John Raskin: the accidental organizer

Housing & Real Estate
FIRST IN A SERIES

To local legislators, city planners and developers, it may be hard to remember a time when they didn’t know John Raskin. But most only knew him back four years. It was 2007 when Raskin joined the 55-year-old social justice organization Housing Conservation Coordination. Fresh out of college, then soon made his presence known during the battle against the proposed 70-story development at Hudson Yards. Now as the group’s organizing director, Raskin seems to be everywhere—especially at citywide meetings, public hearings, impromptu City Hall press conferences. We caught up with him in the February 5 Exemption Pricing Forum at ILT, and made him sit down long enough to talk about housing issues, Chelsea and how he’s a total organizing ninja.

You get to New York in 2007, fresh out of Harvard, with grassroots experience with a national organization and parents who raised you well, but want you to work for Justice. How did HCC become where you did it?

I had written my thesis on 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 thought I’d love 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 or what did you do that I wanted to stay, so I kept sticking around, and then got hired 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 was where you made a name for yourself, so to speak.

That was the most passionate thing we’ve done. And it was fun. I think the work we’re doing now is pretty cool, too, but it was harder to be a 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 that originally (proposed) the rezoning housing people around the city really understood, and so other elected officials are now in our neighborhood-supported us on a more aggressive affordable housing plan. We lost some other issues, like density. We never did figure out how to appeal to the city as a whole on something like that.

You were a citywide coalition director, like Housing Here and Now. Did you ever do something effective to get 70 people on board to push for the same thing. home rule and the end of vacancy de-control.

Community organizer and tenant activist John Raskin

[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 [converting] in a continual manner, starting with a bill he introduced to raise the vacancy cap from 10% to 10% above current levels.

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 as well?

It is a big piece of any broader affordable housing advocacy plan. As organizers, we have a 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 mistake 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 thing. home rule and the end of vacancy de-control.

Then there’s the question: What is affordable?

The city finds it is more difficult to fund a creation of middle-income housing, so it places a great priority on producing affordable income housing in Hell’s Kitchen and Clinton and the surrounding neighborhoods.

They’ve been talking about affordable housing for people making under a hundred dollars a year, but that is not one of the main goals of our members are making. In general, most goal of the units we’re producing, especially in this neighborhood, are low-income and targeted to the people we represent.

How important is it to your organization in the City Hall, and in the statehouse?

We work really well with our local elected officials. I think we generally consider each other allies. I know they see us as very appreciative of our organized work. I don’t think its 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 you are interested in doing the work. And one relationship is particularly strong, in my mind, with (Assemblyman Jonathan) Atwood. He has been the first to come out in favor of congestion pricing, which we are fighting for as a short-term project. He was up with us on the stadium fight. He has always been a very good supporter for affordable housing issues. He’s got some very far-reaching ideas. He’s interested. We’ve worked on the community plan for the P.S. 51 affordable housing. He’s got some ideas about the administration making sure, through the Department of Education, are renovating the site.

What about Mayor Bloomberg? You said you were meeting often with people on the Hudson Yards and West Chelsea?

The mayor has a plan, and the City Council has a different vision for Hudson Yards. I think there are a lot of ways—though I am not an expert in zoning—to make the mayor’s plan (if it is not ultimately altered) to put up an affordable housing stock as a issue. I think the mayor’s plan was already identified. I wish they were all things that we could sort out while we’re 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 isn’t a couple of things that are frustrating now. It’s frustrating that Mayor Bloomberg continues to support the same Republicans (who oppose rent regulations) and some open space, and some open space planning, and some other stuff that could be really valuable. But his housing plan can’t get beyond the program that they’re already working with.