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Systems and Strategies
Jane's Walk

On Saturday, May 5th at 1:00 PM, I attended a Jane's Walk hosted by the Municipal Art Society of New York. The walk was called "Richmond Hill North: A Victorian Village in the Center of Queens, NY." Led by William Gati and Helen Day, participants toured Richmond Hill North, a suburban neighborhood that is currently in the process of obtaining Historic District status. Helen Day is the vice president of the Richmond Hill Historical Society, an organization invested in the preservation of the history of this forgotten town in Queens. William Gati is an architect, musician and current resident of Richmond Hill North. Taking into account the documentaries of past Jane's Walks that were presented in class, this walk severely deviated from my anticipations. The majority of the participants were senior citizens and it was certainly more of a neighborhood tour rather than an interactive activist march. Most participants were from Richmond Hill or its surrounding neighborhoods, including Kew Gardens, Forest Hills and Jamaica. Nonetheless, the walk was incredibly informative with the efforts of William Gati, our very talkative and humorous guide.

The walk began in Forest Park at the entrance on Myrtle Avenue and Park Lane South. Participants gathered at the My Buddy Monument at the main passageway of the park, symbolized as the "Memorial Drive." In the vicinity, seventy pine trees were built to commemorate the lives of the Richmond Hill community that were lost in combat during World War One. The standing, over life-sized monument was gifted to the Gold Star Mothers Association of Richmond Hill and Richmond Hill War Memorial Committee in November 1925. The Gold Star Mothers is a non profit organization of mothers who lost children in service to the United States Armed forces. Joseph Pollia's sculpture, *My Buddy*, represents a "doughboy", a term English people used to describe soldiers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The figure contemplates a grave marked by a cross. The sculpture exhibits the inscription, "ERECTED BY THE PEOPLE OF RICHMOND HILL IN MEMORY OF HER MEN WHO SERVED AND DIED IN THE WORLD WAR 1917." on the right side of the pedestal. The Richmond Hill Memorial remains a century later, as it continues to serve as a tangible reminder of the lives lost to the war and in service to this country.

The quiet, forgotten, suburban neighborhood - Richmond Hill has quite a history. The Triangle Hofbrau Hotel, located where Myrtle Avenue meets Jamaica Avenue, has existed for as long as Richmond Hill itself. In 1912, Ernest Ball allegedly wrote the music for "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" in the facility. This area of Richmond Hill held many brothels and was well known as a place for entertainment. Archaeologists believe that certain Indigenous Peoples occupied Southern New York from 4600 B.C to 1000 B.C, suggesting that they named several neighborhoods in Queens and Long Island. The alleged derivative for the Rockaway Peninsula, neighboring Richmond Hill, is the Rockaway Indian Tribe. Richmond Hill itself was named after a town in England. There is a distinct divide in culture in Richmond Hill, much like the contrasting Harlem and Upper East and West sides of New York City that Jane Jacobs speculated about in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

The partition divided the neighborhood into simply South and North Richmond Hill. Richmond Hill North is the predominantly European area. Both tour guides were of assorted European descent and currently reside in the northside of Richmond Hill. On the contrary, Richmond Hill South is made up of a primarily Guyanese and South Asian demographic. During the tour, a pair in a car drove past us bewildered by the ongoing event in their neighborhood. They aggressively labeled Richmond Hill a substandard district and suggested having the tour in a more exquisite area. This was an occurrence that I had anticipated, given the rising issues regarding gentrification in New York City.

Participants were given the option of quickly exploring the ethnic south side or completely focusing on the residential area of northern Richmond Hill. The majority wanted the latter, so it was decided that we receive supreme insight on the suburban, European side of the town. A vast amount of the homes were Queen Anne Victorian style, illustrating the desire to replicate those in England. Queen Anne Victorian style homes were a popular choice in the 1890's because air conditioners did not exist back then; so residents typically slept on porches, a defining quality of this architecture style. Neo Queen Anne Victorian homes exist as well, though they are not sensitive to maintaining complete resemblance to their predecessor. They were of more modern appearance and some did not even have a porch. The homes in Richmond Hill are affordable, especially compared to their surrounding competitors in Forest Hills and Kew Gardens. Gati mentioned that the price disparity was a big factor that prompted him to purchase his home in Richmond Hill, as opposed to its neighbors.

Many houses, due to their massive size and affordability, were purchased by organizations and large families. One residence we visited was purchased by a non-profit organization to house children with disabilities. Richmond Hill homes are a popular choice for Orthodox Jews as well. Gati frequently mentioned the architects Henry Hoggard and Daniel Stage, who designed many of the Victorian homes. In 1890, Henry Hoggard designed the original Victorian house and received a lot of commissions to plan homes in the area. Homes were frequently built, advertised and purchased so many houses are over a century old. In fact, some of the houses are quite evidently old. Many homes revealed peeling frames and cracking paint. Others were well maintained and freshly stuccoed, consequently depriving it of its original detail. We had the pleasure of entering some of the houses, as many of the participants were homeowners in Richmond Hill.

During the tour, our guide Bill Gati showed us his own home. His home was a Spanish colonial architecture, adjacent to the Long Island Rail Road track and close to an abandoned viaduct that previously extended from Jamaica to Montauk. Gati rents the LIRR property for \$150 a year and has a porch next to the tracks, in which he spends a lot of time basking in the sun, reading or playing the saxophone. For the final site, we visited another participants' home which was a craftsman style "gingerbread" architecture. He claimed to have little knowledge regarding the history of the home, but knew that the previous owners were mostly lawyers, doctors and teachers. The house was originally built in 1873, five years after Richmond Hill was established. This was during the housing crash where no one built homes for ten years. Few houses existed and many belonged to gentlemen farms, or independent growers. Allegedly, a preacher from the church of resurrection originally owned the homes in the area and had a home built for his servants so they could make food and bring it over to him.

The tour was very informative and definitely allowed me to grasp content that I would not have randomly come across online or even in passing, despite being a close resident of the area myself. After having designed a walk of my own and going on the walks designed by my classmates, I realized that several aspects could have been improved on in both fields. The Jane's Walk was very informative, much more than any of the walks created in class. In fact, at times I felt that it was a little too informative and did not maintain the interactive integrity of what I believed the walks should possess. Participants did not really interact with the tour guide and it did not seem encouraged either. When some made comments, they were only followed up with a, "Thanks for volunteering." One person spoke at a time, for a long time and it did not seem very structured. Nothing was distributed at the beginning of the walk, unlike our class where we had maps to guide us to our walk. If the guide was unheard, which was a problem amongst many participants, there would not have been a second chance at hearing him. This could have been solved with a handout that contained fundamental information regarding the sites and neighborhood. If I had not been consistently taking notes, I would not have remembered a lot of the information. I suppose it adds to the good qualities of the walk because it kept me active during the tour and I left well informed.

After the walk ended, I spoke with some of the participants and heard their reviews. Sean, a participant from Forest Hills was mainly delighted to have learned new things about an area he did not frequent. He is fairly young compared to the rest of the participants and looking to purchase a home. Though he mentioned that he will most likely not choose a home in Richmond Hill due to its size, he said it was a good experience to be able to see the exterior and interior of the homes. He observed that some of the homes were not very well maintained and were definitely more suitable for larger families. I also spoke with Richard, a fairly old participant. He grew up in and currently resides in Richmond Hill and claimed to have been one of the last people to utilize the now abandoned viaduct. He attended the walk to reminisce about his neighborhood and possibly learn new things. He said his experience was pleasant and was eager to attend another walk led by Gati that was right after the one we went on.

