

# DESIGN FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS

## A Critique of NYCHA Existing Exterior Conditions

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Grant Houses | South West Entrance

### INTRODUCTION

Public housing, on paper, is advertised as an amazing alternative for low income individuals in which they promise equal opportunity and promote a comfortable environment. Typically these claims are false due to a lack of funding for NYCHA (New York Housing Authority) which results in deplorable living conditions both indoors and outdoors. These living conditions subconsciously affect the resident's quality of life and well being which dictates their comfort, perception, and safety within the space. Unfortunately, the immediate neighborhood surrounding public housing is also typically subjected to systemic inequalities and uncoincidental juxtapositions. With

poor living conditions, neglect in maintenance, and no funds to address these issues, the quality of life for residents is compromised in which it decreases incoming opportunities to lead a prosperous life.

### CONTEXT

Grant Houses is located in West Harlem and borders Morningside Heights. This public housing complex consists of 10 apartment towers spanning 2 blocks from 123rd street to 125th street. During the 1940's, Morningside Heights Inc. (founded by Columbia University) lobbied for the displacement of residents using legislation and supported the construction of Grant Houses north of Morningside Gardens. This

was intended to create a buffer between Morningside heights and Harlem, segregating the differing demographics and economic classes.

The housing complex, like many other NYCHA projects, suffers from a lack of maintenance in which the exterior of most entrances are littered and neglected in terms of infrastructure. Despite all the obstacles that negatively impact the surrounding environment, Grant Houses is bright and lively during the day. At night, more problems become apparent as visibility becomes an issue with contrasting lighting conditions and varying intensities. This makes the space uncomfortable and less safe, causing underlying tensions among residents.

NYCHA

**“THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF WAYS THAT, ON PAPER, PUBLIC HOUSING IS A FANTASTIC ALTERNATIVE, AND HONESTLY IN THE PAST IT WAS,” DAVID ROBINSON, HOUSING LAWYER AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER OF THE MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS COMMUNITY COALITION, SAID. “SINCE THEN IT’S BEEN ALLOWED TO DETERIORATE, MOSTLY THROUGH LACK OF FUNDING AND SOME MANAGERIAL INCOMPETENCE.”**

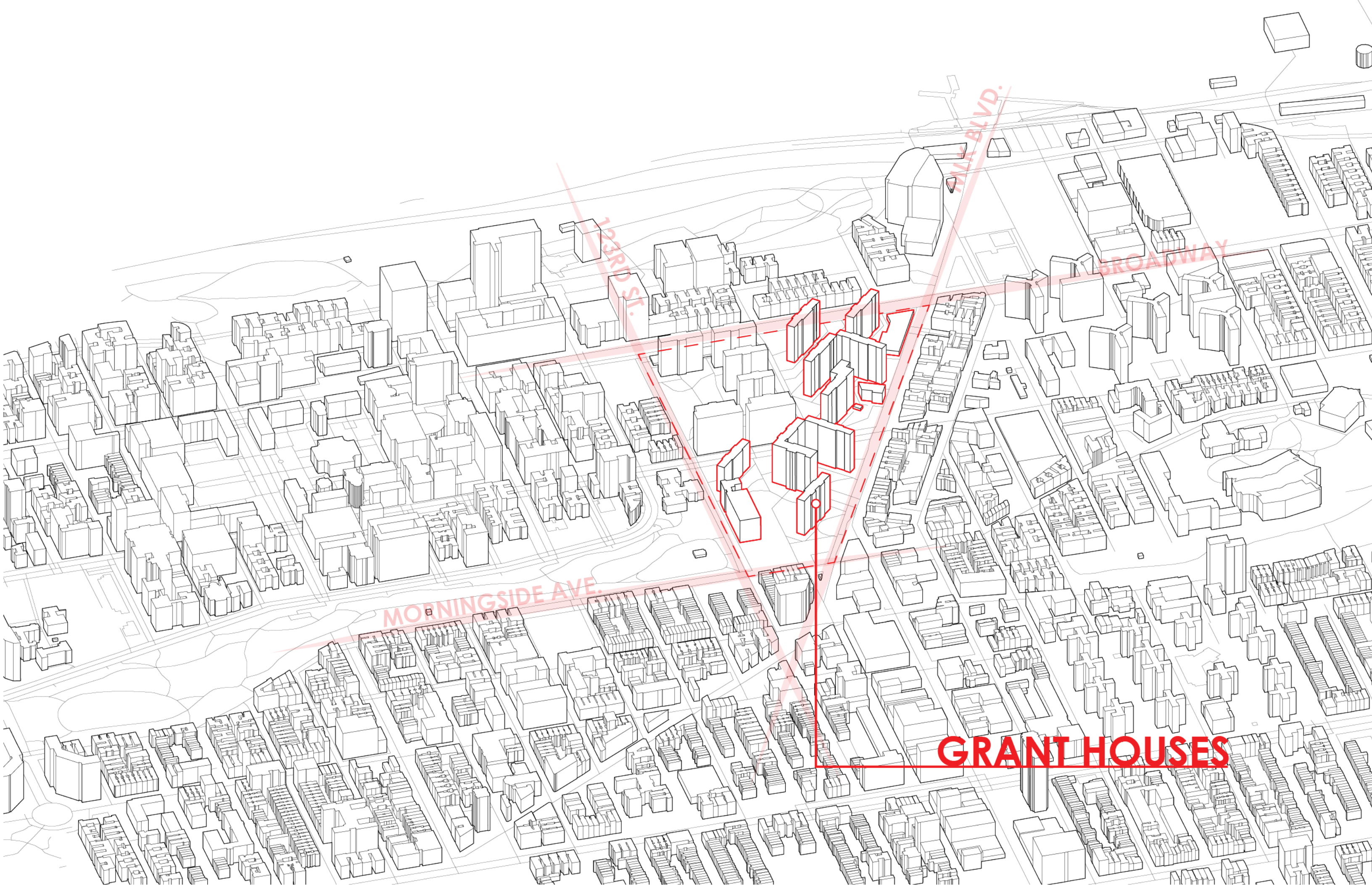
**- KATHERINE NESSEL (COLUMBIA SPECTATOR)**

NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) was established in 1934 and was previously regarded as “a progressive housing solution to fix New York City” (NYT) during the 1950's and 1970's. It was once and still is one of the most important resources for low income residents, but over time, the government has reduced funding for the organization. This caused neglect of maintenance for a multiplicity of housing projects which resulted in reduced staff and depleted resources. This also quickly affected the quality of life for some while others continue to deal with depleting infrastructure. The organization was previously selective with their residents in the 1950's, but in the late 1960's, loosened their selectivity, sparking an increase in crime, vandalism and drugs.



Elevator Outages | Photo by Rommel Nunez





123RD ST.

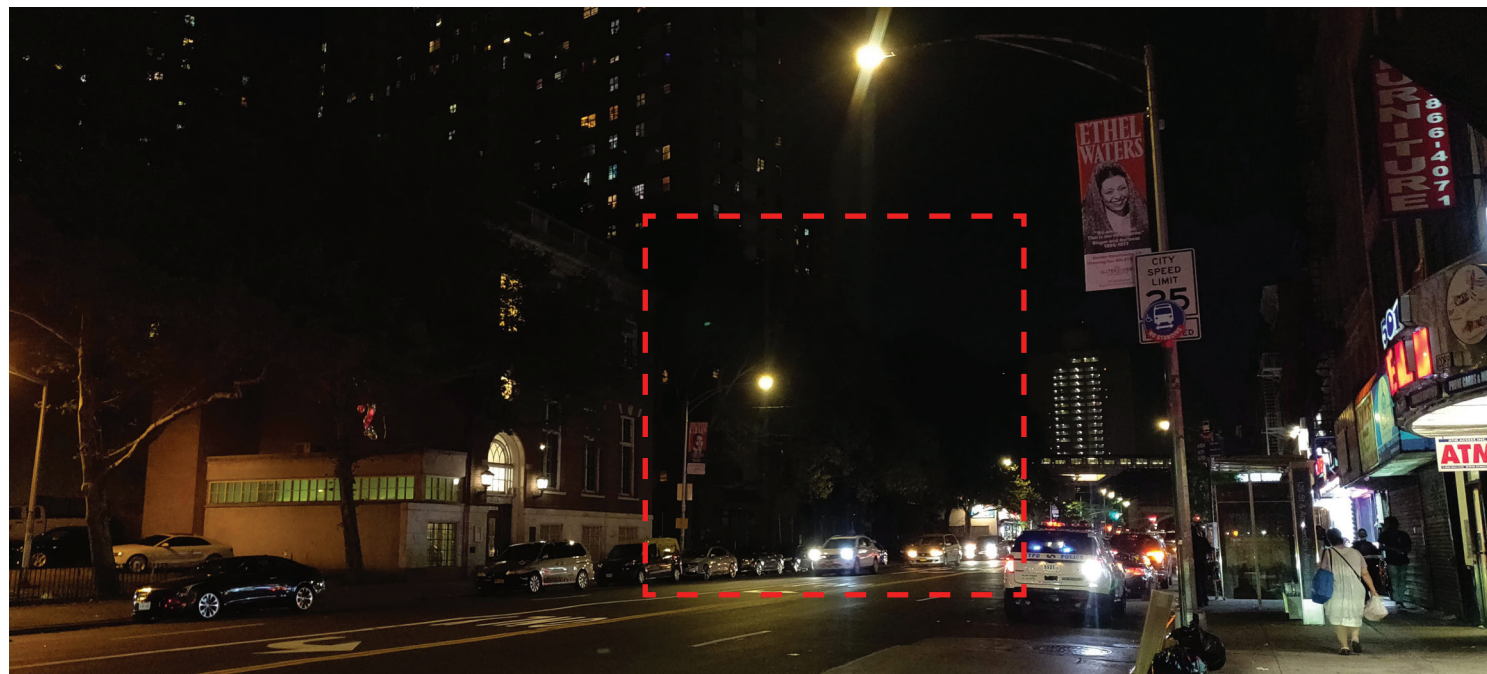
WALK BLVD.

BROADWAY

MORNINGSIDE AVE.

**GRANT HOUSES**





125th Street Day vs. Night

**EXISTING CONDITIONS**

During the day, Grant Houses towers over the neighborhood while being situated in a semi landscaped courtyard. At night the complex becomes barely visible due to inadequate lighting which turns into a safety hazard for residents simply looking to go home. NYCHA housing projects typically consist of two types of light sources - intense bright white and a heavily saturated yellow. These contrasting conditions decrease safety in which it makes it difficult for eyes to adjust from intense to low lighting conditions

(especially for aging eyes). The glare from the intense light source constricts the pupils which decreases vision and blinds the individual. This ultimately decreases safety while increasing discomfort. White light often also includes blue light which if exposed to long periods of time can cause adverse health effects such as disrupted sleep and changes in mood.

The intense light source, typically highlighting the front entrance creates a spotlight effect in which brighter does not mean safer. This spotlight effect highlights activity at the front entrance, sometimes

**“Glare from nighttime lighting can create hazards ranging from discomfort to frank disability.”**

- American Medical Association Council on Science and Public Health (2012)

**SATURATED YELLOW**

Produces dim lighting conditions that contrast the opposing bright white lights making it hard for eyes to adjust. This especially affects aging eyes.

**BRIGHT WHITE**

Outdoor lighting typically contains blue/white light. Long term exposure causes disrupted sleep and adverse health affects. Glare is also produced which decreases vision and increases potential dangers during the night.



The stark contrast in the Bright White lighting vs. Saturated Dim Yellow lighting decreases safety where glare constricts the pupils and shines directly into our eyes - making it blinding. These lighting conditions also makes it difficult for our eyes to adjust from high to low light conditions increasing discomfort and decreasing safety.





### SLEEP-WAKE CYCLE

Exposure to artificial light at night disrupts sleep, hormone secretion, neuropsychiatric, etc.



### MOOD CHANGE

Studies have shown (humans and animals), exposure to artificial light at night causes mood disruptions.



### INDOOR ENVIRONMENT

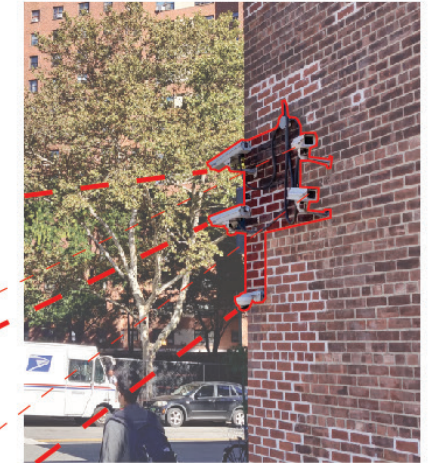
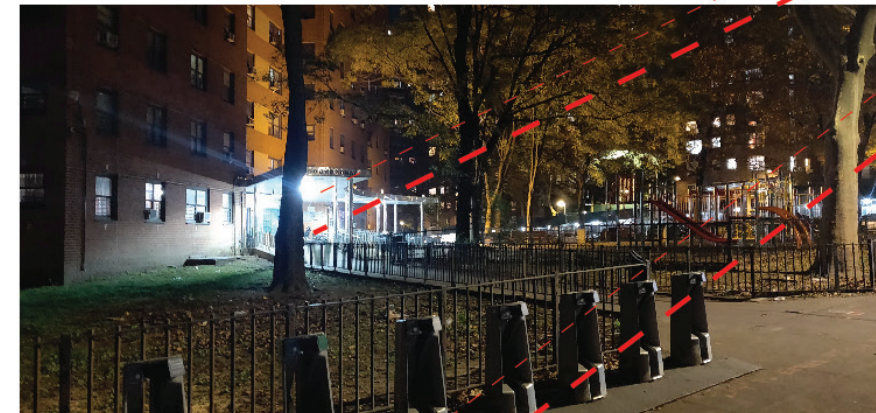
To prevent the strong bright light from disrupting the interior environment, residents are forced to purchase blackout curtains.



Lighting and Wellbeing

attracting unwanted attention. It also creates an uncoincidental juxtaposition in which oftentimes, security cameras are pointed directly at the light source to keep an eye on residents moving in and out of the building. Brighter lighting conditions do not equate to safety, rather it makes victims and property more visible to perpetrators and oftentimes more subjected to crime. While the front entrance of NYCHA buildings are often highlighted, the foot paths are not. The materiality of the pavement is dark which makes it less visible during the night. The glare produced by the entrance also makes it hard for one to navigate through the rest of the complex as it contrasts and blinds residents/visitors.

These inconsistencies in lighting not only affects visibility and safety, but also affects mental health and the overall well being of residents. Units located by the front entrance have a disadvantage in which residents are forced to buy blackout curtains to shield themselves from the intense exterior lighting. Not only does this affect one's sleep cycle, it also affects one's mood to be more irritable throughout the day.



### BRIGHTER DOES NOT MEAN SAFER

Poor outdoor lighting conditions decreases safety and increases discomfort. Brighter conditions do not equate to safer streets, rather it makes VICTIMS and PROPERTY more visible and vulnerable to crime.

**“It is also important that a change in texture or brightness in the visual array is associated with something important going on in the scene. In other words, something that draws one's attention within the scene should turn out to be an important object or boundary...If what draws one's attention and what is worth looking at turn out to be different properties, then the scene lacks coherence.”**

– Kaplan and Kaplan, 1988”



INTENSE DIRECT LIGHT FROM ABOVE  
=  
TENSE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT

CONTRASTING LIGHTING  
CONDITIONS

EXTERIOR LIGHTING AFFECTING  
INTERIOR LIGHTING



INCONSISTENT LIGHTING  
SATURATION

DARK PATHWAY















