

**CASE**
**PENN SOUTH**


Image: Todd Heisler / New York Times

**PROFILE**

**GEOGRAPHY:** United States

**AUDIENCE:**  
Low and moderate income working families

**ORGANIZATION:**  
Penn South (Not-for-profit Cooperative)

**DATE:** 1961 – Present

**DOMAIN:** Housing

**NEEDS ADDRESSED:**  
Participation, housing, protection, betterment, subsistence

**WHAT IT'S ABOUT:**

Penn South is an affordable complete low-impact thriving community of almost ten thousand people in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the world. It was not developed to communicate a message around sustainable living, nor was it conceived as an ecologically sustainable lifestyle project. However, it serves as a model of well-being on a small footprint which is not the norm for North American cities where increasing income typically leads to a greater environmental impact.

Penn South enables low- and moderate-income working families to live a dignified, high-quality life with amenities that are generally only accessible to the wealthy. Residents' low ecological impact is enabled by key features of this community: high quality dense housing in ten 24-story buildings, easy access within walking distance to amenities for all ages and health needs, access to excellent public transit, and its own park. The backbone of this project is its cooperative model of ownership and its dedication to building a sense of community.

Penn South (formally known as Mutual Redevelopment Housing) is a diverse community of all ages, races, and ethnicities, which are actively engaged in the self-management of their commons. It was built in 1961 through a collaboration between the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the City of New York. All buildings accommodate public indoor spaces for childcare facilities, and health and recreational activities; 65% of the land is reserved for open space (a very rare occurrence in Manhattan) that incorporates playgrounds, basketball courts, flower and vegetable gardens, and many trees and benches. Penn South is owned and operated exclusively for the benefit of its occupants. Each family has a modest equity investment in the project, is obligated to sell their unit back to the cooperative when they move out, and provide monthly payments (about one-third of comparable market prices) linked to family income. The City of New York provides tax relief to protect Penn South from the upward pressures of the hot New York housing market.

## PRINCIPLES IN ACTION

### STAKEHOLDER-FOCUSED



The very essence of Penn South is the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders: the community of occupants, many local NGOs and social service and healthcare delivery organizations, and local politicians. The residents are encouraged to actively participate in the civil life of the neighbourhood and larger city. The development's recreational clubs include a woodworking shop, sewing room, exercise club. Tickets to cultural events in the city are available at a deep discount. Stakeholder-focused communication is an important part of community building at Penn South. The monthly newsletter reports on the deliberations of the elected Board, updates residents on the housekeeping and financial issues, and broadcasts social events. Bulletin boards and leaflets announce new opportunities and events.

### BETTER LIVING



In essence, Penn South is a model for sustainability because it supports families on modest incomes and with low impact lifestyles to thrive. The cooperative also provides supports for better living to its residents through organizations including those helping the elderly.

### SYSTEMIC



All aspects of life are reflected in the design of this community: from providing childcare and elderly services, to facilities for indoor and outdoor recreation and cultural life, to access to public transit, medical services, shopping and other urban amenities. Penn South also benefits from supportive policy that provides tax relief to its occupants.

### DYNAMIC LIFE CHANGES



Penn South community is designed to meet the needs of all ages, from infancy to a very old (often highly dependent) age. Elderly residents for example, can access health screening and vaccinations, social workers, support in obtaining wheelchairs and other aids, and crisis management (Penn South [Social Services](#)).

### DIVERSITY



The Penn South community features a very high ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity among its residents. This diversity has been deliberately developed over the years. Penn South's social services and recreational options are designed to be sensitive to the wide range of residents and to build a community among them. Among numerous self-help and support groups there are those for women, men, bereavement, and others. The residents have access to Caucasian, Hispanic and African American social workers.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION



Penn South is structured around the collective community of the occupants with a self-governance model that assures all major decisions affecting the life of its residents are made through a democratic deliberative process. That includes the aspects relevant to sustainability, such as providing bicycle storage, maintaining green open space, upgrading buildings to higher energy performances, and limiting the number of private air conditioning units.

## RESPONSIVE



When Penn South first opened in 1961 it was heavily occupied by the Jewish working class of New York, reflecting the membership of the labour union that created it. By the 1990s the garment industry in New York had largely disappeared and the original population of Penn South was rapidly ageing. The leadership made a conscious decision to diversify the community by encouraging younger families and people representing various ethnic and cultural groups to move to Penn South. Like the collective action dimension of Penn South, this kind of responsiveness is built into the democratic and highly participatory system of self-governance.

Image: Wikimedia Commons



## MORE INFORMATION

<http://www.pennsouth.coop/handbook/2011.pennsouth.handbook.publicpages.pdf>

<https://www.pennsouth.coop/>

<http://scorai.org/blog/sustainable-consumption-and-wellbeing-on-a-modest-carbon-footprint-penn-south-an-affordable-urban-community-in-new-york-city/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penn\\_South](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penn_South)

<http://pennsouthlive.org/social-services>

[http://www.pennsouth.coop/Secure/PrivatePages/NoFuntionPages/governance\\_comm.html](http://www.pennsouth.coop/Secure/PrivatePages/NoFuntionPages/governance_comm.html)

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