

New York City's Unsung Monuments to Working Moms ^[1]

Across the five boroughs, dozens of daycare centers stand as survivors of a massive effort in the 1970s to quickly grow a publicly funded childcare system

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EXCERPTS

Weekdays at 8 a.m., cars start lining the 600th block of Prospect Place in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. There, toddlers and preschoolers file into a sprawling, 32,000-square-foot building holding 14 classrooms with room for more than 150 children. For nearly 50 years, the Friends of Crown Heights' Prospect Place center has been part of New York City's childcare system for low-income families, one of the only such systems in the country. At one time, almost all families enrolled were from the neighborhood. But as Crown Heights, like many parts of Brooklyn, has gentrified, more and more enrolled families commute from other, less affluent neighborhoods. Parents say it's worth it.

"The classrooms are really big, and there's a playground on the roof," says Kelsey Peter, whose 3-year-old daughter attends the center. "It's nice."

Many childcare centers across the country are squeezed into spaces initially designed for other purposes, like church basements or vacant storefronts. In New York City, where space is at a premium, even the most expensive private daycares may have classrooms void of windows. Prospect Place center stands in contrast, as one of dozens of still-standing, publicly funded childcare centers that were built in the early 1970s with the needs of small kids in mind. Some have extensive footprints to minimize the need for toddler stair-climbing, wide halls with room for cubbies, and expansive classrooms opening into gated play areas. Many are even flooded with natural light.

From the sidewalk, passers-by can see Prospect Place center set back from a wrought-iron gate and glimpse playground equipment on the roof, but hidden from view is the building's surprising zig-zagging footprint that makes creative use of the space behind an adjacent building. On Brooklyn's Hegeman Avenue, another of these centers with a rooftop playground spans an entire city block. And more can be found in every borough. From the outside, some look like unremarkable brick boxes. But on the inside, they are an early educator's dream, an administrator at one of these centers told me.

The schools were created as part of a massive effort launched in 1969 by New York City's Republican Mayor John Lindsay to quickly ramp up the city's offerings of childcare by creating new daycares in impoverished New York City neighborhoods where "suitable structures did not exist," as described in a case study published by the Boston University School of Management. The new centers would help quickly build the country's largest publicly funded childcare system, one that would become known for high standards, a unionized teaching staff, and year-round, full-day care for working parents. They would also be the epicenter of a coordinated push to bring universal childcare to New York City, one that would ultimately fail due to waning federal support.

Today, some of these half-century-old buildings are falling into disarray. Many are in gentrifying neighborhoods and costly to rent. But as today's working parents, and particularly moms, nationwide suffer the effects of a private, market-based childcare system gutted by the Covid-19 pandemic, those centers still standing are a testament to the time when New York City wanted to make publicly funded, widely available childcare—like its public schools or subway system—an integral part of life in the city.

Before New York City rapidly grew its public childcare system in the early 1970s, women had been flooding the workforce only to find a dearth of suitable childcare options. Even subsidized childcare for poor families was hard to come by. New York City had about 100 publicly funded centers for low-income families, many which were a by-product of women entering the workforce during World War II and were run by large social welfare agencies.

To meet the growing demand, parent and community groups began organizing small, informal daycares across the five boroughs. Unlike the centers run by social welfare agencies, these programs were about community and women's empowerment rather than charity. "The idea of parent involvement was of the times," says Tony Ward, who, along with Carmen Maria Maristany, opened a daycare in East Harlem in the mid-1960s. "The parents at our school were very militant, they would not hesitate to take the entire school with them to Lindsay's office" for a protest.

Like Ward and Maristany's school, many of the parent-run daycares were bilingual, something Ward says was "radical" for the time.

Several had what the historian Rosalyn Baxandall described as a “strong feminist slant,” and would actively challenge “sex role stereotyping” by encouraging girls “to work with tools and become assertive and boys to verbalize thoughts, express feelings, and learn interpersonal skills.”

Ward and Maristany launched their community program using a two-year anti-poverty grant. But others were financially precarious from the get-go. They made ends meet on cobbled-together parent fees, donated goods from local stores, and cheap or free labor from mothers and other community members who worked the programs.

Leaders of these ad hoc daycares knew their best shot at longevity was to join rank with the city’s publicly funded daycares, but this demanded resources few of the small programs possessed. Foremost, they needed space with the requisite fireproofing and safety exits, square footage per child, and toddler-sized toilets, among other costly requirements.

“In the poor neighborhoods we were working in, that was very hard to find,” remembers Ward, who became a leader of the city’s community daycare movement.

In another time and place that would have been the end of this story: another dream thwarted by New York City real estate.

Instead, that’s when Mayor Lindsay used newly available federal funding for childcare to double down on activists’ vision of a high-quality network of childcare centers for New Yorkers. He enlisted community and parent groups as partners to help build it, and to create suitable space, he launched a “direct lease” program to create and renovate new childcare centers throughout the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

In 1971, the city provided care for 8,000 children in 120 centers, according to the Boston University case study. Just three years later, the city had 410 centers serving about four times the number of children. This growth included programs like Ward and Maristany’s preschool that already had space but were previously not city funded, new childcare programs that secured their own space, and 170 of the new “direct-lease” centers. These direct-lease centers were built or renovated by private landlords, and leased by the city, often for 20 years at a time. This meant that even if the programs went out of business, or were under enrolled, the city was still on the hook for paying.

Many were “beautiful buildings,” that followed an architectural “prototype,” says Rhonda Carloss-Smith, who taught kindergarten in a direct-lease school in East Harlem during the mid-70s. “They had large classrooms, and many classrooms. They had play areas onsite, so the children did not have to leave the building.”

Some shared a building with another social service group, such as a senior center, and many had office space for social workers, a teacher’s lounge and administration. “Almost all of them were air-conditioned, which was at that time futuristic. As a new teacher, I couldn’t ask for anything more,” remembers Carloss-Smith, who is now a director at Brooklyn’s Child Development Support Corporation, which supports childcare programs.

Some of the buildings housed new programs opened by the established social service agencies. But in others, like the one where Carloss-Smith taught, local parents, religious leaders and activists set up schools reflecting their specific neighborhoods. “Many of the leaders of the programs lived in the community,” says Carloss-Smith.

In the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, a local Pentecostal minister, who was also an anti-poverty activist and had previously run a small daycare center out of his church, took the helm of what became the city’s largest publicly funded program. Church of Hope Child Care Center, housed in a new direct-lease building, had space for more than 300 children, including babies.

An Orthodox Jewish rabbi oversaw Temple Emmanuel Day Care Center in a building owned by the center’s board and leased to the city. In contrast to the feminist flavor of several other community-run programs, teachers at Temple Emmanuel, which admitted Orthodox families, separated preschool boys and girls into different classes.

Not far away from where Carloss-Smith taught on 127th Street in Harlem, local leaders had set up a Montessori-inspired school serving neighborhood babies to 12-year-olds enrolled in its after-school program. That school was in a direct-lease space in a renovated brownstone on an otherwise “barren” street not far from a hub of drug activity, remembers Carloss-Smith. “What went on inside was just phenomenal. It was like an oasis in the midst of chaos,” she says.

To pay for new programs, Lindsay leveraged newly available federal money intended to fund childcare as a way to move mothers off the growing welfare rolls. To oversee all of the centers, he created a new city department devoted to early childhood, the Agency for Child Development.

Community groups were pleased when Lindsay chose Georgia McMurray, who was Black and an early childhood advocate, to head the agency as commissioner. Her staff included others who embraced an expansive vision of quality universal childcare as a way to propel kids, women and whole communities toward bright futures. The agency had a division staffed with architects and engineers devoted to school design and maintenance, and “whole units of staff that helped programs negotiate all these leases,” says Carloss-Smith.

With a guiding philosophy of “as much quantity and quality as possible,” as described in the management school case study, the agency rapidly grew a network of daycares “notable not only for the number of children it served, but also for its commitment to high quality care that set national benchmarks,” wrote Simon Black, a professor in the labor studies department of Brock University, in his 2020 book *Social Reproduction and the City: Welfare Reform, Child Care, and Resistance in Neoliberal New York*.

A few groundbreaking standards: a ten-hour-day for working families, a largely unionized staff of teachers with expertise in early childhood development, and counselors to support families with everything from job searches to family disputes. Some programs even had nurses on-site who could deliver vaccinations.

Quality varied from program to program; some program directors seemed more interested in the funding than the children, says Carloss-Smith. But at many centers, she says, “families thrived” from the combination of high programming standards coupled with teachers and staff who were rooted in and responsive to their communities. Many centers developed reputations for doing an excellent job at preparing children—and parents—for elementary school.

Some of the city’s high standards—like the requirement that lead preschool teachers be certified within a certain number of years—led to tensions with some community-run programs, who believed they should have the freedom to hire as they saw fit. But city leadership and community programs agreed on one vital point: both wanted childcare as readily and universally available as possible. They did not want it means-tested, or even attached to work requirements.

It was an idea gaining momentum nationally. For middle-class white feminists, the push for universal childcare “expressed their dissatisfaction with gender and family norms that forced middle-class women to take care of children at home,” explains an article from Bitchmedia. For Black feminists, it “disputed the common cultural narrative that blamed Black mothers and Black families for systemic poverty.” And for welfare activists, fighting for universal childcare “protested the way government-sponsored childcare was only available to the poor,” and used as a tool “to surveil and control” welfare recipients.

In New York City, parents and teachers also spoke of the benefits of integration created by widely available childcare. “We want the classes to come together,” Shirley Johnson, a Black activist explained to the Village Voice in 1973. “If you got kids together in daycare really sharing, you got okay kids. And then you got an okay society.”

Though the federal funding for centers was earmarked for low-income families, it gave states and cities leeway in interpreting those requirements. In the beginning of New York City’s daycare movement, the city granted community-run programs the freedom to use their own loose definition of community need to determine eligibility. This allowed programs to find ways to enroll working and middle-class families for small fees alongside low-income families.

In some centers, that led to a rare moment of socioeconomic and sometimes racial and ethnic integration. Carloss-Smith remembers how at her school, the combination of professional families and families who were struggling financially led to a tight-knit community of parents and teachers who looked out for one another. When parents missed pickup, sometimes teachers would take their children home with them, so that they did not have to report them as being abandoned.

But for most programs, this was short-lived. In 1971, President Nixon vetoed a national plan with bipartisan support that would have created a state-run childcare system with a sliding scale for parent payments that was very similar to what New York City had built. One of Nixon’s concerns: that government-funded care would cause “family weakening.” Soon after, the funding streams that had ignited New York’s daycare renaissance began to dry up, causing the state to tighten childcare eligibility requirements.

The change outraged community programs. Program staff complained that the new eligibility requirements were “a means of reinforcing class distinctions,” and they were being asked to “behave like welfare caseworkers, recording the details of their clients’ lives,” including marital status and “addictive habits,” documented Black.

Daycare leader Dorothy Pitman Hughes, who would later co-found Ms. Magazine, warned that linking childcare to welfare requirements would surveil and punish poor mothers while isolating their children.

In 1972, 350 mothers, children and workers from more than two dozen of the city’s childcare programs stormed the campaign headquarters of Mayor Lindsay, who was considering a bid for president, saying the new eligibility requirements would destroy the racial and economic integration of the centers.

“Mr. Lindsay is running for President and has prided himself on the city’s day care plan; we just want to show that he hasn’t been as active in defending the system as he could be,” protester Bob Gangi told The New York Times.

By day’s end, the office walls were covered “with slogans calling for free universal daycare and a nullification of the state eligibility standards,” according to the Times, and the city had agreed to join the fight.

But federal and state funding continued to dwindle. Soon the state and city forced the centers to serve only the poor, and in 1974, under revamped federal requirements, families receiving subsidized care needed to be both poor and meet certain “social eligibilities,” such as being at-risk of foster care placement. City government also looked to save money by eroding some of the quality standards, such as loosening staff-child ratios and eliminating family counselors. As New York City entered a deep fiscal crisis in 1975, the city began closing dozens of daycares and laying off hundreds of their employees, leaving many families without childcare.

The vast childcare system that had blossomed in a few years began to abruptly and dramatically wither.

The “direct-lease” centers, however, were uniquely buffered from the cuts. Their leases, which spanned decades, all-but-ensured their survival. This, in turn, helped protect the childcare system they were part of.

At the time, some activists and state lawmakers resented these centers’ immunity. Investigations launched at the time suggested that a number of these sites had been built by a small number of politically connected landlords under shady circumstances. Lawmakers saw corruption, reckless spending and shoddy construction. Activists objected to private landlords profiting from daycare funds while so many programs closed. Nonetheless, most of the direct-lease centers survived. This helped to ensure that the city’s child care system survived the fiscal crisis.

Today, New York City continues to operate one of the country's only city-contracted childcare systems, which serves about 20,000 children in publicly funded centers and also has funded home-based childcare programs.

Many of the direct-lease centers are now run not by community organizations, but large organizations, and the centers primarily serve low-income families, falling short of the dream of universal, community-run care that activists fought for 50 years ago. But the ten-hour-day that came under attack during the city's fiscal crisis remains a hallmark of the programs, and many offer social supports along with childcare.

The centers have aging infrastructure and many are costly to maintain. The sheer amount of land they occupy makes them vulnerable to new development. Every few years some of their leases reach their end. In some cases, the city negotiates new leases, other centers hang on month to month in a kind of limbo, and still others disappear from the childcare landscape, displacing the families they serve while erasing a little-known piece of history.

For now, these sturdy old buildings stand as unsung monuments to a time when a Republican mayor partnered with a disparate cast of characters to quickly grow a public childcare system that would outlast both a fiscal crisis and a global pandemic.

New York City's daycare effort is "the best legacy we have of the 1960s," Lew Frankfort, the government official charged with slashing the program, said in 1979. Today's working parents who still depend on those centers would surely agree.

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