Recalling House Tour’s Historic Role as a Community Builder

by Milford Prewitt

As Prospect Lefferts Gardens celebrates its 47th Annual House and Garden Tour, one longtime neighbor who started a house tour some 40 years ago, can’t help but be humbled by how different the community and the goals and objectives of the earlier event are from the 2017 tour.

Born 89 years ago in the neighborhood now known as Crown Heights, Robert Thomason and his wife, Jane, moved to PLG in 1963 just as its working and middle-class demographic was changing racially from white to black.

White residents and merchants were fleeing inner cities in the 1960s, leaving Brooklyn for the suburbs and Long Island. The exodus saddened Thomason as much as it instilled a resolve to embrace integration and welcome all races to the neighborhood. Giving homeowners a stage to show off their rate in interior design and renovation was the least of Thomason’s concerns.

“The house tour is a lot different today from what we had in mind,” he says.

Thomason recalls brokers telling white homeowners that black renovators from the South and the Caribbean were bound to depress their property values and that they should sell immediately. Complicating matters was the banking industry’s wholesale investment in mortgage redlining while brokers stayed busy steering whites out of the neighborhood.

This was called “white flight.”

Thomason still looks back at a broker who refused to show him any houses in PLG because he was white, a practice that epitomized racial steering.

“The only way a white person could buy a home in the neighborhood was to buy it from the owner,” he says. That was how he was able to buy the home in 1937 that he and Jane still live in on Lefferts III. They had lived in the building as tenants for nine years prior to buying it.

A Neighborhood Ministry

Disheartened by the way the media depicted PLG as economically distressed and racially tense and angered by his homebuyer’s experience, Thomason, an ordained Christian minister who had graduated from Yale Divinity School, vowed to make “this neighborhood my ministry” and change the script.

With other like-minded residents he forged the Prospect Lefferts Gardens Neighborhood Association (PLGNA) and soon after, they created a house tour, intended to show that despite the bad headlines to the contrary, blacks and whites could live together as neighbors, welcome one another into their stately homes, and discuss ways to build a better community.

House Tour Day: “It’s My Park!”

This year’s tour is more compact than last year’s, extending from Maple to Winthrop Streets, from Flatbush to Rogers Avenues. Packed in are eight terrific stops, not including the famous complimentary refreshments.

Several of the private homes and apartments on the tour show the fruits of recent renovations, giving visitors an opportunity to see new visions for the interiors of century-old buildings.

An 1899 townhouse that had fallen into significant disrepair has been brought back from the brink with a gut rehab. The owners envisioned creative reuse of several original features, including the original mahogany door and powder room.

An 1825 brick row-Columbia has a completely new kitchen done in an Art Deco style that would have been familiar to the original owners. The newly redesigned garden and blue-stone patios are also on view.

A limestone townhouse displays a facsimile of artisans collected in wide troupes, particularly in Southeast Asia. The peaceful coexistence of old and new is also evident in the kitchen, where the fully functioning gourmet stove “catered” with the house, shares space with a newer model.

In a brownstone townhouse with animal-themed accents, the original radiator have been painted black, giving them the effect of modern sculptures. The garden has been landscaped for entertaining with a terraced blue-stone seating area, fire pit, and grill. A BIBO brownstone was recently renovated with a light but deliberate touch, displaying the space aesthetic of its industrial designer owner. The original details were respected while creating a comfortable home family.

At its top that two houses participated in PLGNA’s first house tour was hardly discouraging, Thomason says.

“When PLGNA started its first house tour, we only had two houses and in both cases, the owners had no intention on selling. They just wanted people to see this neighborhood.” Then as today, owners whose homes are on the market cannot participate in the house tour.

“We were determined to have a neighborhood, open to people of all races and incomes, to talk to one another and make this neighborhood a thriving, peaceful community.

Thomason retired at the age of 57 after working for 40 years as a librarian at the Hewlett Woodmere Public Library in Nassau County—where he cycled to work miles round-trip every day, baring only the most atrocious weather (see the companion story on page 3 about his global bike treks).
Desperate to Stay in PLG, Young Family Finds a Gem on Hawthorne

Stacey Paradiso loves to photograph abandoned, deteriorating old buildings, from train stations to churches and grandiose, honeymoon resorts, to a fire-damaged garage factory in Williamsburg. When she posted a picture to Instagram of a run-down green-and-white stucco house on Hawthorne Street, she didn't know she would one day be living there. Perhaps she was drawn to the unusual building because it reminded her of her grandmother's house in uptown New York, also a stucco, Spanish-revival-style house. At the time, she and her husband, Paul Paradiso, had been renting a floor of a house on Maple III. When their landlord decided to sell, they had a baby (their now four-year-old daughter Vera), and only a few months to find a new place.

Stacey treasured the backyard of their Maple Street house, and both she and her husband fell in love with PLG's architecture and tree-lined streets, and have since become active participants in the community. For a more than a decade they'd lived near Prospect Park (Park Slope and Prospect Heights before PLG), and they knew they wanted to continue living near the park. They looked at several other house rentals in more-affordable PLG but none quite fit the bill. It was a generous-sized space, with high ceilings, a balcony, and most importantly, a large yard, which they share with the face next tenants, three young filmmakers.

Just after they moved in, all the tenants joined together and cleared 86 bags of trash from the backyard. The effort revealed a concrete garden path and a small pond, which is stocked with koi fish in spring and summer.

The landlord, the Children of the Evangelist, had done a nice job restoring the pew details in the apartments, and were open to allowing the couple to connect with their country past. Sarah really didn’t know much about Brooklyn. What she is most proud of and what has remained are the original wood details, moldings, wainscoting and parquet flooring, which look as good today as they did a century ago. Sheryl says as many as a few people moved in. Now her neighbors are new young families riding the wave of Brooklyn’s gentrification and she and Dean represent the elders being solicited to sell. Paul customizing the space with shelves and built-ins. The house, one of a pair of Spanish mission-style houses designed in 1906 by New York architects D. Quick & Yost, once served as the rectory, or priest's house for the church. Paul, a software developer for interactive exhibits, and Stacey, a program manager at UNICEF, are able to apply their considerable renovation and design skills not only to their rental apartment, but also to a rambling “country estate” they bought in Vermont. In their spare time, the couple is fixing up the old farmhouse buildings themselves, hoping to turn one into an AirBnB.

PLG’s Favorite Haunted Home Puts the Ghosts Away for House Tour Redux

Chances are that most PLG parents who have taken their young children out for Halloween might have already visited the stately and beloved home of Dean and Sheryl Foster on Rutland II. Virtually a neighborhood landmark, close to Bedford Avenue, the Foster’s have produced a real fright night every Halloween for the past 20 years or so. That night, it is home not to the Fosters—who don Count and Countess vampire costumes for the occasion—but to their ghoulish and ghostly trick-or-treaters of all ages.

Fox machines, thick spider webs, macabre music, and spooky lighting attract kids and parents alike. On Halloween 2016, Sheryl says as many as 1,200 people stopped by for the show as well as a bit of candy. But while the ghosts, goblins and Frankensteins go home and the eerie decorations are put away, the Foster household returns to normal as a beloved home that has been occupied by the same family for 32 years. The Foster’s raised two children here, and they in turn have blessed them with three grandchildren.

The Fosters enjoyed successful careers on the music side of the entertainment industry (Dean had been a songwriter and later owned a much-sought-after, home-based, international consulting business, DFA Intercultural Global Solutions. DFA helped multinational firms navigate the norms and mores of foreign countries and cultures. Although they sold the business several years ago and consider themselves retired, Dean still travels extensively as a consultant, Sheryl estimates that he has visited 96 countries.

Formerly residents of Windsor Terrace, the Fosters were shown their current home by a broker when they decided they needed more space to grow their family. Participating in their second house tour—the first was in 1997, the family’s second year in the neighborhood—Sheryl says all of the renovation and rehabbing they have done have been a series of little projects that occurred over the years versus one massive gut renovation that most newcomers prefer.

“Til day during the first house tour we were an example of what you do before you upgrade: nothing,” she says. “But it has been a long process over the years.

“We’ve upgraded the kitchen twice, added new appliances and got rid of the old-fashioned wallpaper.”

Major upgrades have been made to the plumbing and electrical systems as well, and two additional bathrooms have been added, she notes.

Sarah is a production designer for television and film. She is a true New Yorker, born and raised on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Sarah really didn’t know much about Brooklyn. Like many Manhattanites, it was a place that she ventured to only for the occasional event. But alas, in 1999 she moved to Fort Greene, eventually met and married Bill, and in Brooklyn they remained.

Then along came Olive. The arrival of their daughter prompted them to start shopping for real estate. They knew people in PLG so that’s where they started looking. When two consecutive contracts on homes they were negotiating to buy fell through, a friend picked up their spirits with news about the opportunity to buy the apartment on Winthrop.

In 2009, they became the proud owners of the large three-bedroom condominium. Sarah and Bill love the neighborhood—being near Prospect Park, the community, they love their building. The building staff take very good care of them and they are grateful to have wonderful neighbors. After a few recent renovations, they really love their new kitchen and bathrooms.

Sarah was recently interviewed by CBS about what it was like to be the production designer for the hit TV show “Bull.” The journalist was so intrigued by her and interested in her personal style that they did a photo shoot at the apartment. They loved all the collections, including Olive’s. Her colorful, eclectic room is a testament to the saying that “the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Roheta Wuftting is an architect, secretary of the LMA Board and president of the Rutland II Block Association.

Photographs for the Echo’s PLG House & Garden Tour feature are by Rutland II resident Martin Friedman.
Robert Thomason Fulfills His Retirement Dream: Touring the World on a Bicycle

by Milford Prewitt

Just when you thought 94-year-old Robert Thomason had made his last epic bicycle trip, he dashed off to Maryland one weekend this past October on his trusty 18-speed Cannondale. As grueling as the approximately 400-mile-round-trip ride from Prospect Lefferts Gardens to Maryland in a single weekend might be for even the most fit weekend warrior a third of his age, for Thomason it was virtually a couple of laps around Prospect Park.

In the past 30 years since his retirement as a merchant who pedaled 60 miles round-trip every day for 20 years from his Lefferts Avenue home to work at the Hewlett Woodmere Public Library in Nassau County, the 54-year-resident of PLG has seen more of this earth from his bicycle saddle than many frequent flyers will see from their window seats.

Only the most atrocious weather stopped him on his bicycling commute, and by his reckoning, there were maybe a half dozen of those over 30 years. The exceptional fitness and stamina he achieved during his working days provided the confidence that enabled him to fulfill a retirement dream: to see the world, revel in humanity’s diversity, continue his lifelong quest for trekin’ from his bicycle saddle than many frequent flyers will see from their window seats.

And once he’d started his long-distance biking resume, Boston and Baltimore were some early ports of call.

On every ride, he traveled alone.

Throughout his 30 years in retirement, Thomason—an unsung hero in the fight against unfair housing and discriminatory lending practices in PLG in the ‘60s and ‘70s—would take off on one of his cycling journeys roughly every five or six years. Despite traveling tens of thousands of miles over the globe, Thomason says he could never fathom riding on the streets of New York. “It’s just too dangerous,” he says.

A 20th Century de Tocqueville

His basement storeroom features several large plastic storage bins filled with diaries, notebooks, news clip scrapbooks, photographs, postcards, maps and other paraphernalia about his trips and the neighborhood’s drive for fair housing and diversity.

No matter the trip, Thomason ended nearly every night in the home of a host family that was part of an international bicycling support network where he diligently wrote in his diaries.

He would also worship with many of his hosts.

No trip personified his commitment to recording the day’s events more than his six-month trek in 1994, from April to November, from Brooklyn to San Diego.

“I knew I was in shape for a cross-country ride,” he says. “It was just a matter of having time. Retirement solved that problem.”

In 200-plus pages, typed single-spaced on an old-school typewriter, Thomason revealed himself to be a latter-day, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French sociologist, historian and journalist who traveled throughout the United States for nine months in 1831 and took copious notes on American government, politics, culture, men, and politics. Four years later, de Tocqueville produced his famed book, Democracy in America, renowned for its prediction that the U.S. would have a war between the states over slavery.

In Thomason’s case, he traveled to San Diego along the so-called U.S. highways, the small-town roadways that connected rural America and some medium-sized cities, when President Ronald Reagan was in office. Then as now, and just as de Tocqueville detected two centuries ago, Thomason noted a troubled nation: Factories were leaving for overseas or closing up, drug abuse among the young and poor was rising, families were disintegrating and income inequality was manifesting itself.

Slices of Middle America

A member of the League of American Wheelmen in Missoula, Montana—perhaps the oldest bicycling club in the U.S.—that gives cross-country bikers maps and a network of overnight stops in beautiful small towns, Thomason often found himself in some uncomfortable situations. He noted a blizzard of amusing, weird, and inspiring interactions.

First of all, it was the bicycling commute, and by his reckoning, there were maybe a half dozen of those over 30 years. The exceptional fitness and stamina he achieved during his working days provided the confidence that enabled him to fulfill a retirement dream: to see the world, revel in humanity’s diversity, continue his lifelong quest for traveling from his bicycle saddle than many frequent flyers will see from their window seats.

Greenlight’s Saturday afternoon Story Time is attracting families with young children. Recently, illustrator Mike Sung read from her book, “Harry and Eliza’s Adventure,” a charming tale that the partners thrilled the partners. “People have been so welcoming and so gracious and excited about the bookstore which is super satisfying. It’s sort of what we hoped it would be expected, but I think more so than we ever thought,” Jessica says. Workshops are particularly busy. Story Time on Saturday afternoon has quickly grown into a community favorite with families. They come for the reading, to see one another, and buy books.

Jessica and Rebecca are learning about what differentiates the PLG locations. “Our job is to bring in what people want,” Rebecca explains. As the partner in charge of inventory, she does this by “religiously watching what sells and responding to it.” She is finding PLG is more racially diverse and socially active. While fiction titles are strong sellers, a deeper and wider selection of nonfiction is selling here than in Fort Greene. Among their bestsellers: James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time, Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s We Should All Be Feminists.

In response to the times and to their customers, the store is launching the Civic Engagement Series: the last Monday of every month, they will host a nonprofit organization and give them the store space for an hour to lead an interactive session that gives people some tools for engagement. The first event, at the end of April, will be with the New York Writers’ Coalition, which offers writing classes to under-represented groups. Make the Road, which deals with working and immigration issues, will follow at the end of May. Bookstores are what Jessica calls “third place spaces”—not work, not home—but places you can go to connect with your community and its culture. “We are serving the literary culture that is already here,” Rebecca says. Both of Greenlight’s founders look forward to doing more to serve the PLG community by partnering with schools, organizations, and local businesses.
As a young person who grew up during President Roosevelt’s tenure and the only child of parents who hated to hate Roosevelt, Thomason says he nonetheless possessed an inherent sense of social justice and equality.

Thomason served in the Panama Canal during WWII. When VJ Day came, he recalls rushing to Times Square to “kiss every girl I could find.”

He earned a liberal arts degree in social studies and education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“...I was 21 or 22 and really didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life.”

After acquiring a teacher’s certificate to work in Chapel Hill’s school system, “I did want to do some teaching but the system was so restrictive and fearful of having an aimless life returned. 

“So I went to Yale Divinity School, thinking I’d do vocational counseling and work with groups.”

It was during his divinity studies that his love of a Christian God and commitment to social justice and equality were honed. He says he became deeply influenced by the humanism, spiritual inspiration and ethics of several professors, most notably H. Richard Niebuhr, who Wikipedia describes as “one of the most important Christian theological ethics in 20th century America.”

Please Don’t Sell

He met and married Jane in Springfield, Ohio where they both worked for a while, he as a guidance counselor at a settlement house and she as a sixth grade teacher in a country school.

But for someone who would help found a progressive community association and work with people in all manner of causes and movements, Thomason says he made a profound and ironic discovery about himself.

“I really don’t like working with groups,” he says. “I far prefer more enjoyable working with and helping individuals.”

That insight into his own psyche and the closing of the settlement house led him to acquire a library science degree at Columbia University, after which he began his long career as a librarian.

“Being a librarian was perfect for me because you are helping individuals,” he says.

He says one of his most memorable moments as a librarian was helping a student who was writing a book about a Civil War battle between North-ern black troops and Confederate soldiers. At the National Archives he located a copy of the handwritten battlefield map of the Northern general.

“This editor was thrilled and I was so happy to have helped him,” he remembers. “Just think, the library is saving me have fun.”

Thomason’s basement library has several large storage bins filled with news clippings, notebooks, newspapers, diaries, photographs, maps and other paraphernalia about the neighborhood’s housing battles, court filings and community meetings. However, much of his archive is in the Brooklyn Public Library main branch at Grand Army Plaza.

Most notable among the articles is one from 1975 when brokers’ sales tactics had reached such an outrageous fever pitch, the New York secretary of state ordered a moratorium on broker solicitations in PLG. Any broker violating the order could lose their license for life. It’s not clear when the moratorium was lifted. 

Looking at his long residency in PLG, Thomason says he is proud the neighborhood no longer suffers the racial animus and housing battles that plagued his decades here. But he is no fan of gentrification, which he believes destabilizes neighborhoods and can result in less economic and racial diversity.

“I think gentrification is a big problem,” he argues. “Everyday my neighbors get letters offering to buy our homes and some of my neighbors are selling. I tell them, don’t sell. But some are and are going back to the Caribbean or the American South. Others are being priced out. 

“But I’m not selling.”

Robert Thomason's Retirement Dream

(continued from page 4)

The families with whom he over - nighted. Here are a few examples of Thomason's repor tage: 

• In Pennsylvania he stayed with a farmer who thought Thomason's life was meaningless and his retirement pointless. To which Thomason fired back: “How safe is our democracy if citizens have to be directed by a boss to have a meaningful life?”

• In Frederick, Md., he saw class divi- siveness, income inequality and dis - placement as local reported media, and the average income was rising from 4500 to 5000, resu - lting in people paying half their monthly incomes on housing. “I prayed then that rich and poor might start talking to one another,” he wrote.

• In Summerville, Mo., he ran across an Am erican family. “And so I went to Yale Divinity School, thinking I’d do an easy job to fix, he worried about another’s.

• In Frederick, Md., he saw class divi- siveness, income inequality and dis - placement as local reported media, and the average income was rising from 4500 to 5000, result - ing in people paying half their monthly incomes on housing. “I prayed then that rich and poor might start talking to one another,” he wrote.

• Summerville, Mo., he ran across an American family. “And so I went to Yale Divinity School, thinking I’d do an easy job to fix, he worried about another’s.

• Summerville, Mo., he ran across an American family. “And so I went to Yale Divinity School, thinking I’d do an easy job to fix, he worried about another’s.

• In Franklinton, III., he watched firemen let a house burn down because the owner didn’t have a tank on his home to show that they neglected the 15-month -

Recalling House Tour’s Historic Role

(continued from page 1)

To Save their Block’s Character, Fenimore Neighbors Petition for Rezoning

Despite the economic and internal dysfunction that has thwarted Community Board 9 from greenlighting a community-wide rezoning plan in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, at least one block in the neighborhood is proceeding with a rezoning initiative.

Neighbors Petition for Rezoning

Community Board 9 from greenlighting a community-wide rezoning plan in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, at least one block in the neighborhood is proceeding with a rezoning initiative.

Actually, it’s half a block, on the southeast side of Moore Street between Bedford and Rogers Avenues. That’s where at neighbors from the Fenimore Block Street Association have won CB9’s sup - port as a co - petitioner to the Department of City Planning to study changing the block from an R6 zone to an R1 zone. Such a change would forbid the construction of buildings taller than the existing wood-frame homes that give the block its unique architectural character.

While it’s not a done deal, rezoning could be a turning point in the community’s development. The next issue of the Echo will delve into the process and examine what’s at stake.

In our fall 2016 lead story, “PLG Confasts a Great Divide,” the Echo made a couple of errors. Mayor de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo have both given 200,000 affordable housing units before he leaves office, nets 100,000. Also we failed to contact zoning study consultant Alicia Boyd, who we quoted saying that PLG is the most predominantly zoned neighborhood in Brooklyn. Point of fact, the 10226 zip code from Parkside Avenue to Foster Avenue (north to south) and New York Avenue to Coney Island Avenue (east to west) is not only the most densely populated area in the country. It’s also the thirteenth most dense in the country. The Echo regrets the errors.