

AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRIKES IT RICH

A major initiative aims to put housing research on par with other social programs. > *By Matt Sollars*

The MacArthur Foundation is funding a national affordable housing research effort to the tune of \$25 million over the next five years, MacArthur President Jonathan Fanton announced last week at a panel hosted by NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. The money will pay for research into the problems inadequate housing causes, plus the broad social benefits of decent housing. Fanton said housing has not received enough attention in recent years when compared to research on welfare, childhood learning and other social programs.

"Far less is known about the impact of decent and affordable housing, and it's time to give housing research its due," Fanton said.

The new initiative comes at a crucial time for affordable housing in New York City. According to the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), 29 percent of New Yorkers spend 50 percent of their income on housing. In recent months, the sale of the major affordable complexes Stuyvesant Town, Peter Cooper Village and Starrett City at record prices to private developers have highlighted the city's booming real estate market and erosion of affordable housing stock.

Fanton announced the funding before a crowd of more than 400 at the Tishman Auditorium at NYU Law School. To Fanton, the strong turnout from housing activists, experts, officials and concerned citizens underscores the need for comprehensive housing research. Though the research initiative has been in the works for nearly a year, MacArthur has not yet determined how the \$25 million will be distributed. The Furman Center seems well-positioned to receive a large chunk of the money, however, with its front-row seat to Mayor Bloomberg's \$7.5 billion plan to preserve or create 165,000 affordable housing units by 2013.

Denise Scott, New York managing director of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, speaking on a panel of housing experts and activists that followed Fanton's announcement, said she hopes the research will back up real-life evidence of the impact housing investment can have in a community. She pointed to housing investment as the catalyst for rescuing neighborhoods like the south Bronx and Harlem that suffered through the abandonment crisis 30 years ago.

Now those neighborhoods are threatened by their own success and risk losing their affordable housing, which could be just as bad for the city in the long run. "Once this affordable housing disappears, it's gone for good. You can't rebuild it, you can't recreate it," Scott said.

Another panelist, HPD Commissioner Shaun Donovan, who is in charge of implementing Mayor Bloomberg's ambitious housing initiative, agreed. "Well-planned, well-executed investment in housing and neighborhoods can rebuild communities," Donovan said.

Donovan put land use issues and the problems of segregation and settlement patterns at the top of his list of research priorities. Understanding these issues and how to design policies around them is crucial as the city moves from what Donovan calls "a challenge of abandonment to a challenge of affordability."

Scott and other panelists said that the new Congress and next presidential election present a unique opportunity to shape a national affordable housing agenda. Scott said that she hopes the MacArthur grant will further that agenda. "One way to keep the window open is to take a bold step forward," she said.

The MacArthur grant – which roughly equals the annual housing research budget at the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development – will be that bold step, Fanton said. The money will allow housing researchers to pursue "new open-ended inquiry that will take a hard look at the complex impact of housing, research that will push our vision beyond incremental policy reform," he said.

- **Matt Sollars**