

## **Religious Facilities Task Force - May 7<sup>th</sup> Presentation Transcript** (Zoom Generated)

**Daphna Ezrachi:** Good morning and welcome everyone to our Capstone presentation. My name is Daphni, we're going to go through our presentation momentarily. And I'll just start off by sharing my screen.

So we're just waiting for a few more people as we gather for this presentation of our Capstone final. Okay, just a few things before we start this presentation is for the Religious Facility Task Force organized by the Manhattan Borough President.

Everyone is on mute. But you can feel free to use the chat function throughout this presentation for questions or comments. Our presentation will be about 20-25 minutes and at the end we will have a Q and A session. We recommend that everyone move to speaker view while we're having our presentation.

So again. Good morning, and welcome to everyone. We want to start with some thank yous and introductions. First, we'd like to thank the Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, and the entire land you staff for walking us with us all year on this exciting project we are honored to be working on such an important topic. We also want to tap things the task force and all the participants.

Throughout the whole year your input in the sessions and with many of you in private interviews after have been crucial and I'm designing the book that you will be hearing about today. And I want to introduce my teammates who are here today. My name is Daphna Ezrachi and here with me today are Noel Myers Powell, Miles Martin, and Louise Hernandez.

And we're going to do today is very simple. We're going to talk about the book why it was created and how we worked on it, we're going to review the design of the book. How we thought of designing both visually. And in terms of user experience our deepest dive will be into the content of the book what every chapter includes so everyone here can get a sense of what we wanted to share with the public.

In terms of the resource and information presented and I'll finish with a Q & A with all of you. It's a really important thing to say that we would love to hear your feedback. As we have a few more days to a few more days in time to work on this spoken so your feedback will be welcome.

Are there any pressing questions at this moment?

Okay. And as I mentioned, you may use the chat feature as we continue through this presentation. And with that, I'm going to pass the mantle over to my colleague Noel who will kick us off and introduce the book.

**Noelle Meyers-Powell:** Thank you Daphni, so as we begin today, we wanted to provide you know a brief recap of action book project. This was a project that was started by the borough president's office. It was a project that really sought to create the resource of information for Manhattan religious organizations, especially as their leaders are making big decisions about their properties and spaces and whether or not they want to, preserve them develop them or find a space of their own. And so this project came about for a few different reasons. First and foremost, as we know, Manhattan is changing.

Gentrification is the reality for many of the borough's neighborhoods rents are increasing the cost to maintain property can become challenging over time. Paired with that, we're also aware that religious organizations are a huge asset to their neighborhoods. We've learned about halo effect and how religious Organizations actually provide a huge economic benefit to their neighborhoods because many of them tend to offer free social services. Things like food pantries and soup kitchens and children's. For example, this is a huge asset that we don't want to lose. Finally, religious leaders have questions. They're looking for information and the great part is, is that there's tons of information out there. We've learned that definitely through this project.

The challenge is more so that all this information just happens to not be house in the same place. And so this project really sought to consolidate information and to present it in a way to readers that you know it was written in a way that was accessible, that's approachable. And then above all else is helpful. Our team did a couple different things to collect content for the acting book until we attended the various passports meetings.

At the two public hearings that were coordinated by the borough president's office, we conducted individual research we partnered with beta NYC to analyze public data and trends. And finally, amongst the four of us, we conducted about 28 stakeholder interviews, nine of which were with religious organizations and their leaders. And these interviews really helped to inspire the content and the design of the actual book, especially chapter three which we'll hear about a little later in the presentation from my colleagues.

But there were some consistent and key takeaways that we wanted to highlight here now for you all. And so what really came to as religious leaders are making these decisions about their properties and spaces. It's important for them to be thinking about, you know, what do we own, and what do we want to do with what we own, and really this idea of goal setting from the onset and being intentional about setting goals.

Second to this, making sure that those goals and decisions are always correlated and corresponding to their core mission and values. Thirdly, that while it's useful to utilize internal resources within the congregation. It's also vital to utilize external expertise. There are many pro bono architects and appraisers who will offer their services for free or low cost really help religious organizations quantify the worth of their property, but also understanding and navigate that legal landscape sometimes can be account.

And finally, that communication is key. And so while these decisions are being made, it's still important to keep the organization in the loop. And to also be thinking about how these decisions while they may seem internal might have an external and greater impact on the neighborhoods where their properties are located. So with that, I'm going to turn over to my colleague Miles, we can add a little deeper into the acting book and he'll speak with you about the design.

**Miles Martin:** Thanks. Well, good morning, everyone. This is Miles speaking. I'm so before we walk through all of the specific content and other goodies that are inside of the book. We're going to just discuss the design, both in terms of the graphic design and in terms of the experience that a reader would have in using this book.

I can start off by saying that the borough president's office gave us a lot of freedom to create a vision for the graphics and for the structure and organization of the book. In addition to the content and we were happy to have this really good opportunity to make sure that the content and design would work together.

So from the beginning of this process, our team has sort of been talking about what the book will look like. And we've looked at examples of similar tools and reports and we've made different design prototypes to test all of our ideas for graphics fonts colors. Layout was one of the central goals for this process has been to make it really easy for anyone to access the information. So in terms of writing that meant using very accessible language that's inclusive on an easy to follow.

And then also in terms of design we've been trying to adopt best practices for different vision impairments or any accessibility concerns. We even wanted to make a document that reproduces well and photocopies are in different size devices, since we're thinking about how will this goes out into the world to help people. And we know that the design will not be a minor role in that.

So the Table of Contents page is a good example of some of the solutions we chose on the design. We went with use this lots of bold type and simple colors to help legibility we use color very minimally and case it's not something that can be reproduced but we do hope that you know having some small graphic details helps people find their way on and we develop some icons. And use that sort of iconography, to make it easier for people to move through the document quickly and keep everything tied together as one complete action book. So if you take a look at the draft version, you'll see that, we tried to have a consistent interconnected system to make it as easy to navigate as possible.

And since this action book is very information dense with lots of definitions and special call out citations case studies. We wanted to have a very precise way to organize all of that information. You can see there's, there's a lot of consistency and branding and the sort of aesthetic component of the design. And we thought this was important to you know to set this action book apart and to make sure that people see it as something that's addressing their specific needs to maybe create some avenues for this project to continue in the future so that after this past year of hard work that you've all contributed to.

This document and these conversations can live on any different projects on and the communications team with the borough president's office has also been instrumental in and helping to find this and disseminate it. And so our collaboration with them creates ways that you know they can share this product, and also that they can sort of preserve the work as it gets developed later on in the future. So with that said, we can move on to my colleague who is talking about the content.

**Luiz Hernandez:** Thanks Miles. So going into the project. We knew there would be two elements that would be crucial to producing a meaningful guidebook for those who read it. The first element was designed which Miles just spoke about. The second element was the written content. Do we have the right information will we be able to help a leader of a congregation navigate through how to best plan for their organizations future religious organization leaders and congregation members who are thinking through their options as it relates to their property and fulfilling their mission is the audience we had in mind when writing. We were aware that many readers of this guidebook might not be well versed in traditional reports from academics. So writing in an inclusive style is top of mind.

Each chapter includes case studies resource call outs and glossary terms. So someone who is reading from a page could take action or gain more information about something in the text without flipping to another page. The book is broken into eight chapters. I will go over the first for them and turn it over to my colleagues to run through the last for

The first chapter includes a guide on how best to read through the book an existing conditions report and some context as to why it all matters. We also included a new paragraph regarding Copa and its impact on religious organizations as well as links to stimulus resources they may be eligible for. Chapter two includes background on the intricate laws, rules and regulations that apply to the church facilities and nonprofits.

Among other things discussed in this chapter. Here's where we introduced the Attorney General's role in the sale of religious facilities. We also linked to a few resources provided by the Attorney General's office. In our view, the most important chapter of the book is chapter three will lay out a framework of how to approach planning for religious facilities future in 10 steps.

The chapter gives an overview of how to begin engaging and planning like rounding up appropriate documents such as deeds, or other property information. We also discuss what type of professional services should be brought in attorneys, appraisers, architects, etc.

The chapter also contains recommendations on internal congregation engagement as well as community engagement. This chapter was largely informed by the stakeholder interviews we conducted, many of whom sit on this religious facilities task for us. So we thank you for your cooperation and your input as we develop this book.

The middle part of the book focuses on three common issues we heard from religious leaders. Maintaining a building you want to stay in redeveloping or selling your property are currently in, and how to navigate without your own space.

In Chapter four, we discuss issues related to stay in place where you go over topics like landmark status and air rights. Land marking is a big topic among religious organizations as it helps preserve the buildings, but also adds cost for maintenance, among other things.

Here we share a lot of links and resources associated with land marking from the Landmarks Preservation Commission and also the New York City landmarks Conservancy.

Another topic of this chapter is air rights, we provided a case study of 100 year old church in Harlem called Bethel Gospel Assembly. They sold their air rights from a parking lot. They gave their parcel to a developer, which in turn built them a brand new chapel with a tower of housing on top of it. They were able to use the proceeds from the sale to further their programming and outreach efforts in the community and grow their congregation. This chapter also includes highlights house this chapter, also highlights how some congregations have decided to share or leased space to generate revenues and use space efficiently.

We say specific examples like St Anne's who rent out space for a school and Judson Memorial who rent out and share space for community events that align with their mission. I'll turn it over to Daphi will talk about selling and redeveloping space.

**Daphna Ezrachi:** Thank you, Luis. So, chapter five, really focused on congregations that want to redevelop their properties or seller properties and primarily for this chapter we spoke to multiple congregations, the first congregation we spoke to was Fort Tyron Jewish Center in Washington Heights and unfortunately, how they ran into a failed development process and the kind of the conclusions they learned fed in different tips and guidelines we presented in this chapter.

The second case study, we focused on was Shaare Zedek which is the third oldest Jewish congregation in Manhattan currently located in the Upper West Side, which sold its building to a developer and is building a new market rate development on site. We also spoke with the developers of the Rocky Mountain Baptist Church in Washington Heights and we're building a completely new 100% affordable housing senior development in which the first few floors will host the new spaces for the congregation. We mentioned environmental review which is unique to New York City and impact a project's timeline in many ways. We also mentioned community boards as an important resource.

We wanted to make sure the congregation's had a sense of these processes that could impact them as they try to redevelop their site. As I mentioned earlier, our main case study for this chapter was Shaare Zedek Synagogue. The Synagogue was demolished and is currently in construction of a new market rate residential building the Synagogue will own the basement and the first few floors will house its main sanctuary, offices, community rooms and nonprofit tenants. This process took many years and faced numerous obstacles like neighbors of the Synagogue, who tried to land market and prevent the redevelopment project.

One of the main lessons learned from this congregation was a need for an external set of advisors and consultants to make sure the project can forward. This chapter concludes with a list of best practices for real estate development both affordable and market rate, although our preference, of course, is to encourage more affordable housing development.

In chapter six, we discussed the challenges of congregations that do not own their space and looking for different types of spaces to rent, we discuss the challenges, these competitions face which are quite interesting in themselves. The first one is vacancy.

To actually find something in Manhattan is extremely difficult. It is even harder for our congregation for a religious congregation because they have the specific needs. They need not only a large enough space for prayer services, but they also need smaller spaces for children's activities during those services for events during the week and so on, but also storage for keeping the various materials they need when they are not in session.

These congregation congregations also mentioned that even when they find these spaces, they're often extremely expensive. And as emerging congregations often nondenominational cost is very is a big question. Lastly, these congregations mentioned the difficulty and actually fostering partnerships, both with other religious organizations or with non religious nonprofits. Actually, interviewees mentioned that there isn't always an openness among religious congregations to share spaces with these newer congregations, even if they are part of the same faith tradition or not.

In this chapter we give examples of interesting spaces that these congregations use schools music calls all rooms and movie theaters. Our main case study for this for this chapter is the Romemu Synagogue on the Upper West Side who partners with West End Presbyterian.

This partnership began because Romemu which was founded in 2006 did not own any property and we're looking for additional space to rent beyond a YMCA they were using. This partnership formed a meaningful and long-term relationship in which these congregations, not only share space, but now also hold events together. Bring congregants together and view the entire site that now does include a building that Roman who owns as one shared campus.

These congregations mentioned that they have many challenges, but also benefits of not owning properties and that they look forward to finding interesting and new possibilities of partnership development throughout throughout the borough. I'm going pass it on to Miles to finish up for the final chapters of our book.

**Miles Martin:** Thank you Daphni. After those more informational chapters we introduced some policy recommendations and I can share that the borough president's office really took the lead and writing and developing these recommendations on drawing on some ideas that came from nonprofits that are already focused on policy and advocacy, including many participants represented in this task force on and also the land use team. And of course, our facilitator Matt Dunbar and Borough President Brewer.

So those recommendations include some ideas for more information sharing for the entire faith community and the city as well as some more technical assistance that's offered for religious organizations that are going through some of these more challenging projects like a sale or redevelopment. So, that means, you know, bringing in HPD or the Attorney General's office or Community Boards that already play an important role. And, you know, sort of asking how can we streamline and provide support through these lengthy processes. Then also there's some recommendations included of just general land use rules and city budgeting to faith based organizations.

So that includes taking a look at the uneven distribution of historic districts on revisiting some of those policies and goals and also revising or clarifying some of the more restrictive rules and the religious organizations that provide social services encounter just to create more opportunities for religious organizations to access capital on especially in terms of managing their facilities.

And then about these recommendations. I just want to point out that on, you know, since the task force wasn't able to meet as frequently as planned, because of covert this year, these ideas are really just broadly outlined in this chapter, and they represent some of the initial goals and good ideas that could start a policy conversation about how to help religious organizations and we hope that, you know, including them all together with the rest of the book will really create some momentum for more change.

Then we close out the book with a chapter that collects together all of the different resources on. And so, you know, there have been clickable. Detailed links included throughout every chapter of this action book on and we wanted to round up all of these and add in more resources on at the end. So that you know you could you could still flow through the book and find external help, but then also you would have this this chapter. That's just a bit of a block of any resources that would be useful to consult on so some of those resources include city, state, federal agencies and organizations. Some organizations that provide funding support, whether you're building a landmark or not.

And some starting points for financing or permitting on that could help any organizations in a salary development process. And then of course vitally you know there's plenty of nonprofits who are working to support religious organizations, and that includes many of the groups that have been a part of this conversation in this task force from the beginning like enterprise partners list New York State Council of Churches, Partners for Sacred Places this many, many more. And then finally, we also want to document our process and some of the sources that we use for research, including very invaluable beta NYC research and then the many, many interviews that made this entire book possible who are also represented and the religious facilities task force. So, you know, just, just to summarize a major goal of this chapter, and also the action book overall is to sort of, you know, be thorough to make information accessible.

And to make sure that religious organizations that are, you know, looking at really difficult and complex decisions, don't hit any dead ends while they're looking for the information that they need. So wrapping that up. I can now hand things over to my colleague Noel who will make this a broader conversation with some Q & A.

**Noelle Meyers-Powell:** As Miles just mentioned, we're going to be ending the presentation portion of today's meeting and transitioning into the discussion. If you want to provide comments, questions feedback. You'd be able to either unmute yourself or as we mentioned earlier, we're monitoring the chat to be want to be able to contribute to the chat. You can throw a question or comment, make sure to address it in the larger group.

If you have questions today that we don't get a chance to answer address. Don't worry, you can go ahead and email it to the email address on the screen. RFTF@manhattanbp.nyc.gov.