

Tanya Domi:

Hello, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the CUNY Graduate Center. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating groundbreaking research, assisting New Yorkers, and informing the world.

Our guest today is Marta Gutman, an architectural and urban historian, the Dean of the Spitzer School of Architecture at City College, the premier public school of architecture in New York City. She is also a member of the Art History Faculty and Earth and Environmental Sciences at the CUNY Graduate Center, an expert in the history of public architecture for children and repurposing architecture as a strategy for city building.

She examines ordinary places in American cities, tackling power and culture in all walks of life, describing the activism of women and tying local stories to national and international histories. Gutman's commitment to social justice has been with her since she started her career as an architect, designing housing for the New York City Housing Authority and shelters for battered women, abused children, and homeless New Yorkers for nonprofit organizations. Welcome to The Thought Project, Dean Marta Gutman.

Marta Gutman:

Happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:

It's really delightful. You are a renowned architectural historian who began your career more in the policy realm. Over the years, you have created a profile as an academic who deconstructs built architectural spaces, whether these spaces advance democratic experiments within cities or more often these communities ingrained social inequalities, racial exclusions, and material failures in a multitude of ways.

How do you think you have leveraged these findings of inequality? Certainly through your vast number of publications in teaching the next generation of city planners, and by working with architects and city planners in the policy space, are there other capacities of how you've weighed in on these contentious issues of inequality and city planning?

Marta Gutman:

Yes. Thank you for this wonderful question. Just to step back, I would say that I think the biggest impact I've had is in my teaching and in my teaching, I take what I describe as a social constructionist perspective on the history of architecture and urban planning. And by that I mean, this is a perspective that I have come to understand through the writings of the great French sociologist and Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, and Lefebvre taught us to understand that places are constructed, they're constructed socially, they're constructed physically, and they're constructed discursively. And in those constructions, the intersections of those constructions, we can find places for intervention and we can find the multiple ways in which inequalities are situated.

Now, most people from the social sciences see Lefebvre as a person or comment Lefebvre strictly from the social side, but myself, trained as a architectural historian who works with everyday landscapes and ordinary buildings, the physical aspect of the Lefebvrian trialecta is something that I stress to my students and in my own work, over and over again. And what I do is I say, "Okay." When I start teaching survey, for instance, I say, "You sit at this table. Right? We're here in a room at City College, at the Spitzer School, and here's a table, who is at the table? Who is allowed to be in? Who is excluded from the room

by virtue of social and economic conditions?" Then I ask them to think about, "What does the table look like? How is it made?" With the first question, there's always this look around the room, like, "I understand that I am in a privileged space being in an institution of higher education, unlike many other people."

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Yeah.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. And then we look at the actual physical artifact and we think about, how was this table made? Who made it? Where did the materials come from? What kinds of inequalities are embedded in those situations, inequalities and exploitations? And then we talk about design, about the discursive structure, and how the two previous constructions connect with politics, with economies, with environmental exploitations, and so forth, and so on.

The eyes open and they carry, I'm proud to say, and pleased to say, they carry this idea with them through their design studios and into practice. And it leads them to situate the buildings they design and the places that they make, in larger social and economic and political worlds.

Tanya Domi:

That's very rich. It's fascinating. For me, I think about, well, here we're in the City of New York, which is one of the oldest cities in America, and one of the most famous city planners was Robert Moses. And we'll talk about your research on how he viewed swimming pools during the New Deal, but he probably wiped out more neighborhoods ... There are so many stories in the Bronx, I live in the Northwest Bronx, but there's so many stories of Moses just wiping out neighborhoods to put in these highways and the infrastructure of New York, which is massive.

Marta Gutman:

Indeed, Moses did this. Moses was not a person I admire on a political or a social level. I admire his accomplishments as a planner, which consists of more than just wipe out, but-

Tanya Domi:

Oh, for sure. I'm just using one example.

Marta Gutman:

... that's a long and complicated discussion. I would say, just to come back to the first question.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Yes.

Marta Gutman:

... and I'd love to come back to Moses later in our conversation.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes.

Marta Gutman:

To the first question, with regard to my role as the new Dean of the Spitzer School, what I am really privileged to be able to see, is to see how the students I taught and the students I am now leading in the school, are taking what they learned at Spitzer, take some from the courses I've taught and applying them in the public realm, and so-

Tanya Domi:

And how they're applying that.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. And so for instance, our graduate students now are taking fellowships or winning fellowships. And the Fund For the City of New York has community engagement fellowships. Last year, we placed two students. This year, we have more. And these folks work with community boards, they work with community agencies, philanthropic groups and the like. And although they don't call it that, but they are learning this social constructionist perspective. And they are understanding how, for instance, a building that they may have learned to design in their design studios as a beautiful object is connected to bigger social worlds and that there's a challenge and an opportunity in situating what they design in these richer contexts.

Other students, two students who finished in the undergraduate program, I just had lunch with them yesterday, and they're Urban Design Fellows in the Urban Design Forums competitive program that pulls in planners, architects, urban designers, and they're broadly considering the problems of waste in New York. So, we are an engaged school. We have an engaged alumni. That is just sincerely joyful for me.

Tanya Domi:

And legacy, no doubt, legacy, and not only your personal one, but also the Spitzer School, which is, as you say, it's a public university. It's about the public. It's about the public space at a university of higher learning. That's very exciting that CUNY has that role.

Marta Gutman:

We're thrilled to be the most diverse public school of architecture in New York City and one of the most in the country. We're the premier public school of architecture in the city. We take that position in the city and our position of responsibility to the city very seriously. We work with community partners. Our students work for the city.

In addition to the groups I just mentioned, they work for various city agencies, Parks Department, Buildings Department, DOT, and the like. And they also join architecture, landscape architecture and urban design professions. And by doing so, they work to desegregate literally professions that have been resistant to change for way too long. We are what? We're 70% BIPOC. More than half with people who identify as women one way or the other. And they are changing the face of architecture.

Tanya Domi:

So, would you say that this is a period of renaissance, of emerging, this orientation with a compact with the city and the neighborhoods and New Yorkers? Is this a period in which all these students are now across the city, doing their work, and they've been infused with this understanding of how social inequality got built into the neighborhoods and how that can be actually transformed?

Marta Gutman:

Yes. The answer to that is yes, but this is also something we don't have to teach our students, because our students live in the neighborhoods, they come from the neighborhoods. They are the people who were slammed by COVID. They are the people who experience inequalities. They come to us with an understanding or an experiential understanding of inequality and a desire to learn how to change it, in its political, its social, and its physical constructions altogether. So, we're happy to help them.

Tanya Domi:

That's really very exciting. So, not only, I mean, are you teaching and you have this stream of students and this legacy, but also in recent years, just before COVID, you co-edited buildings and landscapes for six years and is one of the four historians who founded PLATFORM in 2019.

Your research has been published and reviewed in scholarly publications have been praised in the New York Times, the New Yorker, in the National Endowment of Humanities, New York State Council on Arts, among other organizations. What did you do with PLATFORM? What gave you the impetus to think about creating an online platform? Indeed, what it's named.

Marta Gutman:

We felt, the four historians who founded PLATFORM, myself, Zeynep Kezer, Swati Chattopadhyay, Matt Lasner, and then a fifth has joined, Keishwa Rivzi. Many of us were influenced by the teachings and well, were students of a great architectural historian named Dell Upton, with whom some of us studied at Berkeley in the doctoral program there, in architectural history in the 1990s.

And Dell is now retired and no longer at Berkeley, Living in LA, is a person who changed the way we think about architectural history, inviting us to think about everyday buildings, ordinary landscapes, about the relationship of the ordinary and the extraordinary, and also to think about globality, about world architecture, about inequality, temporality, all that great stuff.

And so, I organized a Festschrift for Dell. Well, we didn't call it that, we just called it a Dell Fest, at Spitzer. And out of that came the decision of a group of us to foreground our thinking in the public realm, to try to bring it alive. And so, we decided to set up, well, you could call it a blog, but it's a bit more ambitious than a blog. It's actually a curated set of publications that are written by esteemed historians, by architects, by planners, by folks involved in all aspects of the built environment, and in studying it and thinking about how to make it better. To write short, incisive commentary on their work. Timely, provocative, and global. Those are the-

Tanya Domi:

The earmarks of it.

Marta Gutman:

... earmarks of the essays people work on, completely DIY. We've had a little bit of money support from various institutions, including from our own PSC-CUNY Research Fund. And we really, really wanted to foster a place where folks could write what they believe. We've published essays that have been censored in other publications. We've published essays from people who are activists in abroad and have had to assume nom de plumes in order to protect themselves from persecution.

We've published essays that address some of the most pressing issues of our time. For instance, the taking down of the Lee Monument in Richmond. That's a very, very important essay that was published a few years ago.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Marta Gutman:

They come out once a week. They're between 1,500 and 2,000 words.

Tanya Domi:

And it's available and accessible. Right?

Marta Gutman:

It's absolutely open source. And we welcome folks to write. We welcome anybody to write, just so long as you're willing to be edited a little bit.

Tanya Domi:

So, just for our audience, our listeners, to know that we will post the link, so that listeners can go to it and look at it.

Marta Gutman:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

And make it available to people where we have a description of the blog itself.

Marta Gutman:

Terrific. And just I should also add that a new editor has signed on, his name is Fernando Lara. So, between us, we have people from the United States, people from India, people from Pakistan, people from Brazil, people from Turkey, people from the UK, working on the editorial team. We practice what we preach, which is that we recruit, we run the journal in an open-minded and global way.

Tanya Domi:

Wow. I look forward to sharing that with our audience.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah, thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Congratulations on that. Moving on to, I think some of your key work, and that is from the beginning of your academic career, you've been researching how spaces have inhibited in marginalized women and children. And it really made me think, yes, all these places that I've lived, wherever I've been, have been really designed by men for the most part-

Marta Gutman:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

... the vast majority of architecture and city planning. Now, that maybe have been changing in recent years.

Marta Gutman:

For sure.

Tanya Domi:

But certainly the whole time I was growing up in the '60s, that was very much dominated by men. And indeed, your award-winning book *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscapes of Oakland, California*, won the Kenneth Jackson Prize in 2014 from the Urban History Association and from the Society of Architectural Historians in 2017, also was awarded to this book, among others.

Your award-winning research on the WPA swimming pools in New York City, demonstrated an expansion of urban citizenship during the New Deal. There were so many wonderful things that came out of the New Deal. I keep remembering seeing librarians on horseback.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. Right.

Tanya Domi:

But this too was really a remarkable thing that actually Robert Moses may have indeed promoted interracial swimming pools, although he wasn't so great on gender.

Marta Gutman:

He wasn't so great on race for the most part either.

Tanya Domi:

That's true, too. Absolutely. So anyway, and on that book, during the New Deal, especially for marginalized children and youth, *Designing Modern Childhood: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children*, which was published by Rutgers Press in 2008.

So, you have assessed a prevalent deprivation and exclusion of women and children in architectural spaces? That's a question and maybe a statement. And have you since witnessed changes in public spaces and design from exclusion to inclusion? And maybe illustrate that for our listeners.

Marta Gutman:

All right. So, that's a big one there. There are a number of them. So, I would say, Tanya, that I started from the position when I began my research in Oakland on the dissertation that was published as *A City for Children*. It began as a study of women's institution building in West Oakland, in particular, for various reasons, I undertook this project.

What I learned from studying women and the places that they built for children, and then through a postdoc, I expanded and reframed in terms of the impact on children in particular, is that the way historians have approached understanding cities and understanding public spaces was framed in a way that excluded the accomplishments of women because it privileged certain kinds of construction. And by

that I mean, purpose-built, elegant, highly expensive works of architecture like city halls and public libraries.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Marta Gutman:

So forth, and so on. And so what I did was, again, following in line, drawing on insights that I had gained as an architect when I worked in providing affordable housing for women and kids, both in the shelter system and through NYCHA. And in that process, I learned how I worked with repurposing existing buildings for housing, in ways of an argument that was developed from an affordability perspective, but also from a rebuilding and preserving neighborhoods perspective.

Tanya Domi:

And maybe repurposing those buildings, obviously.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. And so what I saw, what I've realized in my research by looking at maps, by looking at the census, by looking at tax records, by reading charity reports, and by walking the streets of Oakland, was that women when working in a low rent district which affords innovation, and when even the wealthiest of women in Oakland society were marginalized with regard to economic, to capital, they rented and bought existing buildings. They repurposed them for public purposes, from orphanages to settlement houses, to free kindergartens, to daycare centers. And they did it again and again, and again. They did it whether they were white, whether they were Black, whether they were Protestant, whether they were Catholic, it didn't matter, because they were in a position of needing to look for innovative, affordable, and neighborhood-based solutions to the needs of children.

And so, when you flip your lens, right? You flip your frame, and you look at the landscape as it exists, not as you imagine it ought to exist, you find actors making all kinds of change in all kinds of powerful ways. What you also find when you look at the urban landscape and track change over time, is you find the ways in which inequalities are ingrained into the urban landscape. You would call this ... I took an intersectional perspective, although I didn't call it that in my book, but you lay out a series of photographs of the buildings that were constructed or altered and added onto and replaced. And it's very clear that the African American women who came out of the Black Women's Club movement were disadvantaged economically and politically in ways that white Catholic women weren't, and certainly in ways that white Protestant women weren't.

And so, gender and age are critical axes of organizing and critical axes of intervention, but so too are class, race, and again and again, I can't stress how important this is in American history, religion. There are privileges that accrue to Protestants in the American public, to white Protestants, that accrue to no other group in American history. At least in my research I found that.

Tanya Domi:

So, and Oakland was, at that time when you were in graduate school, there was so much going on in Oakland. The Black Panthers were there. There was all kinds of organizing going on in Oakland and ways of working civically that was breaking ground, was it not?

Marta Gutman:

Well, my argument, people may disagree with me on this one, but my argument is, is I was working in Oakland in the 1990s. The Black Panthers were no longer operative, but the kinds of strategies that they used, where they set up headquarters in existing buildings, is still there on Peralta Street, their headquarters, the building they used. They opened breakfast programs. Their methods of community building and social service and intervention were not so different from the methods that the Black Club women, who they didn't much have much use for, the Panthers, that is-

Tanya Domi:

Right. Right.

Marta Gutman:

... used before them. And for women from other ethnic groups too. And so, this is where the Lefebvrian prospect becomes so useful because you can look at the physical, the social and the discursive, and see where the lines of similarity reside, right? And see how they change, right? Because no one would ever say that the Black Panthers argued that their interventions in West Oakland were politically equivalent to Black Club women.

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Marta Gutman:

No one would ever make that argument. Right? Because the politics change.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Marta Gutman:

But the methods are not so different. The architectural methods aren't.

Tanya Domi:

That's fascinating.

Marta Gutman:

I think it's pretty important. I think it's important to look for our bands of similarities, so we can articulate differences and pinpoint where the inequality, where the racism, where the disadvantage lies.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:



So, continuing in this theme, you write in your book chapter on the History of the Childhood in Western World, Routledge, 2013, "physical spaces are a measure of any society's attitude toward children." And I just want to say that sentence made me stop, too. I teach human rights at Columbia, as an example, and one of the things that I've learned is that I think children in America are in many, many ways suffocated and have little rights. And if you look at our behavior in the international realm, we are the only country on the face of the Earth that has refused to ratify the rights of the child.

Marta Gutman:

That's absolutely the case. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

And that is, for me, that says everything in this sentence that you wrote, it was your introductory sentence. I was like, "She's absolutely spot on." And you imagined spaces for children to live, occupy, play in a relatively modern phenomenon. You write that, "The majority of these spaces are exclusively imagined by adults." And where do these places begin to proliferate, and who are included and excluded, and why? Can you tell our audience?

Marta Gutman:

Right. Yeah. Sure. I'm so glad that that line resonated with you.

Tanya Domi:

It was powerful. Very powerful.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. And indeed, we are the one democracy that has refused to sign the United Nation's Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Marta Gutman:

But that's-

Tanya Domi:

Has a lot to do with the Pentagon, but that's for another time.

Marta Gutman:

Oh, that would be a super interesting conversation.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes.

Marta Gutman:

But the right to childhood is connected. The idea, that children have a right to childhood, that construct is one that connects with the argument in the physical spaces of childhood chapter. And so, children in the 15th or 16th century in Europe, in [inaudible 00:25:03], start to be seen differently. Their childhood is constructed differently.

And kids have always been whatever age, whatever country, whatever history, whatever place, children are dependent. Right? They're biologically different than adults, and they need care. There's no disputing that. And I mean, we all know it. We all were children once. Everybody was once a child. Another point of connection across the human race.

However, in the 15th, 16th century, there started to emerge in Europe an idea that childhood was a special time of life, a time in life that needed nurture, that needed protection, and that the children needed to be, in many ways, isolated, separated, and protected from adults, for various reasons.

And so, this change in the social construction of childhood is one that relies on physical space to be enacted. And so the first places in elite households, very wealthy, aristocratic and royal families, what happens is that special places get set aside, largely in the domestic realm, for kids. Meaning, separate bedrooms. First separate bedrooms, then separate furniture, particularly separate beds are placed. And this notion of the ideal childhood, that a child deserves an ideal childhood, and that ideal childhood then gets translated into a right that all children should have, takes a couple hundred years to unfold in human society-

Tanya Domi:

And manifest.

Marta Gutman:

And manifest.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah.

Marta Gutman:

It's deeply gendered. It's deeply connected to class privilege. As I said, it starts among very wealthy people and then it diffuses into the middle classes, and then finally hits the working classes in ways that I think are still yet to be worked out. Working class kids still do not have the same access to the rights and privileges that wealthier children have in our own city. And we could talk about that for some length.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. I mean, one example of that is latchkey kids. They come home, their parents are still working, and there's lots of children in America taking care of other children because their moms and dads are working and they're away.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

And we don't talk about that. We just don't even articulate that. We don't talk about all the kids that come home and they're alone and they have to create the way they spend that time. And many times, they're taking care of their sisters and brothers.

Marta Gutman:

This is true. You're absolutely correct on that. And there are also ways in which there are historical patterns for that. So, just to say that if we first develop or are first developed in Europe, spreading to all over the world, our differentiated spaces in the house, then they become connected. As the right to childhood then, to a protected and happy and nurtured childhood becomes connected with the inventions of public and private space as we know them now. It's driven by the democratizing revolutions, which require a literate voting population. So, schooling becomes the job of every child rather than work and play.

Tanya Domi:

And the requirement to go to school.

Marta Gutman:

And the requirement to go to school.

Tanya Domi:

To go to school.

Marta Gutman:

The requirement to learn to read.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Marta Gutman:

So, you can read a ballot. And then in conjunction with those kinds of shifts come the need for play in particular, and play is super, super interesting subject. The social construction of play, the way the social construction of play is allied with understandings of masculinity, imperialism, and white privilege. And we could go on for hours on that.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Sure.

Marta Gutman:

And it's also deeply gendered. So, we end up with cities that are differentiated, that are differentiated with spaces for children. But most adults don't see cities that way. They forget how they experienced-

Tanya Domi:

The world.

Marta Gutman:

... the world as children. It's socialized out of them. I mean, I've been on tours of New York and taking people around and I say, "So, look at this and look at that, and look at that." Meaning, "Look at that playground. Look at that school. There was an orphanage there." And they go, "Oh, I see. I see what you're talking about." There is a whole world of architecture and public space for kids, which disappears from our view as adults, because we don't see children and children's spaces as integral to the world we're living in. And I would say this is one reason we end up with such impoverished spaces for children overall.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, that's quite a statement and a reality. But speaking of this, this is a good segue into, at the time, Robert Moses was holding forth during the New Deal, and the WPA work projects included swimming pools in New York City. Which when you think about many times it's for kids and maybe their families, depends on how they get there and when they're able to go.

But could you tell our audience a little bit about the fact that in New York City, it appears that there was an effort to have interracial pools? But tell me if I'm actually wrong here, because I want to be accurate. I want to be accurate.

Marta Gutman:

It's a little bit of a generalization.

Tanya Domi:

Okay. Okay.

Marta Gutman:

Most of the pools were segregated racially because most of the pools were built in racially segregated neighborhoods.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Marta Gutman:

And Moses didn't have any interest in desegregating neighborhoods. In fact, he was pretty interested in keeping them segregated.

Tanya Domi:

Segregated.

Marta Gutman:

And this is very, very clear with regard to his policies affecting all kinds of development in the city. There's no contesting that, and it's not a happy story at all. But in neighborhoods that were racially integrated and where there were progressive people living, largely Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, in Washington Heights, racially integrated swimming happened. In some parts of New York City, in the

great WPA pools, racially integrated swimming happened. There were racially integrated lifeguard teams.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Marta Gutman:

And it wasn't addressed in the great works that had been written about Moses up to the point of my research. And again, I looked at the city, I read oral histories, I looked at film footage in the Park Department archives.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Marta Gutman:

I looked at photographs. And the evidence is incontrovertible, some pools were racially integrated. And so what this means is that we can't say, I think, that Moses definitively segregated pools by matter of park policy. We can say, "I don't think so. I don't think so, in the 1930s that happened." I don't know what happened in the 1950s.

I do know that pools become treasured recreational resources for working class youth, particularly for boys and particularly for teenagers. And they also become sites of courtship for teenage boys and teenage girls. And so, they become sites. And if little kids can't even get a decent playground, try to find a public agency that's going to do something for teenagers, right?

Tanya Domi:

That's true.

Marta Gutman:

Particularly for teenage boys. And so when there is a great public resource that's made, a beautiful pool, right? And this is a place where teenagers can go and hang out and experiment with their selves, their courtships, their sexuality, without parents hanging over them or teachers for that matter, they're going to do it. And so, they become sites that are contested, sites that are defended, and sites that do result in horrible, horrible fights.

Rob Snyder has written beautifully about this in his book on Washington Heights and also in an essay for the Journal of Urban History. And places where tragically people get killed and they get killed in turf warfare that's racialized. And so, they are racialized spaces, they have to be. They're sexualized spaces, they're gendered spaces, they're socially constructed, and they're also magnificent. And they're magnificent in a city where there aren't a lot of magnificent public places for kids. And very, very few of them appeal to teenagers. And so, this produces an explosion of desire and of defense, and it ends horribly in many cases.

Tanya Domi:

That's really unfortunate.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

So, speaking of ending horribly, I just want to say that the past several years, we underwent this horrific pandemic. COVID hit New York, in the United States it was the first city to really implode. We had refrigerator trucks in hospital parking lots with bodies stacked in them. And I remember those moments being, I don't know if it could get any lower than this moment. Thinking of people, there were just not enough places to put dead people, which is just a horrible thought that you were going to sleep every night thinking about people's bodies being put in these refrigerated trucks.

But not only that, what it revealed to many of us, especially New Yorkers, as the first city to get hit, and this is a city that has a lot of social resources, comparatively speaking, to a place like Indianapolis where I grew up. You have an office of immigration, for example, here in New York City.

Marta Gutman:

[inaudible 00:34:50].

Tanya Domi:

A multitude of social services, and yet it just could not hold up during the pandemic. And so since 2020, there's been an explosion, there was always homelessness, but we saw it in ways I don't think we saw it before. And also increased drug use, escalating crime. It is estimated that 50% of the guns purchased in the country right now were purchased during COVID. I mean, an unbelievable proliferation of guns and increased drug use, escalating crime. And this is facing all major, big cities in the United States, the big ones, LA, Chicago-

Marta Gutman:

Every city.

Tanya Domi:

... New York, Boston, Washington DC, San Francisco. Just really, I think in my lifetime, I can't think of a more grim time. Now, I remember '65, the burning of Watts, what happened in LA, what happened in Detroit in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King. But we still had hope even after that. We had some hope.

This situation feels like everyone has been leveled by this experience, and it doesn't seem that the political leadership has been able to step up and meet the moment. So, I want to ask you, especially as somebody who's an architect, been a city planner, that knows a great deal about homelessness and about people living in cities. If you were an advisor to Eric Adams right now, what would you recommend that he do and take steps to immediately address some of the worst problems facing New York City?

Marta Gutman:

It's a great question. I appreciate it. Just to say, I've never been a city planner. I've studied city planning.

Tanya Domi:

Architect. Okay. Sorry.

Marta Gutman:

So, I would tell Mayor Adams that the public should be put back in public housing. You and I had this conversation briefly before.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, we did.

Marta Gutman:

In the prep for this wonderful interview.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Marta Gutman:

And I said that to you. And then by complete luck and good stroke of fortune, Places Magazine, another great online journal, published an essay called The Case for Truly Public Housing. This came out last week, written by Susanne Schindler and Chris Moyer. And Susanne Schindler, she's also written for PLATFORM, is really a wonderful, she's a planner, architect, critic, public intellectual. And they track the history of the Cambridge Housing Authority and they say that Cambridge Housing Authority shows that public housing can work. That what we can learn from this case study that they've made from other case studies, and show how the government can work for the benefit of the people. Right? Not only say what the government isn't doing, but what the government is doing right.

And so many people on the left talk about the failure of the state, and then they expect us to organize to make the state work. And I do think we need to talk about success. And one of the points that Schindler and Moyer make, which is a point I've been making for years, is that in the privatization of public housing across the country for long history of this, that we won't ... Read Susanne's article, which reviews that history quite well. What we've done is we've put the people in charge of housing the marginalized, who never did it prior, never did it previously. The reason we have the New York City Housing Authority, the reason the New Deal intervened in housing is because the private market had failed. And so, that we've now come round full circle and expect privatism to work, seems to me completely backwards.

I think we need to revisit how bureaucracies work. We need to revisit accountability. We need to revisit finance. We need to revisit design and architecture, which are so critical to the success of successful housing, and reinvent New York as a leader as it was in the 1930s of genuinely public housing. So that said, I would also make two or three other points.

Tanya Domi:

Okay.

Marta Gutman:

And this was a point that Commissioner Adolfo Carrion made at the reception of the Fund for New York last Friday evening, that I attended. He said that, "Mayor Adams is envisioning New York as the city of

yes, meaning that the regulations need to be revisited and understood. That the building department, all of the various agencies, water, transportation, any of them, that have to do with construction, are agencies that slow things down rather than figure out how to work with people in order to expedite processes."

So, I'm very much in favor of thinking about where our regulations work and where our zoning, where our building department rules, our building department processes, need to be-

Tanya Domi:

Are impediments.

Marta Gutman:

Are serious impediments.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Marta Gutman:

And then the third thing I would say is having made a case for the public, right? I would also say, and this comes very much from my work in Oakland, in which I studied the fabric of the city. And what I saw in West Oakland, learned about in West Oakland, in a way that it transformed my understanding of American housing, because they didn't have housing like on the East Coast, from where I'd come. Certainly not from New York, multistory, brick buildings, tenements, the whole deal. In Oakland, there's small scale workers' cottages, wood frame buildings, one story, that small scale developers built, people who were called capitalists or speculators in the late 1880s, 1890s, 1900. Houses that homeowners built.

And as new people came in, influxes of population came into Oakland in some measure because of immigration and some measure because of the great fire and earthquake in San Francisco, what homeowners did was they altered their houses. They turned one unit buildings into two unit buildings. And so, they doubled the housing stock in the course of five years. If this is really affordable housing stock, this is for people who are paying minimal rent and don't have a lot of disposable income.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Marta Gutman:

And so, what if we were to think about Queens that way, or Brooklyn, or Staten Island? What if we were to say, "Let's make it possible for a homeowner who has a one-story building or a two-story building, to add a story." And we were to empower the everyday homeowner, the ordinary builder, in order to create more affordable units at the bottom end of the market, not at the top end, which is mostly what's happening now. And then, we were to think about transportation, and then we were to think about playgrounds and think about schools and subways.

Tanya Domi:

And all the infrastructure.



Marta Gutman:

All the infrastructure that goes to-

Tanya Domi:

To support that community.

Marta Gutman:

To build a community.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Marta Gutman:

We would have a different city and we would have a city that I think would begin to address part of the homelessness crisis. Not all of it, but part of it. So, that's my dream. That's what I would do. I don't have an either/or, I have a-

Tanya Domi:

I actually think President Biden should focus on this if he is so lucky to be reelected in the second administration, because I think it's a seismic issue. It's huge.

Marta Gutman:

It's huge.

Tanya Domi:

It's across the country. And if you go back, speaking of failure of privatization, the housing market crashed in 2007, and most people didn't recover from that at all.

Marta Gutman:

Yep.

Tanya Domi:

And so, where did they go to live? And all those people were displaced. I mean, it was a huge failure with the banks over-leveraged. So, I just wanted say that as well.

Marta Gutman:

I agree with you. And I would just add that if you were to think about this empowerment of the everyday homeowner and think about what this could do to redress the inequalities that were written into the urban landscape through the legislation and the redlining of neighborhoods, it's pretty amazing, right? Because people lost housing, but many, many people of color are homeowners in the outer boroughs. And if we were to facilitate that kind of responsible development, we would be adding. It would be a kind of reparations in a way.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. I would think it could be argued on that level politically.

Tanya Domi:

That, reparation, that is for another conversation.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

But I want to ask you before we leave, what are you currently working on? I know that you have a forthcoming book.

Marta Gutman:

Yeah. Well, my forthcoming book is a book called Just Space, Modern Architecture: Public Education and Racial Inequality in New York City. I'm working with a great editor at University of Texas Press, Robert Devens, who's a wonderful editor and also a very patient man.

And this book puts architecture at the center of the struggle for racial justice in urban public education, and the principal focus are buildings in Harlem. The project was sparked by a research project that I began looking at a school that's infamous in New York City labor history and in New York City education history called I.S. 201. It's a windowless junior high school in East Harlem or on the border of East and Central Harlem, 127th and Madison Avenue, and above the railroad track.

And its construction, its design sparked a strike by parents that then fed into the 1968 teacher's strike. And in looking at the architecture of this school, I engaged school architecture. I hadn't done so much study of school since I looked in my book on Oakland and I wanted to come to schools as another really important public building for kids. And I looked at I.S. 201, I wrote a book chapter on it for a book called Educating Harlem.

And then I started tracking the history of the school and the history of the schools that I.S. 201 is adjacent to, many of which no longer stand. And I realized that the study of architecture as an agent of segregation in and of itself, was one that had very long and troubled history in New York City. And so the book, which was initially imagined as a book about post-war architecture for kids, is now a book that takes a much, much longer examination of the unfolding of racial inequalities as expressed in school architecture for New York City's kids.

Tanya Domi:

Well, we will have you back to discuss that important work. And Dean Gutman, I really want to thank you so much for this wonderful conversation today.

Marta Gutman:

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Tanya Domi:

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Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Dean Marta Gutman of the Spitzer School of Architecture at City College, and a member of the Art History and Earth and Environmental Sciences Faculty at the CUNY Graduate Center.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by audio engineer, Kevin Wolf, and CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.