendance at the Exchange Sale Rooms for the past week have been unprecedentedly large for the season, and quite a number of our … German citizens are desirous of possessing land.

—— *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide, 1868*

Our German fellow citizens manifest less of the property instinct than do the Irish, being more fitful, nomadic, and visionary. But whenever the Teutonic race do indulge their slender proclivity in that direction, it is apt to be in accordance with the most widely recognized maxims of sound investment. As a rule, Germans decline to believe in ownership qualified by debt, and, therefore, when they set out to purchase real estate, it is generally with ready money, and with enough of it to pay the entire purchase price.

—— *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide, 1878*

A comparison of land atlases between 1853 and 1867 demonstrates that most of the Seventeenth Ward had been built up and that there were few vacant lots in the district by the 1860s; the vacant lots had been filled with hundreds of tenements. By 1870, the estimated population of ethnic Germans in New York had risen to 282,476 and the neighborhoods around Tompkins Square Park, or *der weiße Garten* (“the white garden”) as it was colloquially known, had become the core of the German enclave. So dominant were Germans in this part of the city that it became known as Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany. *(Figures 1.22-23)*

The blocks between Tompkins Square and the Bowery and Houston and East Fourteenth Streets were “the newest, least industrial, and best residential portion of Kleindeutschland,” according to one historian, and this area was in the process of becoming one of the largest ethnic communities

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60 “Sales,” RER (October 3, 1868), 10.


in the nation to retain the language and customs of its homeland. The German presence notwithstanding, pockets of Irish and other immigrant groups inhabited the district as well, as evidenced by the Irish boarding house run by Mary and Patrick Riley that stood near the corner of Second Avenue and East First Street.

In historian Stanley Nadel’s estimation, Kleindeutschland reached its physical form as a German enclave during the 1870s. As German-American historian Otto Lohr observed in 1913:

> At the beginning of the Seventies, after a decade of continuously rising immigration, Kleindeutschland (the German city in the ever growing Cosmopolis) was in fullest bloom, … [and it] consisted of 400 blocks formed by some six avenues and nearly forty streets. Tompkins Square formed pretty much the center. Avenue B, occasionally called the German Broadway, was the commercial artery… Avenue A was the street for beer halls, oyster saloons, and groceries. The Bowery was the western border (anything further west was totally foreign), but it was also the amusement and loafing district.

As the population of Kleindeutschland continued to expand during the 1870s, its demographic character shifted and evolved. In the 1860s, affluent German-American families had begun moving to uptown residential districts like Yorkville, where new and fashionable housing was being constructed. Between 1870 and 1880, those with the financial means and inclination continued to abandon the district to their working-class neighbors and increasing waves of immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe. Nevertheless, a survey of one sample block enumerated in the U.S. Federal Census shows a preponderance of German residents that indicates a strong German social and cultural presence still characterized the area by 1880. (Figure 1.24) Bounded by First and

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63 Nadel, Kleindeutschland, 67.
64 This was located at 25 Second Avenue, and, in addition to the Riley family and their servants, housed twenty boarders of Irish origin. See U.S. Federal Census for 1880. As well, Saint Brigid’s Roman Catholic Church was constructed in 1848 to serve the Irish community and remains located at Avenue B and East Seventh Street.
67 Nadel, Little Germany, 161.
Second Avenues and East First and East Second Streets, the sample block contained over 1,300 inhabitants, of which sixty-four percent had at least one German-born parent. Furthermore, the cultural influence of these German-American residents was reflected in the nature of the nearby businesses that catered to their needs. Historian Dorothee Schneider has written about the importance of the production and consumption of beer in the social life of German immigrants. Her research indicates that by 1880 there were at least 285 saloons in the Seventeenth Ward north of Houston Street, with twenty-one separate establishments comprising the largest cluster on East Fourth Street in the two blocks between First Avenue and Avenue B.

In addition to shaping the character of the neighborhood as residents, German immigrants played a formal and deliberate role in the development of the Seventeenth Ward as real estate developers and speculative builders. “In New Germany, as a certain section of the eastern part of the city is called, there are rows and blocks of properties owned by frugal and prosperous German citizens,” observed a reporter for the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide in 1878. It was the investments of these prosperous Germans that fueled residential construction in the study area for several decades. Indeed, “enterprising Germans” that wished to invest in property were a common target of real estate advertisements between 1860 and 1880.

The case of Hermann Bruns is an illustrative example. Born in 1828, Hermann Bruns emigrated from Hamburg in 1852 and became a liquor merchant in the city. In the late 1860s, he began dabbling in real estate development by purchasing three lots of the former Minthorne farm at First

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68 The sample block contained a total of 1,371 residents, of which 878 had at least one German-born parent. U.S. Federal Census for 1880.

69 Dorothee Schneider, Gewerkschat und Gemeinschaft: Drei deutsche Gewerkschaften in New York, 1875-1900, Ph.D. diss. (Munich: University of Munich, 1983), 36.

70 Nationalities in Real Estate,” RER 22:558 (November 23, 1878), 1.

71 Advertisement. RER (January 16, 1869), 15.

Avenue and East Fourth Street for $18,000 and contracting architect William E. Waring to design three five-story brick tenements with commercial space on the ground floor. Through the 1870s and 1880s, he engaged in numerous real estate ventures with his son, Hermann Bruns, Jr., work that proved lucrative and led the pair to establish an office at 17 Stuyvesant Street in order to better facilitate business. The firm’s specialty was the construction and “improvement” of multi-unit, tenement dwellings throughout the city’s immigrant districts, working with a stable of architects almost exclusively filled by fellow German-Americans, such as Julius Boekell and Frederick William Klemt. By the end of the century, the elder Bruns had relocated his family from their previous home at 80 Second Avenue to a posh three-story, Neo-Grec brownstone two blocks west of Grand Army Plaza in prosperous and genteel Park Slope. Upon his death in 1918, Bruns was remembered as “an old-time builder of Manhattan” and as one of the founding members of the *Hermannsöhne* fraternal organization. One wonders how strongly speculative developers like Bruns, who made their fortunes by housing the working poor, identified with their immigrant roots. Wilhelmine Wiebusch, a German domestic servant who worked for an affluent family on Union Street near to the Bruns’s Brooklyn residence, offered her perspective on class tensions within German New York: “I have no complaints about the Americans, they are very friendly, gallant people, but I don’t like the Germans here very much, they are all a bunch of snobs,

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73 RER 2:52 (March 13, 1869), 8. RER 3:59 (May 1, 1869), 16. U.S. IRS Tax Assessment Lists for 1864-66 describe Bruns as a retired liquor merchant. City directories and newspapers locate his place of business at 315-17 Bowery by 1861, to which he would build a one-story addition in 1875. RER 16:381 (July 3, 1875), 468. See also Bruns’s testimony in the murder trial of John Sexton in “Murder in the Bowery,” *New York Times* (January 15, 1861), 3.

74 A sample of properties purchased and “improved” by Bruns include: 69 Third Avenue RER 25:629 (April 3, 1880), 318; 61 First Avenue RER 25:625 (March 6, 1880), 225; 37 Lewis Street RER 37:929 (January 2, 1886), 13; 228 Chrystie Street RER 38:967 (September 25, 1886), 1192; and 9 East Third Street RER 41:1060 (July 7, 1881), 881.

75 Their address was 146 Lincoln Place. U.S. Federal Census for 1900

[and] act like they can’t understand German anymore, [and pretend] they know nothing about their old homeland.”

**The Emergence of German-American Architects and Builders**

The German citizen… brings with him to this country skilled hands, powerful sinews, frugality, uprightness, and industry. He is dependent on no one but himself and his Maker, and is no sooner on the soil of a new land than he at once casts about for a means to earn livelihood by plying the same vocation in which he was engaged before he left his mother country. Or, if he has no handicraft, he offers his strength to the highest bidder, and becomes one of the thousand workers in the busy hives of industry.

— E. Idell Zeisloft

The economic growth and expansion of cities during the latter half of the nineteenth century was reflected perhaps most clearly in the building trades than in any other industry. The process of urbanization was given physical expression in the construction of buildings and a rising demand for workers proficient in the building and related arts, which remained a male preserve and an occupational magnet for immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and Great Britain, and their native-born sons for decades. Given the dominance of German immigrants during this period, it is not surprising that census data notes their presence among the skilled workers of New York’s related construction industries. Kathleen Neils Conzen’s observations of workforce demographics in Milwaukee during the mid-nineteenth century hold true as well for New York: “The size of the German population meant not only that they created a market for their own skills, but also that other groups were almost forced to patronize them.”

According to the New York State Census of 1855, over half of the workers employed in the building trades were foreign-born and of these

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80 Conzen, 98.
about one quarter were German, which was equivalent to seven percent of all employed German immigrants in the state.\textsuperscript{81} Two years later, the editor of the \textit{New Yorker Staats-Zeitung} could boast that “many, if not most of the houses in the eastern portion of the city, have been built by German masons and carpenters… and the plumbing, painting, glazing and tin roofing by those who were brought up in the trade in the fatherland.”\textsuperscript{82}

However, while English, Irish, and Scottish immigrants could generally find work with any builder or contractor in the city when it was available, the employment of German migrants was typically confined to those enclaves where employers and their employees shared the same language and the same inherited building practices.\textsuperscript{83} In a pamphlet produced for the Great Exhibition of 1851, Gottfried Semper, the Dresden architect and theorist, described the effect of the language barrier on architects working within New York’s booming speculative real estate market by quoting an unnamed American colleague. “[A] greenhorn, will get none of this business,” the anonymous \textit{deutscher Techniker} ruefully observed, “especially as the building laborers are mostly Irishmen, with whom it is necessary to speak English well in order to keep them well in hand. And then [the process of] building has to be learned anew.”\textsuperscript{84} Other commentators from the period also advised newly arrived German tradesmen, who could be critical of certain American practices and techniques, that it was imperative to adhere and adapt to American methods of construction that were unfamiliar in order to ensure success.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{81} The total number of foreign-born workers in the building trades was conservatively estimated at 13,583 with Germans contributing 3,283. For the purposes of the census, the building trades were defined as builders and contractors, stonecutters and polishers, masons, bricklayers, plasterers, plumbers, roofers, slaters, painters, varnishers and glaziers, sawyers and carpenters. New York State Census of 1855, Appendix, 214–17. See also Ernst, 74–76.

\textsuperscript{82} Quoted in Ernst, 73.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 75.


Before 1850, the architectural profession in the United States was undeveloped and embryonic and master builders and craftsmen dominated the building trades. It is well known that European trends played an influential role in the development of formal and stylistic vocabularies as well as of applied technologies and building systems in America. A growing American readership of European architectural periodicals and pattern books and the absence of a formal school of architecture in the United States until 1865 ensured the influence of architects trained abroad. The expatriate community in New York played a crucial role in both the establishment of an American architectural profession and the organization of labor within the building trades, two groups whose relationship became increasingly polarized during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As historian Mary N. Woods writes, “Professionalism simultaneously associated [architects] with their middle- and upper-class clients and distanced them from militant trade unionism.” Working in New York, several German-born architects — including Leopold Eidlitz, Detlef Lienau, Carl Pfeiffer, and Frederick A. Petersen — helped transmit foreign ideas to American soil and were active in the creation of the earliest professional societies for architects in the United States.

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68 Ibid, 30.

While high-style architects did produce designs for tenements, vernacular practitioners facilitated the erection of the majority of dwellings in Manhattan’s dense tenement districts. Buildings attributed to such men as Theodore J. Bier, Julius Boekell, the Herter Brothers, and William Jose proliferate among the first generation of purpose-built multi-family housing in the study area. Although different tenements are listed in building records as the work of different architects, the striking similarities between many pre- and old-law tenements — whether in plan, facade treatment, and decorative detail — cause some scholars to question the precise role of the architect in the building and construction process. Historian Andrew S. Dolkart’s research into the speculative construction of tenements in the mid-1870s points towards the inherent design constraints embodied within Manhattan’s building code and restrictive lot sizes, the pressure to maximize profit and rents, and the increasing availability of mass-produced and ready-made ornamental detail as possible influences on the standardization of designs. Semper’s deutscher Techniker also provides an illuminating perspective on the influences of speculation and market forces on the diminishment of the architect’s role in the building process, and is worth quoting at length:

What the architect earns from this sort of house building is pretty small; only his volume, if he once becomes known, brings him any reward. If the Yankee wants a house plan, he goes to an architect in the morning, tells him what he wishes, the size of the site, and the sum of money he can spend; in the evening he is back wanting to see the drawing. If it pleases him, he gives the master builder an agreed sum, the construction begins two days later, and in the sixth week the house is ready to move into. For such design drawing the architect receives ten to forty dollars, and cannot live on that sort of money unless ten or twelve houses are built in a row from one set of drawings. … The road which our industry if going — and with industry, the whole of art — is clear: Everything is calculated and cut for the market.

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90 Other seemingly German-American architects at work within the study area include M. Bernstein, Henry Daube, Henry J. Feiser, William Graul, Louis Heincke, Julius Kastner, Kurtzer & Rohl, Henry Lunterband, Edward A. Meyers, Adam Munch, Henry Regelmann, Charles Reissmann, Otto Reissmann, C. Reutz, and Charles M. Straub.
92 Ames, 63-64.
Although Semper’s unidentified informant described real estate practices in 1850s New York, the mechanics of land speculation and the desire to maximize rental income continued to pressure and negatively influence architectural production throughout the remainder of the century. As Montgomery Schuyler, editor of the *Architectural Record*, commented several decades later, “The speculative builder or the contract builder does not pretend to be engaged in inculcating morals or aesthetics. His humble aim is to make as much money as he can, subject only to the Building Department and the Board of Health, and his monstrosities are only what [are] to be expected of him.” Consequently, most architects chose to eschew working-class housing in order to pursue “the monumental and the unique, rather than the ordinary and the repetitive,” leaving speculative tenement design to immigrant builders, immigrant and architects. A closer examination of two architects at work within the study area reveals the expertise, training, and aesthetic preferences that German-born architects brought with them to New York and how they employed their skills to exhibit a distinct German sensibility in New York City.

**Julius Boekell**

One of the earliest German architects active within the Seventeenth Ward was Johann Heinrich Julius Boeckell. Known variously as John Henry or Julius Boekell in the United States, he was born in 1831 in the Hessian city of Kassel to Sophia and Johann Heinrich B. Boeckell, a *Repositor*, or administrative clerk, in the local *Oberbaudirektion*, or municipal building department. Julius Boeckell studied at the Höhere Gewerbeschule in Kassel, the second polytechnic institute and

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93 For an examination of real estate speculation in the first half of the century, see Blackmar, 185-92.
95 Plunz, 16.
96 He is also occasionally listed in American directories and periodicals as Julius Bockell. For ease of reading, he will be henceforth referred to as Julius Boekell. Specification and other design material related to Boekell can be found in the S. Niewenhouse, Inc. Architectural Specifications Collection, 1881-1923, New-York Historical Society.
school of industrial arts to open in the German states after Schinkel’s Bauakademie in Berlin.98

Little is yet known about Boekell’s career before he immigrated to the United States in 1851 and he first appears in New York City directories as a practicing architect only in 1859.99 He volunteered during the Civil War and served as a first lieutenant in Company C of the 103rd New York Infantry Regiment from November 1861 until March 1862, after which he eventually established an architectural office at 233 Grand Street near the Bowery, just south of the Seventeenth Ward.100

One of the first designs that Boekell is known to have completed after his military service was for the former First German Baptist Church on East Fourteenth Street in 1866. Still extant, it is similar in style to Heinrich Hübisch’s Kassel Synagogue, an antecedent with which Boekell would have been intimately familiar and perhaps one of the earliest buildings to be built in the Rundbogenstil, a variety of Romanesque revival that sought to deliberately manifest a German national style of architecture.101 (Figures 1.25-26) The appropriateness of Rundbogenstil over other more classically derived styles within German architectural circles reached its peak while Boekell was enrolled at the Kassel Gewerbeschule in the mid-1840s. In a series of published debates between Johann H. Wolff, one of Boekell’s professors, and Rudolf Wiegmann, a professor of architecture at Düsseldorf, the Romanesque Rundbogenstil was framed as the more

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98 Promoter of the Gothic revival, architect and designer Georg Gottlieb Ungewitter (1820–64), was a graduate and member of the faculty of the Gewerbeschule. A further list of students and faculty of the Höhere Gewerbeschule in Kassel can be found on-line at the following address; accessed March 30, 2011: http://www.wasserarchiv.de/Gewerbeschule.htm

99 Francis, 16.

100 New York Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, New York State Archives. Boekell and his family lived in Seventeenth Ward, residing at 425 East Ninth Street in the 1870s and later moving to 209 East Thirteenth Street by 1880. See the U.S. Federal Census for 1880 and Trow’s New York City Directory (New York: John F. Trow, 1871), 112.

“progressive and authentically German” manner in which architects could design. These debates certainly inform Boekell’s choice of style and help us to understand how he intended German identity to be represented and spatialized within the urban landscape.

Boekell would come to be incredibly prolific in New York, submitting designs for hundreds of commercial structures, manufacturing buildings, tenements, and other dwellings, primarily for German-American clients. One of his earliest known surviving residential commissions is a three-story, three-bay wide, brick dwelling with a ground-floor commercial space located at 39 Second Avenue. (Figure 1.27) Presumably built as rental income, it was constructed in 1869 for Patrick Dunkin at the rear of the lot that also contained the owner’s primary residence. Designed before Boekell was fully established, the building originally had a galvanized metal cornice but retains its arched bluestone lintels on the upper floors. Plans submitted with the structure’s new building permit indicate that each of the upper stories was portioned into one main room with three small bedrooms off of the main stair hall. (Figure 1.28)

By 1880, Boekell had moved his office to the German Exchange Bank Building at 54 Bond Street, and, six years later, had entered into practice with his son, Julius Boekell, Jr. Together they would continue to design conventional commercial buildings and multi-unit dwellings well into the first decades of the twentieth century. One handsome example is 9 East Third Street, a five-story, four-bay, tenement that they designed in 1889 for the German-American real estate developer Herman

102 Wolff, however, was the proponent of trabeated classicism. See Kathleen Curran, “The German Rundbogenstil and Reflections on the American Round-Arched Style,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 47:4 (December 1988), 354.

103 A survey of the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide between the years 1868–99 revealed over 430 announcements of either new buildings or alterations designed or facilitated by Boekell. See also National Register of Historic Places, The Bowery Historic District Registration Form (October 1990) and National Register of Historic Places, Lower East Side Historic District Registration Form.

104 NB-161-1869. Boekell’s reported annual income for the previous yearly was merely $509. See “Incomes for 1868, as Reported to the Assessors for the Various Internal Revenue Districts” New-York Tribune (June 26, 1869), 3.
Bruns. Erected following the implementation of the Tenement House Acts of 1867 and 1879, but before the more extensive reforms that would come after the turn of the century, it is a type known as an old-law tenement. (Figures 1.29-30) Faced in brick, it exhibits hooded, brownstone lintels with crisply incised foliate decoration, brownstone belt courses at each floor, and an oversized entrance portal flanked by pilasters. The building was intended to house sixteen families, three on each floor, plus the basement. Like all tenements constructed after 1879, it exhibits distinctive airshafts that contribute to the characteristic “dumbbell” shape plan.105

**Theodore J. Bier**

Another German-American architect that was active in the tenement districts south of East Fourteen Street was Theodore J. Bier, who was in practice at least from 1860 to 1884.106 An advertisement in a local directory listed him as an “architect and superintendent of all kinds of buildings.”107 Little is known about Bier’s early work or background, but he was involved in a legal case before the Queens County Court of Appeals in 1871–72 that provides some insights into architectural practice during the period. In the case, Thornton vs. Autenreith, house painters Peter and Thomas Thornton sued Gustav W. Autenreith, builder, and claimed that the latter had supplied them with incorrectly scaled architectural plans. They argued that these errors caused them to insufficiently estimate the time and materials required to complete their bid to paint the shooting gallery and bar at Schneider’s Hotel in Astoria, Queens, and, therefore, that they were owed additional compensation. Bier, the architect who drew the plans for the hotel in question, testified in the case on Autenreith’s behalf and described how he originated the designs, which were then copied in vellum by his draftsman. The witnesses on both sides of the case describe a diverse

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105 NB-1592-1899. Francis, 16.
106 Bier’s business address seemed to change every other year or so until he moved to Brooklyn’s Eastern District. He is listed as living at 36 Melrose Street in the 1880 U.S. Federal Census. Also see Francis, 16, 84.
team of contractors, subcontractors, and other jobbers and their testimony seems to sharply divide along ethnic lines between Anglo-American plaintiffs, German-American defendants, and their respective witnesses. The case also offers a window on the process by which building projects came to fruition during the period and merits further research.\footnote{108}

A typical example of Bier’s work in the Seventeenth Ward is the row of four five-story, Italianate-style brick tenements that he designed in 1872 for German immigrant John Kopp at 46-52 East First Street. (\textbf{Figures 1.31-32}) Each of these pre-law tenements was originally built to house twenty-two families in three-room, railroad-style apartments that were arranged four per floor plus two in the raised basement, which also accommodated two commercial establishments.\footnote{109} Iron balconies in the rear satisfied the fire escape provision of the 1867 Tenement House Act. While 48 East First Street is now a vacant lot, the remaining buildings are in remarkable condition and still retain many original features, such as pilastered door surrounds, segmental-arch stone lintels, terra-cotta detailing, galvanized-metal cornices, and other decorative elements.

\textbf{European Precedents and the Possibility for Transnational Exchange}

The city through its Tenement House Department is bringing about permanent improvement. … The worse conditions of the older tenements have been done away with. … Judging by the progress made in improving housing conditions during the last decade it is not too much to expect that at the end of the next decade we will have as clean dwellings as the far-famed German cities.  
— Tenement House Committee\footnote{110}

As housing for the urban poor and working classes became a focal point of social reform in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century, policy makers increasing looked to

\footnote{108} Thornton vs. Autenreich (New York: James McGhee, 1873).  
\footnote{109} NB-204-1872.  
\footnote{110} Tenement House Committee of the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, \textit{Housing Reform in New York City} (New York: M.O. Brown, 1914), 2.
European models for possible solutions. Faced with the challenges of rapid urbanization, out of scale development, and a burgeoning working-class population, European cities like London, Glasgow, Leipzig, and Berlin oftentimes experienced the pangs of advanced capitalism before the urban centers of the United States, and, as a result, American reformers sought to learn from the lessons of their overseas counterparts.\footnote{See Thomas Adam, Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); as well as Marie Huchzermeyer, Tenement Cities, from 19th Century Berlin to 21st Century Nairobi (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011).} Since the 1840s, European reformers had been exploring ways in which housing could be provided by means that did not rely on market mechanisms or the need for profit that motivated private developers.\footnote{Nicholas Bullock and James Read, The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840-1914 (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1985).} In Berlin especially, demand for housing vastly exceeded supply and led to inhumanely crowded conditions and the development of dense estates of housing barracks, such as the Wülknitzschen Familienhäuser that were built along Gartenstraße between 1822 and 1828 outside of the Hamburger Tor. \textbf{(Figure 1.33)} Five enormous, six-story barracks contained thirty single-room units per floor, and, at their most crowded, housed over 2,200 inhabitants.\footnote{The earliest of these was constructed in 1828. See Johann Friedrich Geist and Klaus Kürvers, Das Berliner Mietshaus 1740–1862, Bd. 1 (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980), 76 ff.} Philanthropic building societies emerged in Berlin as early as 1841, and the first model housing in the city was opened to residents eight years later.\footnote{Bullock and Read, 31-33.} Private enterprise sought to solve the housing crisis through the development of the Miethaus, or tenement, which, in response to the broad and wide Berlin lot configurations, usually comprised of a series of five-story wings built around a succession of open courts.\footnote{On the etiology of the Mietskaserne in Berlin see Dietrich Worbs, "The Berlin Mietskaserne and Its Reforms," in Josef Paul Kleihues and Christina Rathgeber, eds., Berlin-New York, Like and Unlike: Essays on Architecture and Art from 1870 to the Present (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 145-58. Two other major works are Walter Hegemann, Das Steinerner Berlin: Geschichte der Größten Mietskassenstadt der Welt rpt., 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Friedrich Vieweg & Sohn Verlagsgesellschaft, 1988) and the first two volumes of the monumental study, Geist and Kürvers, Das Berliner Mietshaus, Bd. 1 1740–1862 and Bd. 2 1862–1945 (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1980-84).} \textbf{(Figures 1.34-35)} As early as the 1860s,
reformers actively pressed for statewide and even national legislation on sanitary reform in Germany, and Berlin’s building code was revised in 1887, for the first time in thirty-five years, to reflect advances in sanitary technology and in the fields of drainage and water supply.\(^{116}\)

While American housing reformers actively sought to understand and analyze European solutions, foreign-born architects and builders also brought inherited ideas about urban dwellings and sanitary reform from their homelands with them.\(^{117}\) As well, immigrants of all classes carried a familiarity with urban conditions with them too, even if it was only gleaned through the process of migration. German immigrants adapted and shaped the built fabric of the Seventeenth Ward by applying their pre-existing knowledge and technical skill to exploit the potential of Manhattan’s narrow lots, finding creative solutions to maximize both profits and the potentials of urban life. Those that arrived after 1880, particularly the large influx of migrants from Prussia that peaked in 1885, would be especially important in transmitting German models to New York.

**The Implementation of the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901**

Writing in 1903, housing reformer Lawrence Veiller observed that “the tenement houses in the Borough of Manhattan are, to a very large extent, located in distinctively tenement house districts, with more definite boundaries than can be found in other cities.”\(^{118}\) He described Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward as containing 2,877 tenements, over eighty percent of which were of four or five stories.\(^{119}\) Today, this area of New York City remains one of the last great enclaves of this once ubiquitous and historically important building type. Until the encroaching gentrification of the

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\(^{116}\) Bullock and Read, 99-100.


\(^{119}\) DeForest and Veiller, 206.
neighborhood in recent decades, the area has historically housed the working classes, with the majority of structures designed from the outset as rental accommodations to house German immigrants and their families. Inexpensive to build and maintain, tenement dwellings were “very profitable for those who built them on speculation or who bought them for their rental returns.” The earliest constructed tenements had few amenities, and, even after the adoption of housing reform laws, provided little comfort or privacy to working-class tenants.

By 1900, the discourse on the tenement house “problem” in New York led to the development of the comprehensive New York State Tenement House Act of 1901, which had widespread implications, influences, and effects on both new construction and existing buildings. This “New Law” effectively prohibited the construction of multiple-unit dwellings on New York City’s standard twenty-five-foot lots and set forth provisions for new construction that limited the coverage of each lot to a maximum of seventy percent and the height to six floors for tenements. In an attempt to improve the living conditions of tenants, the law prohibited interior, windowless rooms and mandated indoor toilets and fire safeguards, among other requirements. It also retroactively effected pre-existing tenements in many ways: by requiring the installation of running water in every apartment, the prohibition of interior rooms without access to natural light and ventilation, the abolition of outdoor privies and “slop sinks,” and the addition of at least one water closet for every two families.

These provisions of the 1901 law required substantial structural changes to existing buildings, such as the addition of skylights, gas lines, and plumbing upgrades. (Figure 1.36) Controversially, the law’s ban on unventilated interior rooms required either that the partitions that divided these

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120 Abu-Lughod, 18.
spaces be pierced with windows or that airshafts be excavated out of the interiors of the buildings themselves. These measures were intended to increase light and ventilation within interior spaces, but required significant interventions that reduced the habitable (and rentable) space within affected units. In his study of the tenement at 97 Orchard Street, historian Andrew S. Dolkart suggests that the provision requiring interior water closets required some of the more substantial changes to pre-existing tenements because of the great effort required to install water and sewage lines within walls and floors and to reconfigure interior rooms for water closets — all while residents continued to inhabit the buildings.\textsuperscript{122}

Several German-born architects and builders saw the stipulations of the 1901 Tenement House Act as an opportunity to expand their business. In the early years of his practice, for example, Otto Reissmann specialized in tenement work, especially alterations to existing building after the adoption of the new law, which often required substantial structural changes to existing dwellings.\textsuperscript{123} Born in Erfurt, Thuringia, southwest of Leipzig, architect Otto Reissmann immigrated to New York in 1891 at the age of 28 along with his wife Hermine Geist and two children.\textsuperscript{124} Little is known about his exact training and career in Germany, but it is clear that he was able to establish a thriving practice in New York. His business was in operation between about 1897 and 1930. Charles Reissmann, his son, trained with his father before starting his own firm.\textsuperscript{125} It is likely that plumber Max Höflich, Reissmann’s stepson, worked with his uncle and cousin on their contracts to ensure that their clients met the new sanitary requirements.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 85–86. The alteration pre-existing tenements as a result of the 1901 Tenement House Act and what provisions were made for residents during the adaptation process has been little studied.

\textsuperscript{123} Dolkart, \textit{Biography of a Tenement House}, 85–88.

\textsuperscript{124} U.S. Federal Census for 1900.

\textsuperscript{125} Francis, 64.

\textsuperscript{126} U.S. Federal Census for 1900. By 1910, Max Höflich had changed his last name to Reissmann and moved to Cedar Grove, New Jersey. Otto Reissmann and his wife would also relocate to Cedar Grove by 1920. See U.S. Federal Censuses for 1910 and 1920. It is possible that the contemporary business Reissmann Plumbing & Heating, Inc. in Chester, New Jersey, is a successor firm to Otto or Max Reissmann’s concern. According to the company’s
Reissmann’s success at obtaining lucrative contracts is not only evidenced by the astounding number of jobs attributed to him in the *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* — over six hundred in the decade between 1900 and 1910 alone — but in the winter holiday cruises that he and his wife took to Bermuda in 1911 and 1912.127 *(Figure 1.37)* Other architects like Gross & Kleinberger, Horenburger & Straub, Kurtzer & Rohl, Henry Regelmann, and Charles and Joseph Stegmayer also benefited from the alterations business during this period, but, generally, only had one third as many jobs; the Reissmanns’ closest competition seems to be the ubiquitous George Frederick Pelham, perhaps the most prolific non-German architect in the Seventeenth Ward during this period. Within the study area, the Reissmanns performed work on at least thirteen separate buildings between 1905 and 1914, the majority of which included the installation of new water closets and the rebuilding of interior partitions within existing tenements, other interior renovations, and the conversion of one tenement into a synagogue.128

**Immigrant Geographies and Building Community in the East Village**

After three decades of growth, Manhattan’s largest German enclave had begun to shrink by the mid-1880s as second-generation German-Americans increasingly settled uptown in Yorkville or across the river in neighborhoods such as Williamsburg and Bushwick in Brooklyn.129 While architects like Reissmann continued to be hired by German-American property owners to

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127 The survey revealed approximately 50 jobs between 1890-1899, 600 between 1900-1909, and 590 between 1910-1919. Records of the Reissmann’s cruises can be found in Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957 for the Hamburg America Line vessel *Oceana* (December 19, 1911) and (January 30, 1912).

128 The synagogue conversion was at 65 East Third Street, ALT-120-1908. The interior alterations and sanitary upgrades include: 15 East First Street, ALT-2903-1905; 47 ½ East First Street, ALT-1360-1906; 85 East Third Street, ALT 4025-1906 and ALT-30-1909; 17 First Avenue, ALT-473-1907; 104-106 East Fourth Street, ALT-1999-1907; 82 Second Avenue, ALT-1428-1907; 15 First Avenue, ALT-88-1910; 54 Second Avenue, ALT-1922-1912; 114-116 East Fourth Street, NB-389-1912; 48 East Third Street, ALT-1926-1914.

129 Burrows and Wallace, 1112.
modernize and renovate spaces for immigrant households in the Seventeenth Ward, these tenants increasingly belonged to other ethnic and social groups, such as those from Eastern Europe. Despite the gradual loss of its German residents, however, the area retained the urban qualities of Kleindeutschland due to the preponderance of buildings by German architects and builders that remained. The evolution and survival of Kleindeutschland’s residential blocks, with its adaptable single-family housing stock converted into flatted accommodations mixed alongside the first generations of purpose-built multi-family structures, is a poignant reminder of how immigrant peoples have helped to influence built forms and shape a vibrant urbanism. Furthermore, the dominance of German-built tenements within the Seventeenth Ward’s housing supply has had an enduring effect on the urban form of the neighborhood. Characterized by the maximum exploitation of space and a history of neglectful maintenance, these German-American contributions nevertheless supplied a resilient and adaptable infrastructure that many generations of working-class inhabitants have called home. These vernacular buildings reveal the agency of ordinary citizens in defining the places where they reside and the influence of cultural exchange in shaping the modern American city in the nineteenth century.
Figure 1.1: Map of the Seventeenth Ward Study Area

- Boundary of Block Survey
- Saint Mark’s Place
- Albion Place
- Tompkins Square
- 30-38 East Third Street
- 21-27 Second Avenue
- German Baptist Church
- 39 Second Avenue
- 9 East Third Street
- 46-52 East First Street
- Bowery
Figure 1.2: Map of original grants and farms, from I.N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*, volume 6, plate 84B-b; Columbia University Libraries.

Figure 1.3: Albion Place on East Fourth Street, Plate 43 from William Perris, *Maps of the City of New York* (1853); Columbia University Libraries.
Figure 1.4: Limits of the built-up area of Manhattan, from Thomas Adams, *Population, Land Values, and Gov’t… Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs* (1929).

Figure 1.5: Map of New York City wards and population densities in 1870, from Seymour J. Mandelbaum, *Boss Tweed's New York* (New York (1965)).
Figure 1.6: Enlisting Irish and German immigrants on the Battery at New York, *Illustrated London News* (September 17, 1864), 288.

Figure 1.7: German Immigrants — their arrival in New York (Undated); New York Public Library.
**Figure 1.8:** Map of the Seventeenth Ward, from Dripps *Plan of New York City* (1867); Library of Congress.

**Figure 1.9:** A Federal-style row house near the Bowery converted to multi-unit tenancy, from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (April 1871), 671.
Figure 1.10: Federal-style row houses at 30-38 East Third Street near Second Avenue (2012); Matthew J. Kuhnert.

Figure 1.11: (Above) Rear of 30-38 East Third Street viewed from the New York Marble Cemetery (ca. 1910); Museum of the City of New York.

Figure 1.12: (Left) “Teutonic Regions in New York, Hot Summer Night,” from Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (October 1878), 689.

Figure 1.16-17: (Above) Tax photographs of 21-27 Second Avenue (1935); New York City Municipal Archives.

Figure 1.18: (Below) 21-27 Second Avenue (2012); Matthew J. Kuhnert.
Figure 1.19: Map of Extra Place, from Council of the Citizens’ Association of New York, Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens’ Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City (1865), 160.

Figure 1.20: Extra Place (ca. 1895); Museum of the City of New York.

Figure 1.21: Charles Stelzle, A Son of the Bowery: The Life Story of an East Side American (1926).
Figure 1.22: The German peace celebration in Tompkins Square, Harper’s Weekly (April 29, 1871), 389.

Figure 1.23: Fourth of July in Tompkins Square, from Harper’s Bazaar (September 11, 1868); New York Public Library.
Figure 1.24: Block 44, bounded by First and Second Avenues and East First and East Second Streets, from E. Robinson, *Atlas of the City of New York* (1893).

Figures 1.25-26: (Left) First German Baptist Church (Undated); New York City Chapter of the American Guild of Organists; (right) Kassel Synagogue (Undated); accessed March 1, 2012: http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/
Figure 1.27: Facade of 39 Second Avenue (2012); Matthew J. Kuhnert.

Figure 1.28: Plan of second and third floors of 39 Second Avenue (1869); New York City Municipal Archives

Figure 1.29: (Above) The lot diagram for 9 East Third Street was stamped with Julius Boekell’s office address (1889); New York City Municipal Archives

Figure 1.30: (Right) Facade of 9 East Third Street (2012); Matthew J. Kuhnert.
Figure 1.31: (Left) 46–52 East Fourth Street (2012); Matthew J. Kuhnert.

Figure 1.32: (Right) Partial view of 46 East First Street (1920); New York Public Library.

Figure 1.33: Wäcknitzschen Familienhäuser, Berlin (1822–28); from Geist and Kürvers, Das Berliner Mietshaus 1740–1862 (1980).
Figure 1.34: Arcade of the Meyershof, Mietshaus, from “The Tenements of Berlin,” Harper's New Monthly Magazine (February 1909), 363.

Figure 1.35: The construction of speculative tenement dwellings in Berlin, from The Pace of the Period, or Tempo der Gründerzeit, by Friedrich Kaiser (ca. 1875); Märkisches Museum.
**Figure 1.36:** Interior of tenement showing new plumbing lines as required by the 1901 Tenement House Act (ca. 1902-14); New York Public Library.

**Figure 1.37:** Hermine and Otto Reissmann’s passport photographs (1922); National Archives and Records Administration.
Chapter 2

German-American Vereine and the Spatialization of Ethnicity

[T]he German element appears to be endowed with what the English call the clubbable disposition more bountifully than the native American, who, though eminently gregarious in his instincts, is not so eminently social. That gemuth of disposition, for which English has not even a name, accounts, no doubt, for the German’s love of the club.
— Francis Gerry Fairfield

The German influx which began in 1845 made New York a dancing city, and the barricades with which Dutch dignity and New England Puritanism had encircled society were broken through.
— E. Idell Zeisloft

As German migrants arrived in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they became active participants in a burgeoning transatlantic exchange of economic, cultural, and intellectual capital. This new German-American transnational community played an important role in the creation, adaptation, and transformation of social and cultural models in the United States, particularly in New York City. Historian Thomas Adam’s examination of the patronage of George Fisk Comfort and the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrates how American society relied heavily on borrowings from its European counterparts, particularly German models, which influenced the transfer of cultural ideas and the creation of an urban

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2 E. Idell Zeisloft, *The New Metropolis, 1600-1900; Memorable Events of Three Centuries from the Island of Mana-hat-ta to Greater New York at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1899), 520.
institutional infrastructure in the growing Empire City.\(^3\) While affluent Americans appropriated examples from abroad in order to articulate certain values and the aspirations of their social class, German immigrants also brought their own social and institutional models with them, which they used to shape community, create meaning, and navigate the nuances of a new life in a foreign country.

As for many immigrant groups, neighborhoods were the primary locus of community life for German-Americans and an anchor for the familial and work activities that defined their lives. The fulcrum of New York’s German-American milieu, however, was a heterogeneous network of voluntary associations that flourished in or near the Seventeenth Ward. These social organizations, or Vereine as they were known in German, helped to articulate and give shape to an immigrant group that is best characterized by its diverse and differentiated constituencies, generations, cultures, and classes. However, as historian Dorothee Schneider writes, “[i]f non-Germans identified Germans by their language and place of origin, German New Yorkers identified one another as belonging to a certain organized group within the community.”\(^4\) Categorized by class, gender, political affiliation, occupation, or any number of other characteristics, Vereine provided a place for immigrants to maintain their own sense of ethnicity under new circumstances and eased their transition to American life. Creating new lives for themselves in new surroundings, German-Americans participated in Vereine to maintain European social traditions while at the same time representing and interpreting their immigrant experiences for themselves.\(^5\)

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Historians like Schneider have argued that the Vereine were the defining element of the German-American community in the nineteenth century, as compared to the role of social affiliations in other immigrant groups, such as the Irish. In Europe, the growth of voluntary associations in the German Confederation was a result of rapid urbanization and the increasing mobility of labor, which weakened more traditional social ties and elevated the importance of Vereine as places of cohesion and exchange. After the political revolutions of 1848, Vereine played an increasingly key role in providing social and political spaces for the working and middle classes to share their manifold interests, whether conservative or radical. As historian Oded Heilbronner writes, “[T]he Verein was one of the main characteristics in the rise and hegemony of German bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth century, and one of the cornerstones of local society as it developed in Germany towards the end of the 1890s.” Despite efforts to regulate and suppress them, voluntary organizations unaffiliated with the state partly defined the social structure that emerged during formation of a modern, German industrial society.

Consequently, German immigrants in the United States found the Verein to be a natural and appropriate model for social and cultural expression, and ethnic organizations and political clubs proliferated wherever they settled, especially in urban neighborhoods like those in the Seventeenth Ward. German social clubs and voluntary organizations in New York numbered in the thousands, and, as one anonymous author reluctantly admitted in the German-language journal *Atlantis*, they could even provide a means by which to build empathy between indigenous and foreign locals:

Singing societies, theatrical associations, Freemasonry lodges, political clubs of all parties, and other organizations are found wherever Germans live, even in the

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6 Schneider, 26-29.
7 Oded Heilbronner, “The German Bourgeois Club as a Political and Social Structure in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Continuity and Change* 13:3 (1998), 443.
8 Schneider, 26-27.
smaller cities. The cultivating effects these societies have, however, are more than dubious and, in general, the observation is valid that these clubs degenerate to the lowest possible taste. They serve no other purpose than pleasure, by which, however, they hang onto their membership. Of course, many of these societies, especially the musical groups, are a means to greater fellowship and they do build bridges between Americans and Germans.9

While the size, structure, and driving focus of Vereine were as various as the German community itself, they tended to be organized by area of origin, religion, class, or occupation, or by affiliation with a particular wave of immigration. For example, certain groups were exclusively identified with Forty-eighters or “Greens” as opposed to earlier generations of immigrants, colloquially known as “Grays.” This vast spectrum provided a fertile platform for the identities and opinions of German-Americans of all classes, genders, and occupations to coalesce and diverge as they saw fit. After 1848, the growth and proliferation of Vereine within New York reflected the broader demographic patterns of German migration to the city, as well the diaspora’s varied loyalties and affiliations. German immigrants constructed their own social identities by joining (or not joining as the case may be) with other men and women with similar interests from the same religious denomination, native region or city, or neighborhood in New York to entertain themselves, create, socialize, exercise, and participate in all manner of activities.10 As historian Stanley Nadel notes, “The Verein way of life, or Vereinswesen, dominated social life in Kleindeutschland.”11

This chapter examines how New York City’s German immigrant community expressed its ethnic identity and traditions in the urban realm through the network of voluntary social organizations that it developed in Kleindeutschland. (Figure 2.1) The first part addresses three types of organizations that were important in fostering social cohesion as well as other — oftentimes more

11 Nadel, 228–29.
tangible — benefits for their members: hometown or regional associations, fraternal organizations, and professional societies. These categories are not unique to ethnic German enclaves, but, nonetheless, local preferences and constraints contributed to shaping a distinct pattern for development of social organizations in New York. The second half of the chapter examines in detail three categories of voluntary organizations that characterize uniquely German ethnic practices: gymnastics and athletics societies known as *Turnvereine*, choral societies or *Gesangvereine*, and shooting associations and gun clubs, called *Schützenvereine*. A closer look at these three types will illustrate how German-American immigrants played a unique role in creating an urban cultural and social infrastructure that shaped the public sphere and created a dynamic urbanism within the nineteenth-century city. Social clubs, voluntary organizations, and other meeting places, such as halls for hire and beer saloons, were deeply woven into the texture of the Seventeenth Ward. An examination of the prominence and popularity of the types of German social organizations addressed below only begins to scratch the surface of the thousands of formal and informal venues that contributed to the intensely public nature of German community life in New York.  

**Hometown and Regional Associations**

Of the many popular kinds of voluntary social organizations within New York’s German-American community, the most prominent were the *Landsmannschaften*, the hometown or regional associations that provided both charitable assistance and a venue for social activities. Often having large memberships, these societies were frequent sponsors of popular festivals, fairs, and other activities that displayed ethnic identities within the public realm. (Figure 2.2) Based on the social networks established by community members of the same locality of origin, Landsmannschaften, in historian Stanley Nadel’s formulation, were a formal means for German immigrants to preserve

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12 For example, see Nadel, 214-50.
certain aspects of ethnic identity, which risked dilution over time through the processes of assimilation and acculturation. The Plattdütsche Volksfest-Vereen, for example, was one such regional association founded on May 1, 1875 in Friederich Flinte’s saloon at 165 Bowery by prospective members who had emigrated from states in northern Germany, such as Lower Saxony, Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, and Bremen. Later that month, the group met again to resolve that it would sponsor a grand festival in Schützen Park near Union Hill, New Jersey, on the Hudson River. Held in September, the festival was patterned after the local Swabian community’s popular Cannstatter Volksfestes, to which “many features such as are only to be found in the homes of the Plattdütsche” were added. The popular success of this first event astounded even its promoters: the five-day festival drew over 150,000 visitors after an enormous parade led participants through the Seventeenth Ward from Tompkins Square Park to the Christopher Street pier and across the Hudson River by ferry to the fairground.

Landsmannschaften crucially functioned as immigrant benevolent organizations and provided mutual aid and assistance to unmoored and indigent immigrants and their families. The entertainments that they sponsored not only provided a way to sustain ethnic identity, but these social activities also raised funds to support the organizations’ charitable work. By the 1890s, the Plattdütsche Volksfest-Vereen gave away nearly $45,000 per year in charitable donations, culminating in the society’s purchase of Schützen Park itself and the erection of a home for the aged and indigent within its grounds in 1895. Called the Fritz-Reuter Altenheim, the home was dedicated as an eponymous memorial to the Plattdütsche-dialect novelist and poet and was

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constructed within a separate enclosure in order to preserve twenty-five acres of open space and thus ensure the park’s continued use as a fairground well into the twentieth century. An early supporter of the project was seventy-nine-year-old Otto von Bismarck, the former German Chancellor, who lauded the altruistic mission of the Landsmannschaften in transnational terms: “I have received with much interest knowledge of the blessed workings of the Plattdütsche Volksfest-Vereen of New-York. With my sincere thanks for your information, I couple the expression of the wish that the efforts of your society for the welfare of the distressed countrymen on both sides of the ocean may in the future succeed as well as they have in the past.” Indeed, although the park itself has now been developed, the Altenheim is extant and continues to serve its original purpose.

**Fraternal Organizations**

Fraternal associations and lodges of various types were also popular within New York’s German community and provided an important venue for fellowship and camaraderie expressed through ritual. *(Figure 2.3)* Affiliated with the Prussian Grand Lodge based in Berlin, the second German-language Masonic lodge established in the United States was founded in New York in 1819. By 1873, New York City contained eighteen German lodges with five additional ones located in nearby King’s County, Brooklyn; fifteen years later, there were twenty-eight district lodges and over 3,000 aggregate members. According to one historian, German-Americans preferred to retain membership in their own lodges rather than associate themselves with Anglo-American orders because anti-immigrant sentiment prevented advancement through the ranks. Through participation in institutionalized ritual and ceremony, lodge membership provided opportunities for advancement in society and in business, and it is probable that the connections obtained

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16 Ibid. The Plattdütsche Volksfest-Vereen, still quite active, is headquartered in the Fritz-Reuter Altenheim today.


18 Nadel, 231.
through affiliations with German-language groups were more conductive to the social aims of German-American members than participation in Anglo-American lodges would have been.

In July 1879, a large gathering of German-American Freemasons celebrated the laying of the cornerstone for New York City’s first purpose-built German Masonic Temple at 220 East Fifteenth Street near Stuyvesant Square. (Figure 2.4) Representatives of all of the German-language lodges in New York City and Brooklyn took part in the ceremonies and the grand procession that preceded them. Beginning at the Teutonia Assembly Rooms on Third Avenue near East Sixteenth Street, 2,500 men marched in a wide circuit through the summer heat, eventually passing through the heart of Union Square Park, which had a long history of demonstrations in support of labor interests, before continuing along Broadway to the building site. (Figure 2.5) The “monument to German Masonic art and labor” cost $60,000 and was funded by subscription, including a significant donation by brewer George Ehret, Sr.19 Eventually built to be five-stories in height, the Masonic hall was faced with Baltimore brick and Nova Scotia stone trim.20 The Masons replaced the façade of the building in 1936 and retained ownership of the structure until 1997, when it was sold to the Friends Seminary School and converted into a Quaker educational facility.21 (Figure 2.6) It is still extant.

Other German-American fraternal societies proliferated in New York during the 1840s, forming breakaway orders or their own unique organizations in order to strengthen solidarity in response to

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anti-immigrant antagonism, to preserve German language and culture, and to provide charitable services. As an 1895 article in the popular English-language press recalls:

The German political refugees of those days… were compelled to form organizations for their own protection… A number of these protective societies has [sic] continued to exist, and have been transformed into benevolent and secret orders. The mutual benefits since derived from these have been enormous, and thousands of widows and orphans have been lavish with their grateful blessings for their existence.22

Theologian Philipp Merkel, the influential pastor of the German Universal Christian Church on Christie Street, led the foundation of two ethnic-German fraternal orders, the *Hermannssöhne* (1840) and *Der Deutsche Orden der Harugari* (1847). The latter became the largest of the German fraternal associations, growing to 370 separate lodges in twenty-five states by the century’s end—all dedicated to the maxim “Germans by birth, Americans by choice, patriots by principle.”23 Both of Merkel’s groups were non-denominational at a time when many Anglo-American societies enforced prohibitions against Jewish members. The older of the two Vereine, the Hermannssöhne, was founded in the former Henry Clay residence near East First Street and Avenue A, and its main precepts emphasized the disavowal of religious or political differences as criteria for membership:

“Any person who is versed in the German language and who is of good sound body may become a member, whether he believes in religion or not, or whether he has any political affiliations or is independent.”24

Distinct German-Jewish groups, of course, were developed as well. In 1843, Henry Jones and eleven other German-Jewish immigrants founded B’nai B’rith in Aaron Sinsheimer’s café at 60

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23 Ibid.
Essex Street; eight years later, the organization financed the construction of its first purpose-built meeting hall two blocks west at 56 Orchard Street. Originally named the *Bundes Brüder*, or League of Brothers, the group was modeled after Freemasonry and was established to engage in welfare activities and to provide aid to the city’s German-Jewish community. Today, the organization has offices and lodges in more than fifty countries around the world.²⁵

As historian Stanley Nadel argues, these Vereine were more than just mere “promoters of community solidarity… [T]hey were key participants in the events which led to Kleindeutschland’s first identification of itself as a community.”²⁶ Before the 1840s, New York’s German-language newspapers primarily disseminated information about events outside of the city, especially those related to the German states, and paid scant attention to news occurring within Kleindeutschland itself. The fraternal organizations took a leading role in turning community attention to the revolutions of 1848 in Germany by staging parades and festivals and also by organizing responses to local conditions, such as resistance and opposition to the city’s restrictive Sunday laws, which limited public performances and concerts, the consumption of alcohol, and other activities on the first day of the week.²⁷ It was the organized and vocal responses of the *Vereinewessen* that caused the German press to give increased attention to more homegrown activities and activism within its pages.

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²⁶ Nadel, 232.

Classes Divisions within German-American Vereine

The many avocational and leisure societies that flourished in New York’s German enclaves surpassed the hometown associations and fraternal organizations in number. Through the mid-nineteenth century, the populist character of German-American leisure culture and its conspicuous display revealed the relative prosperity of Kleindeutschland’s residents, who, in comparison with other ethnic groups, had spare resources and the inclination to devote to leisure activities. One observant German-American commentator opined that the residents of Kleindeutschland must be the most hedonistic people in the world: “At least, they put on more popular festivals in a year than take place in a decade in all the larger cities of Europe together. … Where on earth do the thousands upon thousands of workers, who are the main celebrants in these festivities, get the means and time to pursue so many amusements?”

The political tenor with which these Vereine were often founded in the 1840s, however, seems to have mostly faded away by the latter decades of the nineteenth century and as class distinctions grew increasingly pronounced between the organizations that accommodated Kleindeutschland’s working-class citizens and those that served its elites. This class stratification appeared throughout the city at the time. By mid-century, “New York seemed to be breaking down into two social extremes — of wealth and poverty,” and the idea of class-consciousness as a social category began to emerge in ways heretofore unknown. By the century’s end, one historian comments, “[g]one were the days in the 1840s when the German Society or the Liederkranz united German immigrants with modest means with wealthy citizens.”

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29 Schneider, 33–35.


31 Schneider, 34.
The professional organizations that catered to German-American druggists and pharmacists are an illuminating case study by which to examine class differentiation and the networking potential of club life. German immigrants were active entrepreneurial agents in the pharmaceutical industry, forming the trade networks through which sales agents of major German drug companies marketed their products. When changes in U.S. tariff policies in the late nineteenth century threatened profitability, these same foreign companies began to manufacture their goods in New York City. The *Deutscher Apotheker-Verein*, or German Pharmacists Association, was one of a growing number of organizations that were either transformed by or created expressly for an aspiring middle-class clientele. Founded in 1851, the Verein was one of the earliest established professional societies in its field in the United States, pre-dating the American Pharmaceutical Association by about two years. Derived from German models, the Deutscher Apotheker-Verein published some of the first drug formularies and manuals in New York State and was instrumental in establishing national professional standards and licensing for pharmacists. Established in rented accommodations in Ludlow Street, the group followed the typical pattern of movement for many German Vereine, gradually following the northward migration of Kleindeutschland’s population to Third Avenue by 1870 and then again to Yorkville by 1901.

It was common for the German community’s increasingly stratified voluntary organizations to demand spatial distinction within the city and to relocate their facilities uptown to locales that were perceived as more upscale and fashionable. By the 1870s, noted one contemporaneous commentator, such “upper-crust” clubs as the Allemania, the Arion Association, the Freundschaft

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Society, and the German Club were “representative of powerful and active social forces” in the city of New York and their uptown clubhouses near Central Park exuded great wealth and prosperity, if perhaps lacking in the perceived refinement and exclusive habits of their Anglo-American counterparts like the Union League or the Knickerbocker Club.34 (Figures 2.7–8) 

Journalist Francis Gerry Fairfield compared the German–American patriciate to Anglo-American high society in his 1873 essay on New York club-life and found that the former had its own unique style:

[T]he German element appears to be endowed with what the English call the clubbable disposition more bountifully than the native American, who, though eminently gregarious in his instincts, is not so eminently social. That gemuth of disposition, for which English has not even a name, accounts, no doubt, for the German’s love of the club. Then, too, the German clubs of the city are arranged with a regard to cosiness, home-likeness, and comfort; and hence, while the Americans run mad after that vague something termed stylishness, to the loss of all substantial comfort and ease; and hence, German associations are not addicted to dying of insolvency.35

The Democratic Vereinwessen

In contrast, there also developed voluntary organizations with a more working-class constituencies and self-consciously proletarian identities. Like the Arbeiter Männerchor and other working-men’s choruses, for example, these Vereine typically attracted newer immigrants or manifested a progressive political consciousness linked either to the heritage of the Forty-eighters or to Social Democratic ideals.36 The center of plebeian German culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century was Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward and the clustered settlement within its blocks allowed for the continuation of familiar lifestyles and traditional practices.

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35 Fairfield, 19.
36 Schneider, 34–35.
In addition to the categories of voluntary organizations discussed above, which were common among many immigrant groups, there were also those established to respond to the culturally specific needs of New York’s German immigrants. The second half of this chapter will examine three characteristic voluntary organizations that manifest a particular and distinct cultural identity and spatialized specific German ethnic practices within the urban realm: gymnastics and athletics societies known as Turnvereine, choral societies or Gesangsvereine, and shooting associations and gun clubs, called Schützenvereine. A closer look at these three types will illustrate how German-American immigrants played a unique role in creating an urban cultural and social infrastructure that shaped the public sphere of the nineteenth-century city. In contrast to more elite clubs, these Vereine provided a democratic platform for social organization and activity, and, like many of the institutions within the Vereinwessen, the Seventeenth Ward was where many of the first purpose-built structures to house these organizations were constructed.

**The Turner Movement in New York**

Few people in America have any idea of the nature of the organization of Germans known as the North-American Turner Bund, the general idea being that the intention simply is to provide for gymnastic and athletic exercise for men and women, boys and girls, and with that its function ends. Such, however, is not the case.
— *Harper’s Weekly*, 1890

According to an 1857 article on German life in the United States, “[t]he first attempt at building an organized network of clubs extending all across the Union was made by the Turner society, which from its earliest initiatives showed promise for outstanding results in social and political matters.” Founded by refugees from the revolutions of 1848–49, the New York Turnverein was

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37 “Turn Vereins in America,” *Harper’s Weekly* (September 20, 1890), 734.
envisioned as a platform for ethnic solidarity and radical reform in the United States. Renown for its nationalist spirit, the Turner movement traced its roots to the gymnastics association founded in 1811 by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in Berlin, which promoted athleticism and the development of physical and moral vigor. One early history of the New York Turners summarizes the group’s rationale as follows:

Still under the impulse of the popular uprising and favored by the liberal institutions of this country, they presented as their main purpose German-American gymnastics, the uniform physical and spiritual education of the people, and an active engagement in all political, social, and religious issues in terms of radical progress.  

More than a local voluntary organization, various histories of the Turnverein of New York emphasize its active role in the creation of a national network of Turner societies that promoted labor reform and socialist politics. And while it nourished German customs and habits through camaraderie and cultural programming, the Verein also trained a fit cadre of men to be a bulwark against the threat of physical violence, prejudice, and xenophobia that resulted from nativist sentiment.

According to founding member and gymnastics instructor Felix Reischneider, some of the earliest organizational meetings of the New York Turnverein took place in Erhard Richter’s saloon at 55 Forsythe Street and at William Hartung’s restaurant at 22 City Hall Place in the summer of 1848. Many of the young members were recent immigrants with radical proclivities, such as Sigismund Kaufmann, one of the most active early members of the society, who came to New York as a political refugee from Frankfurt and would become its first speaker and the editor of the Turner

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39 The Turner’s radical politics were too much for some in Kleindeutschland: the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung styled them the “convicts deported from the prisons of the Fatherland.” Quoted in “New-York Turnverein,” New York Times (April 25, 1869), 8.
41 Ibid.
Zeitung, the organization’s journal. German was the official language of the society, as it was the only common tongue of its early constituency: “[N]o other course was possible for all members were German-born and their residence in New York ranged from a few months to a few years.”

The Verein was administered through several committees and aimed “apart from physical gymnastics against the pressure of mind and material goods to strongly encourage true freedom, prosperity and education for all classes.”

The formation of the group coincided with the beginnings of collective action on the part of the tailors’ union in New York that culminated in a series of strikes and violent demonstrations against the police. This may have been a powerful impetus for the group to broadly define its mission to work towards the improvement of civic life and the material circumstances of the working classes regardless of their ethnicity. In addition to being advocates for labor reform, the Turners would also play an active role in opposition to slavery and join the Union cause during the Civil War. As Kaufmann himself explained, the organization was founded on democratic ideals and “it must serve the new Fatherland with upright loyalty in order to have any right to benefit by the privileges and advantages accorded to an organization of American citizens.”

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44 General Membership: Minutes. 3.1, meeting dated July 20, 1850. New York Turn Verein Records, Max Kade Center, University of Kansas. The archives of the New York Turnverein are now located at the Max Kade Center for German-American Studies at the University of Kansas. A small collection of records for the Central Turn-Verein, a later offshoot, and the papers of Gustav Scholer, a member of the Turnverein’s board for many years, are held at the New York Public Library.

45 Baron cites *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* (August 17 and 30), 1850.

The first headquarters of the Verein was located at the Shakespeare Hotel at the corner of Chambers and William Streets while gymnastics classes were held in Stubenbord’s Restaurant in Frankfort Street. By the end of its first year, the organization had 180 members and fifty candidates on its rolls. Special sections were begun in the society’s second year for dramatics, fencing, and shooting, the latter of which were led by the charismatic Franz Sigel, a native of Baden who would later become a Union major general in the Civil War. The society’s membership continued to grow and it faced increasing difficulty in finding suitable quarters that were conveniently located, meeting variously in a rented hall near Broadway and Canal Street, the Eagle Hall near the corner of Chrystie and Delancey Streets, and Harmony Garden in Essex Street. In February 1859, the Verein acquired the old Quaker meeting house at 27-33 Orchard Street for $30,000, “for which each member was taxed the sum of one dollar and in addition, had to purchase a share or certificate of indebtedness, to the value of ten dollars.”

But, by the end of the Civil War, the building’s facilities were again found to be lacking, both too small for the needs of the growing membership and programming and ill suited for the requirements of the organization’s female auxiliary. One newspaper article estimated approximately 3,000 Turners alone attended the annual festival in 1863. As well, many members complained that the Orchard Street location was simply too far downtown from their residences and an examination of the Turnverein’s membership books from this period does suggest that the overwhelming majority of members lived north of Houston Street. In early 1871, the organization was able to secure a suitable building site in “the upper city” and a group of four lots for the new club hall were purchased for a sum of $67,000 at 66–68 East Fourth Street, which extended through the block to East Third Street, with an additional $60,000 reserved for alterations.

47 Voss, 33.
48 Ibid.
(Figures 2.9-10) About half of this sum came from the sale of the Orchard Street property, which was razed and replaced by tenements, while the remainder was raised by the membership.

In February, a building committee was organized and Turner member Charles Kinkel, an architect and civil engineer, was asked to prepare a plan for the new *Turnhalle*.

**Charles Kinkel**

According to census and other records, Charles Kinkel was born in 1824 in Schkeuditz, a town twelve kilometers northwest of Leipzig in the Free State of Saxony. He may have graduated from the University of Heidelberg with a degree in civil engineering and emigrated to the United States after living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where his first son was born. It is not known when Kinkel arrived in the United States, but he first appears in New York after 1866 and became a naturalized citizen three years later. He was one of the founding teachers at the German Polytechnic Association’s scientific school, which opened in 1867 and where Kinkel taught architectural drawing and geometry. He is known to have filed several patents during his tenure there, including designs for a fire escape, an improved propeller for steamships, a machine to clean windows, and an improved steam generator. Kinkel and his family lived at 38 East Third Street between 1870–74. By 1885, his office had moved to Yorkville near Second Avenue and East Ninety–second Street and he advertised himself as an architect and “examiner of buildings,”

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51 See “A Washington Man’s Tower,” *Washington Post* (April 1, 1890), 2. In the article, Kinkel claimed to have designed “Dom Pedro’s summer residence… and was an intimate friend of the Emperor.” According to the U.S. Federal Censuses for 1870/80, Kinkel’s son Hermann was born in Brazil in approximately 1860.

52 The school was located at 97 Rivington Street. “A New Scientific School,” *American Artisan and Patent Record* 4:14 (February 6, 1867), 212.

53 U.S. patent nos. 55,773 (June 19, 1866); 57,637 (August 28, 1866); 67,239 (July 30, 1867); 574,202 (December 29, 1896)
specializing in “plans, specifications, and contracts for building purposes promptly executed.”

(Figure 2.11) For a brief period, Kinkel shared an architectural practice with Sigmund Kusnitzky, who is known to have been active within Cincinnati’s German community between 1869-71.

Based on a survey of the Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide and other periodicals, Kinkel appears to have designed very few buildings in New York: merely a “first class store” of Ohio stone at Rivington Street and the Bowery in 1872 and a handful of tenements and tenement conversions in Kleindeutschland and Yorkville in the following decade. He also executed plans for a four-story “brown stone-front” dwelling at Fourth Avenue and Sixtieth Street for druggist Lewis H. Hasse. After 1889, he appears to have moved to Washington, D.C. to work in the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, where he was employed for a short time before being removed from his position after being charged with collecting campaign funds in his office and other improprieties. While in the nation’s capital, Kinkel served as president of that city’s German-American Technical Society, and, along with his then partner George R. Pohl, proposed an ambitious design for a great iron tower for the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1892, alas unbuilt. Perhaps his most publicized design, the immense structure would have been 1,500’ high and 480’ in diameter at its base, and would have included an auditorium and galleries to accommodate an estimated 30,000 people as well as the largest hotel in the world (with

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54 Membership lists: Membership album 1.2, 1850-67, New York Turn Verein Records. National Archives and Records Administration, Passport Applications; U.S. Federal Censuses for 1870 and 1880; and Index to Petitions for Naturalizations Filed in Federal, State, and Local Courts in New York City. Kinkel’s 1885 passport application includes a note by him on letterhead with his Yorkville address.

55 Dennis Steadman Francis, Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900 (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979). Kusnitzky is known to have designed the Sängerfest Halle, St. John German Protestant Church, the Kopling Society Building, and the Jaap Building, all in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati. See the Biographical Dictionary of Cincinnati Architects, 1788-1940; accessed March 12, 2012: http://www.architecturecincy.org/dictionary/K.html

56 Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide 10:228 (July 27, 1872), 36. See also Alt-478-1871 for a commercial conversion Kinkel completed for William Pfluger at 54 Second Avenue in 1871.

57 Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide 4:97 (January 22, 1870), 8.

approximately 4,000 rooms). One critic for the *American Architect and Building News* felt that its sumptuously decorated surfaces and overt outrageousness recommended it over the comparatively unadorned and more utilitarian Eiffel Tower.⁵⁹

*The New York Turnverein*

The cornerstone of the new Turnhalle on East Fourth Street was laid on July 17, 1871. Attuned to the public opinion of New York’s overwhelmingly Democratic German-American wards, Mayor Abraham Oakey Hall, in his remarks at the ceremony, alluded to the strength of the Turner organization “being represented in a union which is extending over nearly all the States in the Union, forming in itself a power, which, in union with the liberty-loving elements of the nation, is sufficient to preserve law and order.”⁶⁰ Two Federal-style row houses dating to 1831 were combined and extended to East Third Street, resulting in an extensive new clubhouse that was 50’ wide and 200’ deep.⁶¹ Still extant but with significant alterations, the main Turnhalle raised the original dwellings to a full four stories in height over an elevated basement with a regular brick facade divided into five bays, topped by a simple cornice and a shallow pediment. With a frontage of fifty feet, the original structures were extended back to East Third Street an additional one hundred feet. An illustration published in the Turnverein newsletter *Bahn Frei!* depicted the structure as it looked after its central section was rebuilt after a substantial fire in 1880: rising above the elevated entrance porch, the central bay on each floor was articulated by a grouping of three windows surrounded by Neo-Grec ornamentation, and a prominent fire escape with wrought-iron decoration. Board minutes detail the interior arrangement of rooms. The basement contained a billiard hall, bowling alley, and kitchen, as well as a barroom and saloon affiliated with Jacob

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Ruppert’s brewery. A hall and dining rooms comprised the first floor. The second floor housed a large exercise hall complete with a stage and refreshment room. The third floor contained the sitting and meeting rooms for female members, and the fourth floor contained additional meeting and storage space. William Winkel, the lessee who ran the commercial establishments in the basement, and his family also lived in an apartment on the fourth floor. The extension to East Third Street housed classrooms and other spaces in the Turnverein’s school.\textsuperscript{62}

According to the organization’s centenary brochure, the Turnverein achieved its peak in membership and general activities during the years that it was located on East Fourth Street. In addition to gymnastics, fencing also played an important role in the organization’s history and the Verein’s fencing club was among the earliest established in the United States, contributing to a “physical culture [that] was vigorously pursued in accordance with Turner principles.”\textsuperscript{63}

In addition to providing facilities for gymnastic prowess, physical fitness, and exercise, the New York Turnverein was equally dedicated to the education of the intellect. As one commentator noted, “The German Turners believe that under the present school system the brains of the children are over-taxed, and they encourage a series of exercises … not with the view of adopting a trade, but for the purpose of showing children how to use their hands, and inspire them with the love of work, not only as a means of living, but as conducive to good health and content.”\textsuperscript{64}

Beginning in 1856, the Deutsch-Amerikanischer Schulverein co-sponsored German language classes at the Turnverein and the organization soon offered elementary education to the children of


\textsuperscript{64} Manson, 584.
Kleindeutschland’s residents before the free public-school system was securely established. By 1859, the school was staffed by ten teachers and a principal and offered classes in German, French, drafting, bookkeeping, and choral instruction in addition to physical exercises. “We may say that our drawing scholars have a good reputation in the different art and industrial establishments where the art of drawing is required,” boasted headmaster Heinrich Metzer. Historian Paul Ramsey notes how the membership of the Turnverein was instrumental in adding German language instruction to the regular curriculum of the New York City public schools by 1870.

With the march of population uptown, many members of the New York Turn Verein found the existing location too inconvenient and precipitated a schism that would lead to the abandonment of the East Fourth Street facility. In 1886, a select group of members led by Judge Charles J. Nehrbas split off to form a new organization, the Central Turn Verein, which first leased the old Hebrew Orphan Asylum on Seventy-seventh Street before commissioning architect Albert Wagner to design a “monster Turnhalle” to be erected at Sixty-seventh Street near Third Avenue. (Figures 2.13-14) One of the largest clubhouses in the United States when it opened in 1893, the six-story building provided athletic and education facilities for approximately 1,800 members, making it the largest Turnhalle in the world when it opened the following year. With 1,000 members of its own and a growing student body with the largest enrollment in the Bund,

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65 Since English-language classes never seem to have been on offer, the school appears to have served as a bulwark of German culture and tradition rather than a vehicle for assimilation and acculturation. Theodore Huebner, “The German School of the New York Turn–Verein,” The American German Review (August 1950), 14–15.


the New York Turn Verein felt enormous pressure to follow suit. In April 1895, the organization’s board voted to leave the old neighborhood and purchased property at the corner of Eighty–fifth Street and Lexington Avenue for $55,000. (Figure 2.12) The historic East Fourth Street building was sold for $83,250, and the new Turnhalle designed by Israel & Harder opened in November 1898 in the heart of Yorkville.

**German–American Singing Societies**

The next great musical genius of the world should be an American; but he can only come after generations of musicians have prepared our soil and sown the seed which, under the warmth of his sacred fire, shall ripen to a rich harvest.

— Walter Damrosch

The social life of New York’s German wards also revolved around innumerable singing societies, which were patterned after the familiar *Liedertafel*, or male part-song choirs of Germany. The second characteristically German voluntary organization that this chapter will examine in detail, these societies presented public concerts and hosted benefits for charitable concerns, as well as provided an important venue for social companionship. According to historian Robert Ernst, singing societies first appeared in New York in the 1830s as small and informal groups, often temporary and loosely constituted, until sustained German immigration could support larger and more permanent Vereine. Singing was an activity enjoyed across class boundaries within the German community, and the political associations of early groups often faded over time as members concentrated more on musical pursuits. The Turners and other social reformers, working–class associations, and affluent clubs all participated in this kind of recreation. But while

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72 Ernst, 130.
audiences were often diverse, memberships within groups tended to be relatively homogenous or became so as they evolved.\textsuperscript{73} Nadel credits singing societies with providing social cohesion to German-American enclaves and quotes a New Yorker Staatszeitung editorial from 1860 that emphasized how the “cultural historical mission” of German immigrants toward their adopted homeland united “the worker, the businessman and the politician … [and erased] the social distinctions that divided the German element.”\textsuperscript{74} Optimistic as this may seem, the singing societies, nevertheless, did cultivate and foster a unique German-American identity, sustain social and regional loyalties, and introduce native Americans to new forms of cultural expression.

Enormously popular, singing societies provided German immigrants with the opportunity to sing familiar songs within a relaxed setting, and, also, sponsored occasional outings, picnics, and festivals to Jones’s Wood, Hoboken, and other favored locales. (Figure 2.15) These large gatherings played an important role in establishing ethnic and collective identity for German-Americans while providing a venue for Anglo-American New Yorkers to mingle with their neighbors. An anonymous reporter for the New York Times described the spirit of amity that suffused the Whitmonday Pfingstmontag festivities of 1858: “To this festival, although it is German, every poetic soul, of whatever country, will bring its own vernal anticipations, and celebrate…. These German Spring Festivals, as our citizens are well aware, are not affairs of yesterday. They have been pleasant recreations, even for Americans, for many years past.”\textsuperscript{75} Except for a five-year period during the Civil War, yearly national Sängerfest also united local participants with other German immigrants from across the country. (Figure 2.16) To great acclaim, New


\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in Nadel, 239.

York City hosted the annual singing festival of the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund* in 1852, 1855, 1858, 1865, 1871, and 1894.76 (Figures 2.17-18)

**The Deutscher Liederkranz**

By the 1860s, dozens of singing societies proliferated in the German communities of New York and Brooklyn. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of musical activity, historian George C.D. Odell lists thirteen prominent groups in his book *Annals of the New York Stage*, but there were undoubtedly other organizations as well as more informal groups.77 Although it became a more elite institution in later years, the Deutscher Liederkranz was typical of the many avocational societies that developed in Kleindeutschland that emphasized the role of the clubhouse, a place that provided a convivial atmosphere in which to express camaraderie. Musical critic August Spanuth wrote that the lack of a permanent clubhouse and "common social base" during the early years of the Liederkranz led to disputes, defections, and schisms between members. For example, dissonance over the quality of food provided at club events spurred several Liederkranz men to secede and form the separatist Arion in 1854.78

Like many early clubs, the Liederkranz operated out of several rented accommodations before settling in a permanent location.79 From 1852 to 1863, the Liederkranz met and held concerts at the Pythagoras Hall on 136 Canal Street, a location that William Steinway refers to in his diaries

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77 George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, Vol. VII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 674-75. The organizations that Odell lists include the New Yorker Sing-Academie, the New York Musik-Verein, the Rheinischer Sängerbund, the Schwäbischer Sängerbund, the Männer-Gesangverein, the Arion Society, the Teutonia Männerchor, the Gesangverein Fidelia, the Lyra Männerchor, the Deutscher Liederkranz, the Gesangverein Arminia, the Beethoven Männerchor, and the Mozart Männerchor, to be joined in later years by the Yorkville Männerchor, and the Lorelei.


79 For a listing of locations, see *History of the Liederkranz*, 6.
as "the Pit," a shortened version of the venue’s name as well as a possible allusion to the quality of its accommodations. In 1863, with membership growing to approximately 700 members, the organization converted two late Federal-style dwellings at 31-33 East Fourth Street into their clubhouse. (Figure 2.19) These were enlarged six years later with the purchase of the adjoining townhouse at number 35 for $32,500. The basement contained a “refreshment room” and kitchen, billiard tables, and a bowling alley; while on the floors above were a reading room, parlors, reception rooms, ladies’ sitting rooms, and a capacious 80’ by 50’ rehearsal hall with 35’-high ceilings. The front of the main hall was decorated with three large banners: In the center hung a 10’ by 15’ standard decorated with the society’s emblem, a Grecian lyre encircled by a large crown of laurels. A broad ribbon was entwined about the wreath and was inscribed with the names of prominent German composers. On either side of this central standard, two additional vertical banners were hung, which were decorated with female allegories that represented the spirits of song and pleasure.

An ever-increasing membership soon surpassed the facilities of the existing Liederkranz clubhouse, and, in 1881, a building committee chaired by William Steinway purchased five lots at 111-119 East Fifty-eighth Street. (Figure 2.20) A new, opulent hall opened on November 26, 1882, following the gradual movement uptown of German-American business and culture. Historian

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80 See Steinway Diary (June 10, 1862). The Liederkranz was an important touchstone for Steinway throughout his life and he commented frequently on his involvement with the group in his diaries, mentioning it in his first and last entries as well as many in between. For more information about Steinway’s involvement with the organization, see “Liederkranz (L.K.),” accessed March 17, 2012: http://americanhistory.si.edu/steinwaydiary/annotations/?id=627

81 New York Times (January 16, 1862), 8. Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide 3:57 (April 17, 1869), 7. The three buildings, now demolished, were adjacent to the Seabury Tredwell House, now known as the Merchants’ House Museum, and all built as part of a row of late Federal townhouses in 1832.


83 At 1,557, membership was at its peak when the new clubhouse opened. The new hall was designed by William Kuhles and H. J. Schwarzmann in the German-Renaissance style with interior decorations designed by George Herzog. See History of the Liederkranz, 15. See also Christopher Bruhn, "Between the Old World the New: William Steinway and the New York Liederkranz in the 1860s," in John Graziano, ed., European Music and Musicians in New York City, 1840-1900 (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 139.
Stanley Nadel comments that the new Liederkranz clubhouse "was designed to demonstrate that the German-American upper class of New York was fully prepared to match the opulent life-style of its Anglo-American contemporaries." The erection of such a grand edifice by what was now an affluent society with limited membership elicited many laudatory comments in the popular press that both praised the handsome new hall and considered the influence of German taste on the evolution of the musical culture of New York. An anonymous reviewer in Harper's Weekly wrote:

That New York is largely indebted to its German citizens for the development and support of its music is a fact that needs no demonstration; but it is in reviewing the history of this art during the past fifty years that the extent of the German influence is best appreciated. While the musical world of New York was listening to the filigree melodies of the Italian school, the German musician was advancing steadily and quietly, until at last he claimed New York as his. The best piano-fortes to-day are made by Germans; the large music shops are under their control; the opera is sung in their language; their names appear as directors of all the large musical organizations; the music of German composers predominates on the concert programmes; and a large proportion of the artists and of the audience which goes to hear them is of this nation. One of the organizations that has helped them to this power is the Liederkranz, the oldest German musical society in New York.

The Liederkranz’s membership was increasingly composed of German-American elites and the aspiring professional classes. After the opening of the new clubhouse, the organization’s board voted to restrict the admittance of new members by only filling places that were vacated as a result of death or non-renewal. It also made the dues more expensive, providing a further impediment to membership for working-class individuals. In his history of the society, Hermann Mosenthal reflected on how the composition of the Liederkranz’s membership was perhaps more democratic in its youth: “Probably despite the lesser number of members there existed less homogeneity in social standing than there is now. And they had to be less selective in admitting new members since one wanted to shine with a rather large chorus at the concerts.”

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86 Mosenthal, 54. Bruhn, 139.
87 Mosenthal, V. Translation by Heidi Varblow. Quoted in “Liederkranz Membership” accessed March 15, 2012: http://americanhistory.si.edu/steinwaydiary/diary/?date=January+5%2C+1885&x=15&y=9
While many private organizations like the Liederkranz followed their constituencies uptown, some musical institutions preferred to remain in Kleindeutschland or invest in new facilities there that capitalized on the area’s cultural affiliations. The New-York Musical Exchange, for example, opened its new headquarters at 32 East Fourth Street in February 1887. (Figure 2.21) Dedicated to “furthering the artistic, financial, and social interests of its members,” the Exchange also provided a home for the Musical Protective Union.\(^88\) Founded in 1863, this organization was an advocate for those employed in the musical professions, guarding its members against the dishonest practices of agents and theatrical managers. It also provided charitable aid, sickness benefits, and philanthropic relief to musicians, performers, and their families. Known as “the Wall Street of musical notes,” the sustained presence of the Exchange, performance venues, and other nearby institutions ensured that Kleindeutschland remained a center of the performing arts in the cultural life of the Empire City for decades to come.\(^89\)

Singing societies and other voluntary organizations dedicated to musical pursuits were important institutions that provided social space for German-Americans to maintain — and often celebrate — their ethnic identity. And furthermore, the clubhouses and meeting halls of these groups provided visible opportunities for the manifestation of German taste, style, and influence within the public realm, to pay homage to European origins, and to promote Germanic culture and values in their adopted home. Speaking at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Liederkranz, community leader and industrialist William Steinway explained, “If one is surrounded the whole day by Americans — the evening here allows one not to forget the old homeland.”\(^90\)

\(^89\) Manson, 583.
Steinway and other trustees acquired a box at the New York Safe Deposit Company for the storage of the society’s bonds and papers they chose the password “German” to protect its contents. Combining patriotism with a love of song, the emergence and popularity of Kleindeutschland’s singing societies illustrate how immigrant groups aspired to preserve aspects of their cultural heritage while integrating themselves into American economic and social life. As a speaker at the 1865 Sängerfest noted, “To constitute a German nation in the bowels of America, is impossible; but to lend our influence to the struggle for the best interests of man, is not only feasible, but a solemn duty, and our influence will take a firmer hold… the more highly we prize our German culture.”

Shooting Societies and Gun Clubs in German New York

German-American militia companies appeared in the United States for the first time in the 1830s, but became especially popular in the decades that followed. Increased immigration after the revolutions of 1848–49 influenced membership markedly, as did concerns about violence precipitated by nativist sentiment. (Figure 2.22) By 1853, writes historian Stanley Nadel, approximately 1,700 German-Americans constituted one quarter of New York City’s militiamen, and, by the end of the decade, “every conceivable group in Kleindeutschland appeared to have discovered the social possibilities of having its own guard.” Many companies served with distinction during the Civil War, but militia groups became less popular after this time, possibly because anti-immigrant feeling had shifted away from German-American groups or at least had become more covert. Nevertheless, the New York Schützenvereine, or shooting societies, were held in high esteem by amateur and vocational sportsmen alike for their marksmanship and talent.

91 Tellingly, Steinway’s diary entry is in English and used the word “German” instead of “Deutsch.” See Steinway Diary (January 5, 1885).
93 Nadel, 234-35.
“Among the German-American shooters of the country,” wrote one enthusiast, “the rifle clubs around New York are looked upon as the head and front of the handlers of heavy rifles and set-triggers.”

German-American gun clubs might have housed small shooting galleries in their clubhouses, but they tended to compete at larger rifle ranges located outside of the city center, such as the pleasure ground at Jones’s Wood along the East River; Schützen Park in North Bergen, New Jersey; Ridgewood and Dexter Park, Queens; or Creedmore, near the German-American company towns of College Point and Astoria, Queens. The third annual festival of the national Schützenbund, at the time the largest held to date, was convened in New York in the summer of 1868. (Figures 2.23-25) Weekly journals and newspapers estimated that over a quarter of a million individuals participated in festivities that were extremely popular amongst New Yorkers of all stripes. The Schützenfest “by its magnitude and success evinces the growing taste for physical and athletic sports which is being impressed in part by our German population upon American social life,” wrote one reporter, “An immense assemblage not only of Germans but Americans testified the popularity of this novel feature in American life.” Led by Union major general Fritz Siegel, the festival began with a grand procession through the streets of New York to the shooting grounds at Jones’s Wood. A Congressional committee of visitors was appointed to attend and foreign representatives from Holland, Prussia, Austria, and Switzerland also took steps to see the sharpshooters. Costing over $40,000, the buildings at Jones’s Wood included a grand Festhalle and

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96 Putnam’s Magazine 2:8 (August 1868), 247.
shooting stands. In addition to feats of skill, the chief delights of the event included German music and song, a dancing pavilion, and other amusement that helped make the festival a family affair. “The German never enjoys himself, whether at fest or at work, without his children, and the little ones as well as the rifles were in arms during the festival week,” observed one visitor, “It was not uncommon to see a sturdy Teuton loaded down … with a fat baby and his favorite rifle.”

**The Deutsch-Amerikanische Schützengesellschaft**

By the 1880s, shooting had developed into a leisure activity for the aspiring middle classes, and most Schützenvereine had relocated to the suburbs along with many of the residents of Kleindeutschland. (Figure 2.26) The Deutsch-Amerikanische Schützengesellschaft, however, remained headquartered in the old neighborhood and served as a tangible reminder of the area’s German heritage despite changing demographics. (Figure 2.27) In 1888, the organization commissioned architect William C. Frohne to design a purpose-built hall at 12 Saint Mark’s Place in order to house lodge rooms and facilities for twenty-four individual shooting societies and gun clubs, including the Germania Schützen Bund, the Independent Schützen Corps, and the Brooklyn Rifle Corps. While there was a small shooting gallery in the basement of the building, most clubs actually competed at the larger rifle ranges located in the suburbs. The five-story masonry structure contained a host of amenities: the basement contained a bowling alley in addition to the aforementioned shooting gallery; a saloon, a large restaurant, and an assembly room could be found on the first floor; the various lodge rooms for the individual companies comprised the second, third, and fourth floors; and the top floor housed a private apartment for the building’s

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caretaker. Still extant, the building remains profusely decorated with terra-cotta ornament that expresses the martial themes of the society, including helmeted heads, shooting targets, and crossed rifles, as well as the motto *einstigkeit macht stark* or “unity provides strength.”

Organized in 1894, the Nationaler Schützen-Bund was also headquartered in the building, from where it planned the grand Schützenfest of 1895, the first tournament sponsored by this national sharpshooters’ union. The event surpassed all previous shooting festivals in New York City. It was held at the rifle ranges in Glendale Park, Queens, from June 30 to July 10 and distributed over $25,000 in prizes to participants. As a reporter for the New York Times commented, “The German sharpshooters of America have on many occasions arranged mammoth festivals in different parts of the Union, but these were only pygmies in comparison with the tournament which will be held here…” President Grover Cleveland was to have fired the first shot and had consented to officially open the festival, but was not able to attend. As one observer wryly observed about the event, “Shooting at marks was ostensibly the object of the Schuetzenfest [sic], and there is no doubt that enough powder was burned to blow up Manhattan Island, but it is also true that sufficient beer was consumed to float the island back into place again.”

**William C. Frohne**

The architect of the Saint Mark’s Place clubhouse was William C. Frohne, who was born in Germany in 1853 and immigrated to New York with his wife in 1877. Three years after his arrival, he was enumerated by the U.S. Federal Census as a “furniture designer” while living in a tenement on East Sixth Street between First and Second Avenues. By 1900, Frohne and his family

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101 The event was originally scheduled to end July 8, 1895, but was extended due to popularity. “Festival for Marksmen,” *New York Times* (March 24, 1895), 16. “Crack Shots to Gather,” *New York Times* (June 16, 1895), 17.
had relocated to the west Bronx, where he would reside and retain his office for the remainder of his life.\textsuperscript{104} Although not much is known about his career, he was in practice as an architect in New York City as early as 1886 through at least 1921. Despite the fact that he primarily worked alone, Frohne was involved in two brief partnerships: one with Paul Kühne from 1893–94 and another with William Graul in 1894.\textsuperscript{105}

Early in his career, Frohne was active in producing designs for tenements and their conversions, as well as for small commercial buildings such as those at 211-213 Bleecker Street and 191-195 Greenwich Street.\textsuperscript{106} His most well-known work today, the headquarters of the Deutsch-Amerikanische Schützen Gesellschaft, was constructed in 1888 at 12 Saint Mark’s Place and is the first of a series of commissions that the architect received for five-story immigrant social clubs. It is likely that his work on the shooting society clubhouse directly influenced his selection the following year to design the German Odd Fellows’ Hall at 69 Saint Mark’s Place, which is still extant and largely intact.\textsuperscript{107} (\textbf{Figures 2.28-30}) As a result of their mid-block sites, both structures have much the same massing and utilize the vocabulary of German-revival styles to great effect: the German-Renaissance revival and the Rundbogenstil respectively. The facade of the Odd Fellows’ Hall was constructed of buff brick with terra-cotta panels with granite accents. Estimated to cost $32,000, the building was envisioned to be “as much as a clubhouse as an Odd Fellows’ hall can be”: the basement contained bowling alleys, the first floor a dancing hall and

\textsuperscript{104} See U.S. Federal Censuses for 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920.
\textsuperscript{105} See New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Bohemian National Hall Designation Report, LP-1914 (July 19, 1994).
\textsuperscript{106} Both commercial buildings are listed in \textit{American Architect and Building News} 19:538 (April 17, 1886), XIV and \textit{American Architect and Building News} 22:621 (November 19, 1887), XII.
\textsuperscript{107} To date, the Odd Fellows hall does not appear to have received much notice, but would seem eligible for individual landmark status. It is remarkably intact aside from a ground floor addition and the loss of its cornice and roof ornamentation.
“accommodations,” and the second, third, fourth, and fifth floors lodge- and clubrooms. In 1895, Frohe was commissioned to design the Bohemian National Hall at 321-325 East Seventy-third Street, another Renaissance-revival clubhouse that features an elaborately ornamented entrance porch supported by paired granite columns, as well as a two-story arcade with paired columns and terra-cotta ornament.

After the turn of the century, Frohe became associated with Philip Braender, a prolific, German-born, real-estate developer and tire manufacturer, for whom he designed numerous loft buildings, offices, and commercial structures in the burgeoning Fourth Avenue business district. One of the more publicized projects from this period was Frohe’s design for the Ashland Building at Fourth Avenue and Twenty-fourth Street, a twenty-story loft building with a budget of one million dollars. Architectural critic A.C. David commented favorably on its design saying, “[T]he effect is excellent. … [The building has] a salient line and direction, from which it [derives] propriety and dignity of appearance.” Architecture and design critic Henry W. Frohe was the architect’s son, and, for a brief period, shared a practice with his father and may have been involved in its design.

“A distinctive type of business buildings on a large scale, partly loft and partly office building, [is] being developed [in the Fourth Avenue district.] If the present high standard of its buildings is

110 These include 26–32 West Seventeenth Street, 14–20 West Nineteenth Street, 7–9 East Twentieth Street, 26–28 East Twenty-first Street, 143 West 125th Street, as well as a loft at Broadway and West Fourth Street. See New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Ladies Mile Historic District Designation Report, volume two, LP-1609 (May 2, 1989). See also Construction News 21:16 (April 21, 1906), 309; Construction News 23:20 (May 18, 1907), 367; Construction News 25:2 (January 11, 1908), 24; and American Architect and Building News 92:1667 (December 7, 1907), 138. A brief biographical sketch of Philip Braender can be found in Christopher Grey, “The Ungainly Duckling that Alighted along the Park,” New York Times (September 3, 2006).
111 It was also eponymously referred to as the Braender Building. “Fourth Avenue as Business Centre,” New York Times (January 16, 1910), X11.
113 Frohne & Son is listed in 1913. See James Ward, Architects in Practice, New York City, 1900-1940 (Union: J&D Associates, 1989).
maintained it will be an addition to the business architecture of New York of which the city may well feel proud,” explained the younger Frohne about the impact of the real estate market on design, “To the profession, perhaps, the most significant feature of these Fourth Avenue buildings is the noticeable extent to which architectural services have been availed of, and this fact is the more significant because building operations of this character are so largely conceived in a pure spirit of speculation in real estate operations and the appropriation for architectural services is one of the first items to be reduced.”

**Voluntary Organizations and the Production of German-American Social Space**

As space is a construct that is socially produced, according to theorist Henri Lefebvre, it is possible, therefore, to examine how the foreign-born have incorporated themselves into the social fabric of their adopted country and how this has been realized in spatial terms. Voluntary organizations and social clubs have long been an important means by which these processes are made manifest in the urban realm, and, for German immigrants, they have been a way by which to represent their newfound identity and solidarity as hyphenated Americans. Clubhouses and meeting halls are tangible reminders of the conscious production of group identity and historical memory. More ephemeral traces like parades, festivals, and other events spatialize ethnic practices and traditions within the urban landscape and help to foster social cohesion and form a collective consciousness that transcends mere individual responses. As ethnic German communities grew in wealth and prestige — and increasingly identified more strongly with the adopted homeland than their land of origin — they ever more desired to see themselves represented in the public realm through involvement in voluntary organizations and to participate more fully in activities and interactions.

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that gave form and definition to their identity as ethnic Germans. As historian Kathleen Neils Conzen observes:

The symbolic umbrella of the ethnic culture has to be broad and flexible enough to serve several, often contradictory purposes: provide the basis for solidarity among the potential members of the group; mobilize the group to defend its cultural values and advance its claims to power, status, and resources; and, at the same time, defuse the hostility of the mainstream ethnoculture by depicting the compatibility of the sidestream ethnoculture with American principles and ideals.\(^\text{115}\)

Constructed primarily by and for German-Americans, the clubhouses of the New York Turn Verein, the Deutscher Liederkranz, and the Deutsch-Amerikanische Schützengesellschaft concretely represent the performative roles that individuals play in forging and constituting ethnic identity. These buildings also locate this process within the urban environment as part of the built fabric of a dynamic and changing city. They housed the very kinds of cultural forms and practices that theorist and political scientist Benedict Anderson determined were so essential to the construction of “imagined” communities.\(^\text{116}\) As expressions of the culture of German-American voluntary organizations, they remain markers of a sensibility that was distinct from mainstream society, but, at the same time, as places of encounter, these structures also remind us of the processes by which the benefits of pluralism can be seen as positive. Knit into the democratic street grid and transformed by use and time, the built evidence of the Vereine remains a palpable reminders of the pushes and pulls of immigrant life, of what has been described as the “complex dialogue between American imposition of ethnic categories and immigrant rallying of ethnic identities.”\(^\text{117}\) The Vereine reveal competing visions of how the city was imagined and indicate the process by which immigrant groups represented, innovated, and adapted cultural practices and


\(^{117}\) Conzen, et al, 10.
forms in order to manage change, negotiate their identities, and contribute to a vibrant and democratic public realm.
Figure 2.1: Map of the Seventeenth Ward Study Area: Meeting Halls and Clubs

- Boundary of Block Survey
- German Masonic Temple
- German Apotheke Vereine
- New York Turn Verein Hall
- Deutscher Liederkranz
- Deutsch-Amerikanische Schützengesellschaft
- German Odd Fellows' Hall
- Scheffel Hall
- Webster Hall
- Teutonia Assembly Rooms
- Germania Assembly Rooms
- Concordia Hall
- Beethoven Hall
- Ottendorfer Library/Deutsches Dispensary
- Aschenbroedel Verein
- German Branch Y.M.C.A.
Figure 2.2: *Volksfest* in Caledonia Park, Jersey City Heights, from *Harper’s Weekly* (September 9, 1882), 572.

Figure 2.3: Members of the Order of the Harugari dressed in bearksins march in the grand procession of the North German Society parade as it leaves the Germania Assembly Rooms (1875); New York Public Library.
Figure 2.4: The German Masonic Temple (upper right) and images from the German Masonic fair, from *Harper’s Weekly* (November 29, 1879), 945.
Figure 2.5: (Above left) A rendering of the German Masonic Temple’s renovated façade at 220 East Fifteenth Street (1936); The Chancellor Robert R. Livingston Masonic Library, Grand Lodge of the State of New York.

Figure 2.6: (Above right, top) The Teutonia Assembly Rooms at Third Avenue and East Sixteenth Street, from The Freundschafte Society of the City of New York (1914).

Figure 2.7: (Above right, bottom) The Freundschafte Society at Third Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, from The Freundschafte Society of the City of New York (1914).

Figure 2.8: (Right) The Arion Association Club building at Park Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street (1894); New York Public Library.
Figure 2.9: The New York Turn Verein’s headquarters at 36–38 East Fourth Street, from Bahn Frei! (April 28, 1898), 3.

Figure 2.10: German-American gymnasts exercise at East Fourth Street, from Harper’s Weekly (March 13, 1875), 227.

Figure 2.11: Architect Charles Kinkel’s passport application (1885); National Archives and Records Administration.

Figure 2.12: The new uptown facilities of the New York Turn Verein at Lexington Avenue and Eighty-fifth Street, from New York Turn Verein zur Jubelfeier seines 60 jährigen Stiftungsfestes (1910), rear cover.
**Figure 2.13:** The Central Turn Verein’s “monster Turnhalle,” from Harper’s Weekly (September 17, 1887), 670.

**Figure 2.14:** The gymnasium of the Central Turn Verein, from Harper’s Weekly (September 20, 1890), 733.
Figure 2.15: Sunday pleasures at Jones’s Wood, from Harper’s Weekly (November 5, 1859), 708.

Figure 2.16: The great Sängerfest of the German singing societies parade past New York’s City Hall, from Harper’s Weekly (August 5, 1865); New York Public Library.
Figure 2.17: German musical societies of New York serenade opera tenor Theodor Wachtel at the Belvedere Hotel at Irving Place and East Fifteenth Street (1875); New York Public Library.

Figure 2.18: The German Sängerfest at Madison Square Garden, from Harper’s Weekly (June 23, 1894), 580.
Figure 2.19: (Left) Headquarters of the Deutscher Liederkranz at 31-33 East Fourth Street (Undated), from Hermann Mosenthal, Geschicht des Vereins Deutscher Liederkranz in New York (1897).

Figure 2.20: (Right) The new Liederkranz Hall at 115 East Fifty-eighth Street (ca. 1905); Museum of the City of New York.

Figure 2.21: The New-York Musical Exchange on East Fourth Street near Third Avenue, from Harper’s Weekly (August 4, 1888), 582.
Figure 2.22: Banquet hall of the third-annual American Schützenfest (ca. 1855); Library of Congress.

Figure 2.23: Scenes from the Schützenfest at Jones’s Wood, from Harper’s Weekly (July 18, 1868), 452.

Figure 2.24: Nineteenth-century, German-American shooting targets, from William F. Mangels, The Outdoor Amusements Industry… (1952).
Figure 2.25: Hall, shooting grounds, and spectator stands of the Schützenbund at Jones’s Wood, from Harper’s Weekly (July 11, 1868), 440-41; and (below) detail of the shooting range and targets.

Figure 2.26: A German-American rifle team parade in New York City (ca. 1905); Library of Congress.
**Figure 2.27:** (Left) the *Deutsche-Amerikanische Schützengesellschaft*, from Moses King, *King’s Handbook of New York City* (1893).

**Figure 2.28:** (Center) the German Odd Fellows’ Hall, from Moses King, *King’s Handbook of New York City* (1893).

**Figure 2.29:** (Right) the Bohemian National Hall (ca. 1905); Museum of the City of New York.

**Figure 2.29:** Advertisement for the German Odd Fellows’ Hall, from *Der Führer: Organ der Deutschen Freimaurer & Odd Fellows* (July 16, 1898); The Chancellor Robert R. Livingston Masonic Library, Grand Lodge of the State of New York.
Chapter 3

The Invention of Cooper Square: Social Activism and the Construction of Meaning in Postwar New York City

If we accept the fact that all buildings[,] like nations, are ephemeral social constructions, and that the built environment is a testament to change rather than something of enduring materiality, we can begin to look on old buildings with a new lightness.
— Miles Glendinning

Nineteenth-century German-America reconfigured the parts of the city it inhabited into an ethnic landscape that can still be read in the proliferation of tenements and social-club buildings that continue to dominate the urban fabric of the East Village. The built heritage of Kleindeutschland largely survived the successive waves of change that swept over other areas of Manhattan real estate and this legacy enabled the Seventeenth Ward to become a crucible for later generations of immigrants and working-class individuals. Although described as obsolescent by postwar city planners and housing reformers, these buildings created an infrastructure that proved to be highly resilient and adaptable to the needs of later residents. While the tenant activists of the 1950s and 1960s may have been unaware of or uninterested in who built their neighborhood, or why, or for what purpose, those elements that they recognized and valued, tried to preserve and perpetuate, were the direct results of the German solutions to shaping a livable and vibrant community.

While historically characterized as a “slum,” it would be more accurate to describe the housing stock of the Seventeenth Ward as low-rent. As Herbert J. Ganz described the similar living

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conditions in Boston’s former West End, the affordable rents often found in un-rehabilitated, dense, older dwellings enabled many households without long-term job security to keep housing costs low and elderly residents to maintain their independence while living near to social and support networks. In addition to being a place to live for people of modest means, the democratic social halls and institutions originally built for German voluntary organizations continued to provide spaces for community cohesion and social and cultural interaction as they were adapted by other groups. In combination with the area’s walkability, easy access to public transportation networks, and mix of residential and commercial buildings, these features gave the neighborhood its character and proved to be as much a motivator for preservation as the more commonly recognized criteria of aesthetics and architectural distinction.

In the postwar era, the specter and promise of slum clearance and urban renewal policy galvanized and transformed American cities. In particular, New York City’s urban neighborhoods became “terrains of struggle” over who was allowed to participate in the determination of land-use, and, therefore, the distribution of the harms and benefits of urban living itself. This concluding chapter will examine the history of urban renewal in the Lower East Side in order to trace the evolving meaning of the historic built environment to the residents of Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward, which developed a particularly strong legacy of social activism with regards to its architectural heritage. The activity of the Cooper Square Committee and its opposition to postwar redevelopment efforts present a narrative of how ordinary citizens conceptualized the urban realm and defined for themselves the physical, social, and intangible qualities of place that were worthy of preservation. Unlike later struggles, the activists in this case did not explicitly privilege the historic

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3 I am particularly indebted to the comprehensive chronology and interpretation of the activities of the Cooper Square Committee found in Marci Reaven, *Citizen Participation in City Planning: New York City, 1945-1975*, Ph.D. diss. (New York, New York University, 2009). For a discussion of urban renewal sites as “terrains of struggle,” see Reaveen, 345.
character of the urban fabric as such, but rather, valorized the social and economic values inherent in it and that were created by their immigrant predecessors. The case of Cooper Square and the activities of its residents present an opportunity for historic preservation practitioners to look more holistically at urban neighborhoods, and, furthermore, point towards the necessity of creative solutions that create different and better tools to preserve those characteristics that make them habitable and enduring.

**Slum Clearance in the Lower East Side**

But tell me: When you say, ‘The value of a building,’ do you really lay more stress on the subjective value than the dollar value?

On both. For human nature determines that subjective value, sooner or later, becomes money value; and the lack of it, sooner or later, money loss. The subjective value is far higher, by far the more permanent; but money value is inseparable from the affairs of life; to ignore it would be moonshine.
— Louis Sullivan

As previous chapters have emphasized, Manhattan’s Seventeenth Ward is characterized by its historic, nineteenth-century building stock, much of it constructed and designed by foreign-born practitioners to house fellow immigrants and their families. Primarily a German enclave, the neighborhood eventually surrendered most of its German-American residents by 1900. Nevertheless, its abundant tenement dwellings continued to provide affordable, entry-level housing for a diversity of ethnic and occupational groups for decades. But, beginning in the nineteenth century, reform advocates and policy makers identified tenement districts such as this one — and by association their inhabitants — as grave threats to the health, safety, and welfare of the entire urban realm. Several recent scholars have re-examined these early

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5 This topic has been fertile ground for recent scholarship and is addressed at length in Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1795-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Andrew S. Dolkart, *Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street* (Santa Fe: Center for American Places, 2006); and Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis*
municipal efforts to address the “tenement problem” as well as the later federally supported policies of slum clearance during the 1930s and postwar urban renewal, all which advocated large-scale demolition of existing dwellings and the construction of new housing.6

A result of decades of reform informed by environmentally deterministic thought, the 1937 Housing Act defined “slums” as those residential areas which, “by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health, or morals.”7 Slums were often conflated with areas of blight, and the eradication of the slum became a locus of housing policy for officials and reformers at all levels of government from local to federal. The Lower East Side, of which the Seventeenth Ward was then considered to be a part, became a primary focus of redevelopment efforts by the late 1920s and 1930s.8 This period saw the area’s historically dense population decline by over fifty percent to 250,000, largely a result of the demolition of low-income housing stock and the availability of newer and better quality residential districts that were being constructed in the outer boroughs and were linked to Manhattan by an ever-expanding transportation network of subways, bridges, tunnels, and roadways.9

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7 United States National Housing Act of 1937, 1st Session, Chapter 896, 50 Stat. 888, enacted Sept. 1, 1937, Sec. 2.3.

8 Other clearance projects during the 1920s and 1930s in the Lower East Side include the widening of Allen Street (1931), the creation of Sarah Delano Roosevelt Park (1929-34), and the First Houses (1935-36).

9 Page, 100-101.
The Depression led real estate developers and housing reformers to collaborate, facilitating urban transformations that linked the promotion of civic welfare with private interests that wished to find new ways to maximize profits at the expense of the working classes in areas with declining rents. Low-income housing was increasingly demolished and replaced with dwellings for more affluent residents. Fresh from his development of Tudor City, real estate mogul Fred F. French aptly demonstrated how slum clearance could be profitable with the erection of Knickerbocker Village in 1934.10 (Figures 3.2-3) Its average rent of $12.50 per room was out of range for many of the families in the neighborhood.11 Only three households displaced by the project moved into the new development and eighty-six percent of the families that had lived on the site relocated to adjoining blocks.12 Although the Reconstruction Finance Corporation limited profits from Knickerbocker Village to seven percent, French breezily characterized the development as a successful, profitable venture and ignored the social costs of slum clearance for existing residents: “Our company,” he said, “strangely enough, was the first business organization to recognize that profits could be earned negatively as well as positively in New York real estate—not only by constructing new buildings but by destroying, at the same time, whole areas of disgraceful and disgusting sores.”13

This trend was epitomized by a project of unprecedented scale, the creation of Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village, which bounded the Seventeen Ward at East Fourteenth Street.14

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10 Ibid. See also Christopher Mele, Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 97.

11 Landmarks Preservation Commission, First Houses designation report, LP-0876 (November 12, 1974).


13 “Housing in Lower Manhattan,” an address by Fred F. French at the Department of Economics and Social Institutions, Princeton University, April 24, 1934 (Princeton: Princeton University, 1934), 8. French’s company was paid $340,000 for the demolition alone. See Page, c.f. 90, 274. See also box 9, folders 1-3, Fred F. French Company Records, 1902-1966, New York Public Library.

14 For an excellent and authoritative history of Stuyvesant Town, see Samuel Zipp, Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73-156.
Financed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and begun in 1947 in the midst of the postwar housing shortage, the development subsumed twenty-five city blocks within its enormous footprint. On the site prior to redevelopment, approximately 3,400 families were housed in over four hundred residential buildings, seventy-five percent of which were constructed prior to 1900.\footnote{Zipp, 85.}

\textbf{(Figure 3.4-5)} In a promotional booklet distributed to Stuyvesant Town residents after the project was completed, the historic neighborhood was described as “a dirty and unsightly tangle of tenements” that had “slowly settled into obsolescence.”\footnote{Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, \textit{Stuyvesant Town: This Is Your Home} (New York: Metropolitan Life, 1952), 4–5. Quoted in Zipp, 91.}

These private efforts were heavily subsidized by municipal tax breaks and land acquired by the city through eminent domain. In fact, New York State’s 1942 Redevelopment Companies Law, which enabled insurance companies and other financial institutions to invest in or found limited liability companies for the purposes of slum clearance, was passed specifically to facilitate the Met Life project and was personally shepherded through the legislative process by Robert Moses, influential chairman of the Slum Clearance Committee.\footnote{Zipp, 80–82.} A survey conducted by the Community Service Society in 1945 revealed that no more than three percent of the prior inhabitants would be able to afford to live in Stuyvesant Town and only about twenty-two percent of them would be eligible for public housing. In total, about 2,250 families were displaced by the development, which provoked controversy and disagreement about the efficacy and ethicality of urban renewal policies amongst urban planners, housing reformers, municipal officials, and the general public citywide.\footnote{Zipp, 99–101.}
Postwar Federal Housing Policy

As historian Gwendolyn Wright observes, the federal Housing Act of 1949 did not respond to the postwar housing shortage by providing low-income dwellings, but rather by facilitating the transformation of “blighted” urban areas into municipal tax streams through new construction. Title I of the act authorized the federal government to subsidize up to two-thirds of the cost of slum clearance and redevelopment. Expanded six years later by the Urban Renewal Act, the new laws enabled the clearance of land with no requirement or provision for providing suitable housing that was affordable to existing inhabitants.¹⁹ Sociologist Peter Marris described the economic aims of the postwar urban policies quite bluntly: “To meet the needs of city government and commerce, urban renewal has to attract back into the city those who will provide the highest revenue and the best custom, and revive the prestige of urban life.”²⁰

This attitude belies the fact that New York’s tenement districts were a vital area of habitation and commerce for the city’s working classes. As the urban economy depended on low-wage work, immigrant and poorer neighborhoods served a vital function in connecting individuals to the labor market. While often lacking in modern amenities, most dwellings did offer affordable places to live within close proximity to factories and other places of employment, and doubled as places of work in addition to habitation.²¹ Although insufficient, the city’s aging tenement stock was the speculative market’s provision for housing in a broader environment that hampered the construction of public housing and often restricted the free movement of ethnic and racial

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minorities throughout a city where redlining and racial discrimination in the housing market was commonplace.

The federal urban renewal program fell far short of expectations, and private interests avidly exploited its shortcomings. Areas defined as “slums” could receive federal funds to replace them with commercial developments, cultural and institutional centers, or high-income residential districts. As historian Jon C. Teaford notes, critics claimed that the program actually unduly burdened those that it targeted for assistance: “In their opinion, Title I had become a welfare program for the wealthy, a means of enriching private developers and downtown property owners. Too often the victims of redevelopment were the poor, because slum clearance meant removing them for the benefit of the rich and powerful.”22 Issues of race were often central to the formation of urban renewal policies and allowed the use of federal funds to reinforce segregation and discrimination against and disproportionate displacement of ethnic minorities and people of color.23

**Urban Renewal and the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance**

Housing is big business.
— Aaron Wildavsky24

In 1948, Robert Moses persuaded the Irish-born Mayor of New York City, William O’Dwyer, to establish a Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance (CSC). Chaired by Moses himself, the committee was effectively independent of existing municipal agencies, including the City Planning Commission. Moses was able to dominate policy-making with regards to urban renewal and social

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22 Teaford, 445-46.
housing for the fourteen years that he led the CSC, and enforced his authority and influence by controlling the approval and distribution of Title I funding for clearance projects to private developers. The planning process for these projects was lengthy and secretive, with little provision for public comment or input. During his tenure, New York City received $34 million in federal urban renewal monies, more than any other municipality, and had begun 838 Title I projects by 1960.

By the mid-1950s, there was an emergent public resistance to the CSC’s approach to redevelopment, which too often resulted in massive clearances and relocations. New York State Assemblyman Samuel Spiegel interviewed tenants and sympathetically related their perspective in his book, The Forgotten Man in Housing, in 1959. Residents, he wrote, “deeply resent[ed] the treatment afforded them. They are distressed at the thought of severing their communal and social ties.” Remarking upon the mounting opposition to slum clearance after the development of the new center for the performing arts at Lincoln Square, Spiegel cautioned that the city’s harsh and unsympathetic treatment of site residents required a different and more humane approach:

“[Tenants] cannot be easily placated. They will not passively submit to eviction merely because someone cries ‘Make way for Progress.’ Is this progress?” (Figure 3.6) Spiegel’s plea reminds us how so many of the privileges of modern life—Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in this case—were historically secured in the postwar era along lines demarcated by race and class.


27 Spiegel also provided legal counsel to tenants through the Lower East Side Housing Clinic. See Samuel A. Spiegel, *The Forgotten Man in Housing* (New York: Loder Appeal Press, 1959); 4, 15–16. See also Zipp, 355.

28 Spiegel, 6.

The Invention of “Cooper Square”

In 1956, the CSC set forth a plan calling for the clearance of a twelve-block area in Manhattan’s former Seventeen Ward, bounded by Delancey Street, East Ninth Street, the Bowery, and Second Avenue. As historian Marci Reaven writes, “Up until this point, these blocks had shared no special links with each other outside of proximity and whatever social ties that residents, businesses, and local institutions had forged.”\(^{30}\) She credits Moses with affixing the appellation of “Cooper Square” to the area, after Cooper Union, the venerable technical institution whose proposed expansion he saw as a key local partner in the redevelopment of the neighborhood.\(^{31}\) The original Title-I plan proposed to raze much of the site and to replace existing buildings with 2,900 middle-income cooperative units that were sponsored by the United Housing Federation, Abraham Kazan’s union-affiliated organization that had already built a number of similar projects on the Lower East Side, including Corlears Hook and Seward Park.\(^{32}\) The reclamation of the dense tenement district was projected to cost over $73 million, the second most expensive clearance scheme aside from Lincoln Square, which was also then in the works.\(^{33}\) The Cooper Square initiative proposed to displace “2,400 tenants, 450 furnished room occupants, 4,000 beds used by homeless men and over 500 businesses.”\(^{34}\) Old- and pre-law tenements designed or built by German immigrants compromised the overwhelming majority of the housing stock, as well as Federal-style row houses that had been converted into multi-unit dwellings in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^{35}\)

\(^{30}\) Reaven, 60-61.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.


\(^{33}\) Reaven, 71. For an excellent and thorough history of the redevelopment of Lincoln Square, see Zipp, 157-252.

\(^{34}\) Cooper Square Community Development Committee and Businessmen’s Association, An Alternate Plan for Cooper Square (1961), 32-33.

\(^{35}\) Ninety-five percent of the 11,900 housing units were constructed prior to 1900, most being walk-up tenements. City of New York City Planning Commission, Cooper Square Area Urban Renewal Designation (December 10, 1963), 4
According to a report by the site’s relocation surveyor, eighty percent of the area’s residents, about 2,158 households, had an annual income of less than $5,000. The report also indicated that the racial distribution of the neighborhood was eighty-five percent white, ten percent African-American, 1.5% Puerto-Rican, and 3.5% “other.” The City’s Planning Commission provided a bit more detail about the evolving character of the neighborhood’s inhabitants, noting that:

[A] tremendous diversity exists among its... people as testified by churches, clubs, and businesses whose names are written in Greek, German, Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish, Italian, and Chinese, as well as Spanish — the original language of the more recent arrivals from Puerto Rico. Another relatively new group in the area includes the “East Villagers” — an expanding population of writers, artists, students, musicians, and actors—many of whom live in brownstones and tenements that have been privately converted into small apartments with new equipment at high rents.  

In her chronology of the Cooper Square urban renewal project, Marci Reaven describes the site plan designed by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill and its proposed vision for reshaping the neighborhood. (Figure 3.7) Cooper Union would be the institutional anchor at the area’s northern edge: Saint Mark’s Place between Second and Third Avenues would be cleared in order to allow the construction of two new educational buildings for the university and a small park. Select architecturally distinct remnants of the area’s German heritage, the existing Ottendorfer Library and Deutsches Dispensary at Second Avenue and East Ninth Street would be preserved; as well, the block between East Sixth and East Seventh Streets with its theater, churches, and institutional buildings was also considered for possible retention. South of East Sixth Street, except for the 1830 New York Marble Cemetery, the plan called for the total replacement of all extant buildings with new construction. In maximum contrast to tenement life, twelve twenty-six-story apartment buildings were designed to provide accommodations for middle-income residents and

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36 Helmsley-Spear, Inc. relocation survey report. Quoted in Reaven, 76-77.
37 City of New York City Planning Commission, Cooper Square Area Urban Renewal Designation (December 10, 1963), 4.
harshly break with the low-scale urban context of the surrounding blocks.\textsuperscript{38} Much like the Stuyvesant Town complex four blocks to the northeast, this plan, Teaford contends, manifest a philosophy to “obliterate the urban past and replace it with something better. For most urban renewal planners, there was no reason to confirm to the urban context. That context was the very thing that they were trying to destroy.”\textsuperscript{39}

**Citizen Opposition to the Cooper Square Plan**

In 1959, tenant activists from all across the city organized to form the Metropolitan Council on Housing and were united by their common opposition to the conventional ideology of urban renewal.\textsuperscript{40} The same year, University Settlement organizer Frances Goldin and Thelma Burdick, the director of the Church of All Nations Neighborhood House, led a small group of citizens to organize the Cooper Square Community Development Committee (Cooper Square Committee) to represent the interests of the local individuals whose homes and businesses were threatened with demolition by the slum clearance plan.\textsuperscript{41} Historian Marci Reaven describes the formation of the committee and its activities in great detail. In her estimation, by the time that the community group had met for the first time, “the renewal plan was almost a fait accompli”—developers and other partners were already on board, site plans and surveys were complete, and only three months remained until the Board of Estimate would vote on whether to approve the formal request for federal funds. “Although there had been occasional newspaper coverage of the Cooper Square plan,” she writes, “no official mechanism existed to inform or involve citizens in such land-use decision-making.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38} Reaven, 77-80.
\textsuperscript{39} Teaford, 456.
\textsuperscript{40} Gold, 116. Zipp, 355.
\textsuperscript{41} Reaven, 84. Leventhal, 512.
\textsuperscript{42} Reaven, 85.
The original leaders of the Cooper Square Committee were all white, generally middle-class, left-leaning individuals with a history of community organizing. Later participants were more ethnically mixed and reflected the ethnic and class diversity of the neighborhood. In addition to Goldin and Burdick, early members who played a central role included artist Helen DeMott, historian Staughton Lynd, housing advocate Esther Rand, and urban planner Walter Thabit, a protégé of the urbanist and housing expert Charles Abrams, who would also form an affiliation with the group.  

The group found many characteristics of the neighborhood to valorize and celebrate, despite the area’s perceived deficits. As we know, the area had been the historic center of Kleindeutschland and contained a rich, built heritage that reflected the German’s mid-nineteenth-century influence, which included churches, better quality multi-unit dwellings, and attractive social clubs and institutions, particularly in comparison to the tenement districts south of Houston Street. Indeed, before the Depression scuttled their plans, real estate developers like Samuel Ageloff, Saul Birns, and Fred F. French envisioned this area of the Lower East Side as being the “hub of lower civic and financial districts,” a wealthy enclave for respectable elites within walking distance of Lower Manhattan’s white-collar offices. The proposed renewal area also contained many cultural assets of long standing that were threatened, such as McSorley’s Bar on East Seventh Street, the Five Spot jazz club on Cooper Square, and the Church of All Nations on Saint Mark’s Place, as well as a burgeoning arts scene. Many of the local commercial establishments had been community fixtures for decades — one survey indicated that fifty percent had been in business for over twenty years.

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44 Quoted in Wasserman, 101. See also Wasserman, 99-102.
45 Reaven, 94-95.
The Cooper Square Committee expressed especial concern over the prospect of tenant relocation, demanding that any renewal plan make provisions for re-housing all inhabitants within the new development. The committee would eventually advocate for the retention and rehabilitation of the vast majority of the existing residential building stock, recognizing its value and affordability for the area’s marginalized and vulnerable citizens. Furthermore, combining an interest in both the material and immaterial markers of community cohesion, the committee privileged the area’s existing social networks and relationships. As Walter Thabit would later explain at a City Planning Commission hearing in 1963:

A renewal effort has to be conceived as a process of building on the inherent social and economic values of a local community. ... While there is no such thing as a definable neighborhood on the Lower East Side, there are communities of interest, both large and small. There are ethnic, social, cultural and economic associations and dependencies. And there are the individual preferences through which these associations and dependencies are sustained and nurtured — even in the context of a slum community in which people live and do business at least partly because they cannot afford to do it elsewhere.

After the Cooper Square Committee began to register its objections with various city agencies, it was suggested that the committee members formulate their own plan for the redevelopment of the area. In October 1959, they drafted a statement that outlined their views and charged that the city’s proposal would result in a socially fragmented neighborhood that was divided by class and ethnicity: “The Slum Clearance Committee Chairman has stated that it is not possible to conduct a slum clearance program without relocating the site tenants. [We] respectfully suggest that the S.C.C. should place its emphasis on slum clearance, not people clearance.” But the further demand of the citizens’ group suggested that resistance to urban renewal had taken a new turn: “[We have] an alternate plan which would make new housing available before a single tenant is removed from his present apartment, a plan which would provide varied rentals, rehabilitation of

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46 Reaven, 106-07.  
47 Quoted in Gold, 201.  
48 Leventhal, 513.
houses that need improvements and retention of businessmen. Thus we could keep our integrated community intact, yet welcome others wishing to move into our area.”

The activity of the Cooper Square Committee was a local expression of a larger movement that rejected the imposed solutions of municipal planners and was a turn towards increased citizen participation in the urban planning process and its institutional shift toward decentralization. In many ways, the actions of citizens’ groups like Cooper Square embodied Henri Lefebvre’s call for the socialist transformation of planning, which he put forth in *Le Droit à la ville*, his 1968 essay on spatial justice. “Only the taking in charge by the working class of planning and its political agenda,” he wrote, “can profoundly modify social life and open another era… Until then transformations remain superficial[.]”

Citizen protest, dissent within professional planning circles, and accusations of corruption and financial mismanagement at the CSC were no boon to proponents of urban renewal. As historian Hillary Ballon writes, “[Moses’s] antidemocratic methods and indifference to community values had incited a citizen planning movement that he did not comprehend and could not accommodate.” By 1959, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. began to see Robert Moses and the slum clearance policies that his office promoted as political liabilities. Moses was offered the presidency of the 1964 World’s Fair, and, with his removal, in May 1960, the New York State Legislature approved the creation of a Housing and Redevelopment Board (HRB) that made the CSC obsolete.

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49 Quoted in Reaven, 108-09.
51 Ballon, 94.
An Alternate Plan for Cooper Square

The newly appointed HRB set aside the existing renewal plan for Cooper Square in 1960, and, within a year, it received a document that outlined the Cooper Square community’s own ideas about the future development of the neighborhood. Prepared by Walter Thabit, the Alternate Plan for Cooper Square was one of the earliest postwar development plans to originate from ordinary citizens and would anticipate the creation of citizen-led community districts in New York City in 1965. (Figure 3.8) The product of numerous community meetings, surveys, and research, the Alternate Plan vigorously advocated against the forced removal and relocation of existing residents:

All the site tenants want better housing, but they are bitterly opposed to a project which would displace them from the site. They resent the interference that they are not fit to live with because they are poor, that they must get out of their community because middle-income housing is so important to the future of the City of New York, that they are expendable pawns in the housing experiments of the intelligentsia. … The Cooper Square resident agrees that the area needs renewal, but he believes that he should benefit from the improvement, not be the one to suffer from it. … Under the banner of ‘public purpose’, the site tenant’s right to housing has been taken away and given to a family with a higher income. This interpretation of ‘public purpose’ is a nefarious perversion of the law. … Site tenants have the indisputable priority to the new housing on sites from which they are displaced, and it the city’s responsibility to see that this housing is provided for them at rents they can afford.54

Published in the same year as The Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs, Thabit’s report highlights similar ideas about the social cohesion embedded within neighborhood networks, or, as Jacobs described them, the “city’s irreplaceable social capital.”55

The Alternate Plan proposed a redevelopment strategy that would provide racially integrated housing and amenities for a diversity of residents from a range of incomes and backgrounds, in

53 Reaven; 23, 206–07. See also Citizens Union and Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council of New York City, A Program for Community Districts (June 1964).
54 Cooper Square Development Committee and Businessmen’s Association, An Alternate Plan for Cooper Square (New York: Cooper Square Development Committee and Businessmen’s Association, 1961), 4–5.
direct opposition to the ideology that drove projects like Stuyvesant Town and Lincoln Square. Redevelopment was planned in phases to avoid displacement. The construction of 1,440 new housing units would begin on vacant land and later proceed on six blocks proposed for clearance between East Fifth and Stanton Streets. The historic housing stock on the remaining six blocks — fifty-two percent of the dwelling units in the area — was targeted for preservation and rehabilitation: “[T]he housing shortage mitigates against the indiscriminate demolition of stable—though substandard—tenement areas.”  

The “vital community elements” that Thabit defined as worthy of retention in the *Alternate Place* were all characteristics established by the German-American community in the nineteenth century: the density of affordable housing units; community diversity in terms of class and ethnicity; existing community facilities, including social clubs and meeting spaces; an “integrated” mix of businesses and residences; and a “visually and socially satisfying” neighborhood. The plan particularly called out the Second Avenue shopping district for exhibiting “a great deal of resiliency and stability if not prosperity.” Although the Cooper Square Committee did not explicitly value the historic character of the urban fabric as such, it found meaning in the social and economic values inherent in the buildings created by German-America. The committee based their argument on utility and the experiential qualities that the buildings made possible as places of habitation, connection, and cohesion rather than on the historical or aesthetic characteristics of the built environment: “For loss of a few members, a social club or meeting room will close; for loss of a few dozen, a church or store can be lost. When one member of a family moves, other[s] may no longer stay. The whole social fabric is liable to be destroyed.”

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56 *Alternate Plan*, 17–18.  
57 Ibid, 6–8.  
58 Ibid, 19.  
59 Ibid, 14.
The influx of artists into the neighborhood received special attention, as they were seen as providing “a boost to the whole district” and “spurring the revitalization” of the neighborhood.\(^6\)

The plan suggested a modest artists’ housing program that included both new construction as well as a loft-conversion program for existing commercial and non-residential buildings.\(^6\) The Cooper Square Committee would anticipate later provisions to provide special incentives for non-profit arts organizations in the area and the creation of the city’s first cultural arts district, recommending the inclusion of artists’ housing in their plan and supporting the conversion of commercial lofts to residential use for artists.\(^6\)

The citizens’ plan represented a considerable investment in private initiative and resources that did not go unnoticed. City Planning Commission chairman James Felt admired the cause of the Cooper Square Committee and spoke in support of the plan at an October 1961 press conference.\(^6\) Felt would later be “instrumental in changing the focus of the city’s urban renewal program from demolition to preservation and rehabilitation.” Prominent urbanist Charles Abrams commented approvingly on the social cohesion and resiliency that the plan would foster, rooted as it was in the neighborhood’s historic fabric: “The plan calls for the capture of existing social values, values which cannot be replaced by the monumentality characteristic of city building in the last 25 years.”\(^6\)

\(^{60}\) Ibid, 20.
\(^{61}\) Ibid, 39-40.
\(^{62}\) Ibid, 37-40.
\(^{63}\) Reaven, 208.
\(^{65}\) Quoted in Reaven, 209.
The City Planning Commission Responds: Urban Renewal through Rehabilitation

The *Alternate Plan* played a major role in helping to spur municipal agencies to rethink their approaches to urban policy. Cooper Square was included within the City Planning Commission’s 1962-63 urban renewal study program, which advocated a more humane approach to thinking about neighborhood improvement and redevelopment. First of all, in response to the advocacy of groups like the Cooper Square Committee, it articulated “citizen-participation” as an “inherent” element in the methodology of any new program, allowing local voices to play a greater role within the municipal planning process. And secondly, it placed “great emphasis on the rehabilitation and conservation of existing housing,” which were presumed to be less costly than new construction, obviated the unnecessary relocation of residents, and avoided the simmering “controversy… [over] the destruction of residences still fit for use.”

Based on the study, the City Planning Commission published its recommendations for urban renewal designation for the Cooper Square area at the end of the following year. It acknowledged the *Alternate Plan*, but, in the end, chose not to implement it as the neighborhood group envisioned. *(Figure 3.9)* Against the protests of the Cooper Square Committee, the City Planning Commission nearly doubled the proposed renewal area, extending it north to East Fourteenth Street and east to First Avenue as far south as Houston Street. Akin to the previous plans, it recommended the clearance of the blocks along the Bowery south of East Fourth Street to Delancey Street and their replacement by a mixture of middle-income and public housing. In contrast, however, the report also advocated for the complete rehabilitation of the buildings on all of the remaining twenty-three blocks, some eighty-five percent of the area’s structures and dwellings. The report defined “rehabilitation,” a new and unproven method of revitalization, as

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“the substantial improvement of existing structures in deteriorating areas for the benefit of the people now living in these areas.” A proposed expansion of the city’s tax abatement and loan programs would augment this comprehensive rehabilitation proposal, which would be available for more varied types of interventions and potentially accessible to a larger pool of recipients. The City Planning Commission also recommended the development of a large-scale, specialized rehabilitation “industry” in New York that could service this and other neighborhoods targeted for improvement, and, as well, serve as a vehicle for creating jobs within the building and construction trades.

In addition, the city’s language of pluralism and public interest emphasized many of the intangible characteristics of the Cooper Square area as being worthy of preservation, including its “tremendous diversity” and its historical associations as a “melting pot” for countless generations of immigrants. The report also explicitly repudiated the destruction of vernacular landmarks that were of a more social or cultural significance. So, for example, “the Commission would not favor any proposal that would call for … the destruction of colorful local establishments such as McSorley’s.” And, moreover, the City Planning Commission anticipated the passage of the 1965 Landmarks Law and optimistically encouraged preservation-oriented planning in its recommendation that “close liaison be established” between the newly formed New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and the HRB in order to ensure the “historic or esthetic preservation of appropriate structures or places in the Cooper Square Area.”

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68 Ibid, 1.
69 Ibid, 6.
70 Ibid, 3-4.
71 Ibid, 10.
72 Ibid, 12.
Despite the city’s concessions, the Cooper Square Committee remained cautious about the municipal plans for fear of rehabilitation-caused evictions without tenant protections, and, one suspects, the City Planning Commission’s refusal to enter into direct negotiations. The committee mounted a tenement rehabilitation study in 1963–64 as an experiment in how best to manage such a program and ensure that the needs of existing tenants were met.\textsuperscript{73} Shortly after his election in 1966, however, Mayor John Lindsay cancelled the request for federal funds to initiate the Cooper Square urban renewal program. While Lindsay was under pressure from the committee to alter the city’s proposal, as Marci Reaven observes, the mayor’s action was a response to more pressing concerns: “He also may have found the committee’s objection a convenient reason to jettison a low priority and troublesome project to focus, instead, on areas where riots had occurred and might again.”\textsuperscript{74} In February 1970, the committee forced a vote by the Board of Estimate on the Alternate Plan and it was adopted as the official plan for the renewal area. In the end, however, over the course of the next decades, internal struggles, shifting municipal and federal priorities, and a lack of funding—in addition to New York City’s deepening fiscal crisis—all collaborated to forestall any immediate redevelopment of Cooper Square.

\textbf{Progressive Community Planning in the East Village}

The tenant activism that produced the Cooper Square Committee ensured the preservation of the renewal area’s historic building stock and was a watershed moment that articulated a “humanistic vision” of modern urbanism.\textsuperscript{75} The committee has been a major advocate for affordable housing for over three decades, and, indeed, remains an active force for social justice in the neighborhood. It is recognized as a pioneer in community-based planning and tenant organization and has served as an incubator for coalitions and other neighborhood groups that support housing for lower-income

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Reaven, 274.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Reaven, 248.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Reaven, 359–60.
\end{itemize}
families, seniors, and the homeless. Its activity helped to facilitate the construction of the Thelma Burdick Apartments, which was financed through rental subsidies provided by the federal Section 8 program. Designed by architect Roger Cumming, the development opened in 1985 and contains 146 dwelling units for low-income residents.

In 1990, Mayor David Dinkins signed an agreement with the Cooper Square Committee that gave it the responsibility to rehabilitate municipally owned residential properties in the neighborhood with financial support from the city’s capital budget. The following year, the committee founded the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association (MHA), which, as of 2012, manages twenty-two buildings with over 350 individual housing units that are reserved for households that make less than fifty percent of the area’s median income. While the MHA owns and administers the buildings, the Cooper Square Community Land Trust owns the land upon which they sit and ensures that the dwellings remain affordable for low-income residents in perpetuity, thereby helping to preserve income and racial diversity in an increasing gentrifying East Village. Urban planner and advocate of progressive community planning Thomas Agnotti characterizes the land trust as “one of the strongest legal instruments for the preservation of affordable, low-income housing” in the nation.

New York City’s First Cultural District: The Fourth Street Arts Block

Although many of the neighborhood’s nineteen-century German voluntary organizations moved uptown or to the suburbs along with their members, the structures that they built remained. The

76 For example, the Cooper Square Committee organized the Bowery Residents Committee, the Good Food Co-op, Third Avenue Artists, the tenant rights organization Good Old Lower East Side, and several tenant associations.
78 Angotti, 121–22.
79 Ibid.
vocal advocacy of the Cooper Square Committee ensured the survival of this built heritage in the East Village, and facilitated the transformation of many former German-American Vereine for new tenants and uses. Alex Harsley’s photograph from the early 1980’s captures this juxtaposition in its depiction of a Cooper Square banner stretched across East Fourth Street, between the Bowery and Second Avenue, staking a claim to the public realm and framing a view of German social clubs in the distance, including the former New York Turn Verein building. (Figure 3.10) The committee and the office of City Councilmember Margarita Lopez collaborated in 2000 to create a special Urban Development Action Area on this block of East Fourth Street that led to the creation of the city’s first official cultural district and ensured the long-term viability of much nineteen-century urban fabric.\(^8\)

Many buildings on the block came into municipal ownership through eminent domain as part of the city’s urban renewal plan. The street came to serve as an informal (albeit unintended) arts incubator as the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club and the Millennium Film workshop, among other arts organizations, were able to secure month-by-month leases from the city on otherwise vacant buildings beginning in the late 1960s, and, over time, East Fourth Street developed into a vibrant arts corridor. The Fourth Arts Block (FAB) was founded in 2001 in order to forestall the potential loss of these buildings and to develop a sustainable, long-term plan for the now thriving arts district that had developed in the former German-American social halls and institutions. Finally in 2004, the city created the first municipal cultural district when it sold eight buildings for a token sum to non-profit organizations with the stipulation that they continue their non-profit cultural use in perpetuity. All of the buildings were rehabilitated and renovated with a combination of public and private funds to house theatrical, dance, and other arts organizations.

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\(^8\) The only other cultural district in New York City is the BAM Cultural District in Brooklyn. As of 2012, there is no official policy or set of benefits or restrictions for cultural districts.
HPD and FAB liaised closely with the cultural tenants to develop business plans and fundraising strategies in order to ensure the success and stability of the new ownership agreements.\footnote{Reaven, 360. City Planning Commission, East Fourth Street Cultural District land use review application, C040314 HAM (August 11, 2004).}

Among the rehabilitated structures is 62 East Fourth Street, which was built as a hotel in 1889 and later became the home of the German musical union Astoria Hall. It is now home to the Rod Rodgers Dance Company and the Duo Multicultural Arts Center. The former Aschenbrodel Verein at 74 East Fourth Street houses the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, while the New York Turnverein building at 66–68 East Fourth Street contains the theatrical company’s workshop and offices. As of 2012, the Cooper Square Committee has been the recipient of $250,000 in funds from the New York State Main Street program for facade renovations, building upgrades, and streetscape improvements for the historic structures on the East Fourth Street block.\footnote{Cooper Square Committee website, accessed, March 18, 2012: http://www.cooperquare.org/who-we-are/historical-accomplishments}

\section*{Conclusions}

Because of its rich past, the historic fabric within the Seventeen Ward has received much attention from historic preservationists in recent years. The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation (GVSHP) has long stewarded the neighborhood’s heritage and played a major role in advocating for contextual rezoning to preserve the character and scale of one of New York’s most distinctive neighborhoods.\footnote{Letter from Andrew Berman to Amanda Burden date November 17, 2005. Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation (GVSHP).} After many years of negotiation with an array of local stakeholders, the Department of City Planning announced the rezoning of 110 blocks in the East Village and the Lower East Side to impose lower height limits and densities to ensure that new development would be in keeping with the existing neighborhood. Additionally, the Department introduced
provisions for inclusionary housing to encourage the expansion of affordable housing stock and retain the socio-economic mix of area residents.  

Along with the Historic Districts Council, the Neighborhood Preservation Center, and the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative, the GVSHP has also supported efforts to designate new individual landmarks and historic districts within the East Village. It played a crucial role in landmarking Webster Hall and completed a survey of blocks between the Bowery and Tompkins Square Park in order to more effectively advocate for landmark protections. This activity culminated in the designation of the East Tenth Street Historic District on the north side of Tompkins Square Park in January 2012, and, the calendaring of a vote in June 2012 to consider 300 additional buildings in a new East Village/Lower East Side Historic District.

During the nineteenth century, German immigrant architects and builders completely transformed the physical, social, and experiential qualities of New York City’s Seventeenth Ward, having far-reaching consequences beyond any original intentions. The dense tenement districts, social clubs, and other structures that they designed and built left an enduring stamp on the image and form of the modern city. The preponderance of well-constructed, adaptable structures, resilient and inexpensive to maintain, provided the infrastructure for working-class communities to thrive in the neighborhood well after the German-Americans departed from Kleindeutschland. These dwellings and meeting halls provided the physical conditions for the formation and development of a cohesive and active community so entrenched that it had the capacity, self-awareness, and resources to advocate for political action when threaten by postwar slum clearance and urban

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85 New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Webster Hall and Annex Designation Report, LP-2273 (March 18, 2008).
86 New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, East Tenth Street Historic District Designation Report, LP-2492 (January 17, 2012).
renewal. Created by German-America, the elements that the Cooper Square Committee fought to perpetuate and preserve helped to inspire an alternative vision of urban life that valued human relationships, solidarity, and belonging. The citizens of the Cooper Square Committee brought a new set of perspectives to bear on their recommendations for urban improvement and initiated successful, creative approaches for developing new policy tools to preserve the tangible and intangible aspects of neighborhood character and advocate for positive social change. The committee's activity has profound implications for historic preservationist practitioners, who would do well to be mindful of their example as they strive to holistically and meaningfully connect people to the past and to one another — and to engage with the values and aspirations that should inform our future.
Figure 3.1: Jesse Tarbox Beals, Family in an airshaft (c. 1910); Columbia University Libraries.

Figure 3.2-3: Samuel H. Gottscho, Two views of Knickerbocker Village (1936); Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 3.4: Berenice Abbot, View of the Gas House District before urban renewal (1938); New York Public Library.

Figure 3.5: Aerial view of Stuyvesant Town (1947); Citizens' Housing and Planning Commission.
Figure 3.6: Protest against Lincoln Square urban renewal (1956); Library of Congress.
Figure 3.7: Plan of the Title-I Cooper Square Renewal Area (1959); City Planning Commission, City of New York.
Figure 3.8: Alternate Plan for Cooper Square (1961); Columbia University Libraries.
Figure 3.9: Cooper Square area planning recommendations (1963); City Planning Commission, City of New York.
Figure 3.10: Alex Harsley, Cooper Square banner stretches across East Fourth Street in front of former German-American meeting halls (ca. 1980); Lower East Side Preservation Initiative/Fourth Street Arts Block.
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