Over the last 30 years, Donald Notice, executive director of West Harlem Group Assistance, Inc. (WHGA), has observed three distinct periods in housing in Harlem.

There was the early 1980s. He calls those years the Abandonment Period. Landlords were literally walking away from Harlem properties. Drugs and crime were rising. There was an influx of abandoned houses and buildings that scattered throughout Uptown.

By 1988, Harlem entered what Notice refers to as the Revitalization Period. The federal government became involved. A low-income tax credit was provided in government programs and the private sector began to invest in communities and put equity in affordable housing. Tax abatements from private funders for affordable housing became available and the City of New York made a commitment to revitalize Harlem housing. Mayors Koch, Dinkins and Giuliani put abandoned Harlem buildings in development programs.

Today, Harlem's housing market is in a 21st century Renaissance Period. Affordable housing has changed neighborhoods into desirable areas, evolving into gentrification. High end properties are flourishing and, most times, people other than Harlemites are acquiring ownership.

"We're dealing with the future of affordable housing. The lack of city-owned buildings is the biggest obstacle," explained Notice. “The community did an excellent job. However, we can't get the land cheap anymore.”

Notice joined WGHA in 1992 and became executive director in 1998. He manages the agency's $7 million operation, which has a portfolio of 71 buildings and 12,000 units of affordable housing. Its three subsidiary organizations include two homeless shelters for families and the Oberia D. Dempsey Multi-Service Center, where over 90,000 New Yorkers come for services each month.

In addition, WHGA finds temporary apartments for tenants when a building is being renovated. After renovation, tenants are moved back. The rent is structured for 60 percent of the median area income.

“In 2012, we had 110 units of affordable housing available. We received 30,000 applications,” Notice recalled. “It documented the need for affordable housing in Harlem.”

Through his leadership, WHGA has become a leading community development corporation in New York City. Under his direction, there have been 12 major affordable housing and homeownership projects consisting of 625 affordable housing units totaling over $120 million in construction costs.

Notice has been instrumental in Harlem housing since the 1980s. During that period, he served as Deputy Director at a local Northern Manhattan office of NYC Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). While at HPD he was on the frontline in developing and implementing housing criteria in West Harlem.
A key leader in the negotiation with the Columbia University expansion project, Notice serves as chairman of the West Harlem Local Development Corporation. Now, $100 million will be allocated in funding for housing and program supports for neighbourhood residents. “Some build houses. We deal with issues concerning residents. Some build and leave. To us, social service is the key to maintaining these communities,” explained Notice. “We took 114th Street and changed it one block at a time. Families can send children to college. It gives me a fulfilment to see the community striving... helping people create wealth through home ownership. I love helping people.”
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