



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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NEW PROGRAM TEACHES NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS TO PLAN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES

A few years ago, the site of the old Rheingold brewery was a blight on the Bushwick, Brooklyn, community, a garbage-strewn lot filled with abandoned tires and furniture and polluted from factories that had come and gone. Sick of living next to an environmental hazard, local residents and elected officials began a campaign to devise a better life for the space, partnered with city agencies and international planners, and together hammered out a vision that worked for both the neighborhood's and the city's goals. Today, hundreds of apartments, a park, and a community center fill the remediated brownfield property, serving as a model for how community members can help determine the future of their neighborhoods.

With new development in New York City at historic levels, this is a critical time for community residents across the five boroughs to learn how to create their own neighborhood plans -- before outside developers impose a project on their block. To groom the next generation of citizen urban planners, the Municipal Art Society Planning Center has created the Livable Neighborhoods Program, a demonstration project that breaks down the development process, offering training materials and seminars on everything from community organizing to zoning laws to sustainability to how to create a community plan that elected officials will take seriously.

"We don't want land use decisions to be made in the courts—it's costly and divisive," says MAS Planning Center Director Eve Baron. "We want the planning process to involve all stakeholders from the beginning, before decisions are made."

Noting that the city provides only limited training and resources to community boards, which are charged with making critical planning decisions on behalf of neighborhood residents, Baron adds, "This program is meant to fill in those gaps, and to demonstrate that effective neighborhood planning depends on sufficient resources." Anthony Borrelli, director of Land Use, Planning, and Development at the Manhattan Borough President's Office, facilitated a May 5 workshop and had this to say: "More than anything, I was impressed by the enormous appetite lay folks have for zoning information and knowledge. Land Use 101 and other community development workshops should be an on-going service."

More than 100 New Yorkers, from community board members to city newcomers, are expected to attend the next training session on Saturday, May 19, at Hunter College. Featured speakers

will include planners from Sustainable South Bronx, the Fifth Avenue Committee in Brooklyn, Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development, the Brooklyn Borough President's Office and MAS, discussing issues from how to read an environmental impact statement to how to navigate the city planning process to how to create and preserve affordable housing. Each seminar student will receive a "toolkit" with chapters on community organizing, data collection, 197-a planning, brownfield planning, historic and cultural resources preservation, electronic mapping and the budget process, among other topics.

"This renewed my sense of optimism that you just have to keep trying," said Magda Aboulfadl, enforcement project manager at the Garment Industry Development Corporation, who attended the first training session on May 5. "Even if you write the perfect 197-a and mobilize everybody and get the full support of your elected official, even if you don't know what the outcome of that is, you still have to keep trying."

The Municipal Art Society of New York is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the MAS has worked to enrich the culture, neighborhoods and physical design of New York City. It advocates for excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art. Helping community organizations and neighborhood advocates confront the planning, land use and economic development issues facing their neighborhoods is the core goal of the MAS Planning Center. Through public forums, workshops, publications and one-to-one assistance, the Center tackles neighborhood issues at grassroots and citywide levels. The Livable Neighborhoods Program is funded by the Altman Foundation and the Mizuho USA Foundation of the Mizuho Corporate Bank, with additional support from the Wachovia Foundation, the Bank of America Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation.

WHAT: Livable Neighborhoods Program seminar

WHEN: Saturday, May 19, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

WHERE: Hunter College, 695 Park Ave. (enter at East 68th Street and Lexington Avenue)