

John Raskin: the accidental organizer

HOUSING & REAL ESTATE FIRST IN A SERIES

To local legislators, city planners and advocates for low-income communities, it may be hard to remember a time when they didn't know John Raskin. But most only need look back four years: It was 2003 when Raskin joined the 35-year-old social justice organization Housing Conservation Coordinators, fresh out of college, then soon made his presence known during the battle against the proposed Jets stadium at Hudson Yards. Now as the group's organizing director, Raskin seems to be everywhere: at large citywide protests, public hearings, impromptu City Hall press conferences. We caught up with him at the February 9 Congestion Pricing Forum at F.I.T., and made him sit down long enough to talk about housing issues, Chelsea and how he got a taste for organizing.

You get to New York in 2003, fresh out of Harvard, with grandparents who founded a national organization and parents who raised you to want to work for justice. How did HCC become where you did it?
I had written my thesis about civil legal services, and thought I might go to law school, so I was looking for work doing legal services. After I found HCC and its legal clinic on the Internet, I just showed up and said, "Look, can I just intern here?" I then fell in love with the organization and the neighborhood. It was just great—extraordinary really. A great group of people who really cared about each other and the neighborhood.

There is a difference between legal work and organizing. Most people don't even know that it's a skill, that there are training institutes for it. How did you get into it? I didn't realize I was interested. But I wanted to stay, so I kept sticking around; and HCC was looking for an organizer. It was just as the stadium and the big Hudson Yards rezoning fight was really underway. I didn't know anything about organizing. But that's what they needed.

The stadium fight is where you made a name for yourself, so to speak.
That was the most prominent thing we've done. And it was fun. I think the work we are doing now is pretty cool, too, but it was fun to be part of a fight that everyone was paying attention to.

And you won half the battle.

Yeah, we won the stadium battle. And we did get a better housing plan in the rezoning than originally [proposed]. The housing people around the city really understood, and so other elected officials not in our neighborhood supported us on a more aggressive affordable housing plan. We lost on some other issues, like density. We never did figure out how to appeal to the city as a whole on something like that.

After the stadium, my next job was to start the West Side Neighborhood Alliance, a place where people from the neighborhood can make decisions and advocate, not just issue by issue but more long-term for what we think will be better for the neighborhood.

Staying with hot issues for another minute...let's segue to the fight against illegal



Chelsea Now photo by Lawrence Lerner

Community organizer and tenant activist John Raskin

hotels. We [at HCC] are actually working, with some of the tenants, on a way of demonstrating just how much housing we have lost—some of which is designated affordable housing and some of which is market-rate. But nonetheless, it is skewing the housing market if you are taking units off the market to use them for short-term stay.

I don't know for sure yet, but it is quite possible that there are many units taken off the market through short-term stays as we gain in affordable units. There are aggressive things that the mayor is doing to produce new affordable housing, but they're not going to be ultimately successful if we lose the housing we have now.

So much of what you work on comes back to the home-rule thing [since enforcement of rent laws is still controlled by the state]. Is that an issue that you guys work on at all?

It is a big piece of any broader affordable housing advocacy plan. As organizers, we have great influence with the local elected officials in the City of New York. But our power is through their constituents, the renters. We have no ability to go up to state legislators versus urban legislators to ask to get a hearing, because they have no reason to respond to us.

Are housing advocates making a stink about that big picture?

A couple of citywide coalitions, like Housing Here and Now, did some very effective work to get a lot of people on board to push for the same things: home rule and the end of vacancy de-control

[which allows rent-regulated units to convert to market-rate]. We got Governor Spitzer, during the campaign before he was the governor, to agree to work on [housing] in continual way, starting with a bill he introduced to raise the vacancy control level from 2,000 to 2,800 [a bill now stalled in the State Senate].

What do you make of the city's commitment to build 165,000 units of affordable housing? And how do you regard the units being created under the 80/20 program [which provides tax-exempt financing for developers who provide at least 20 percent of apartments to low-income households]?

They would be enormously valuable if they were permanent. But the way it is structured now is that a majority of the units will age out after 20 years or so [or whenever the mortgage on any building is paid off].

We are looking at this in the context of the mayor's plan of 2030, and some of these developments going up now will already have expired by then. An aggressive affordable housing plan is wonderful, but one that doesn't take any sort of permanence into account is not going to integrate neighborhoods long-term. It just pushes the fights off 20 years down the line.

Then there's the question: What is affordable?

The city finds it a lot more difficult to fund to create middle-income housing, so [it] places a great priority on producing middle-income housing in Hell's Kitchen and Clinton and the surrounding neighbor-

hoods.

They have been talking about affordable housing for people making under a hundred thousand dollars a year, but that is so out of the realm most of our members are making. In general most of the units we're producing, especially in this neighborhood, are low-income and targeted to the people we represent.

How important to you and other activists is it to nurture socioeconomic integration in Manhattan, and on the West Side?

I can't speak for other housing advocates, but I [see] a variety of reasons, not the least of which is fairness: letting people stay in the neighborhood that they have helped make safe, that they have helped develop over time. And it is always better to have people interacting with people who aren't of their economic background. But that is an argument that we have to make continually over time.

Who do you think of as allies in City Hall, and in the statehouse?

We work really well with our local electeds. I think we generally consider each other allies. I know they are very appreciative of our organizing work—I think in part because we haven't had major policy disagreements. So generally, as it stands, we are out there pressuring other people to do what [they] already want to do.

The question we usually have for elected officials is whether or not they are interested in doing the work. And one relationship that's particularly solid, in that way, is with [Manhattan Borough President] Scott Stringer. He has been the first to come out in favor of congestion pricing, which we are fighting now as a short-term project. He was with us on the stadium, and he has always been a very good support for affordable housing issues. He has gone so far as to make planners in his office available to us, to work on the community proposal for the P.S. 51 affordable housing site. We now have the administration [promising] us funds, through the Department of Education, for renovations of the site.

What about Mayor Bloomberg? You said you were working with his people on Hudson Yards and West Chelsea?

The mayor has a plan, and the City Council has a different vision for Hudson Yards. I think that there are a lot of ways—though I am not an expert in zoning—in which the mayor's plan is not internally coherent; there is going to end up being a bunch of flaws, even besides the ones that we [have already] identified. I wish they were all things that we could sort out while we at least have some ongoing relationship with the same people in City Planning. [who planned the rezoning]. What I am worried about are all the problems that will surface five years down the line under a new mayor.

There are a couple of things that are frustrating now. It is frustrating that Mayor Bloomberg continues to support the senate Republicans [who oppose home rule and rent-stabilization], despite switching his voter's registration to independent. And it's frustrating that his PlaNYC sustainability plan does not mention housing. It has great transportation planning, and some open-space planning, and some other stuff that could be really valuable. But its housing plan can't get beyond the programs that they're already working with.