What Was Not Said
A Response to Mayor Bloomberg's State of the City Address
by Arnold S. Cohen

The most meaningful speeches delivered during tough times often stay with us as defining moments of those times. But sometimes a moment is defined more by what is <u>not</u> said. That was certainly the case last week in Mayor Bloomberg's State of the City address.

The Mayor appropriately focused on the resilience of the City. He spoke of strides made in the City's economy despite the flagging national economic scene. Of success in securing the safety and livability of our great metropolis. And of the City's continuing power of promise for immigrants, entrepreneurs, young people – even for tourists – from the world over.

He also made the sanguine observation that progress is not guaranteed, "It's up to us to create it." And he prodded us to continue to work together, as New Yorkers, to "focus on what is truly important: winning the big game."

So it was particularly painful to those of us who work daily with those New Yorkers desperately clinging to the hope that the New York success story might one day belong to them, too, that they were virtually nowhere to be found in the Mayor's speech.

I am referring of course specifically to the more than 35,000 New Yorkers who "officially" today remain homeless and living in shelters, but also to the many who are homeless but under the radar or on the brink of losing their homes.

The Mayor made no mention of those who are experiencing homelessness – 75% of whom are now families with children. There was no rallying cry to "re-imagine a brighter future" that explicitly includes these constituents. If homeless New Yorkers were there are at all, it was as shadows hovering behind other matters.

Perhaps my complaint seems unfair. The Mayor did talk admirably about jobs creation and spurring small businesses. He mentioned further reducing "the welfare rolls" by helping people become self-sufficient, and reducing truancy and increasing summer jobs for young people – all positive developments.

But when he talked about "transforming" neighborhoods with new shops and parks and attractions, he could have also talked about rebuilding neighborhoods in the heart of the

City's low-income areas by creating real, vibrant centers of community life with sufficient, safe, and affordable housing.

When he spoke about "launching business incubators that will hatch more start-ups in new media, fashion, the arts and other industries where innovation is key," he could have also laid out an innovative plan to connect these new entrepreneurs with the people whose self-sufficiency is dependent on *career* development – not just placement in low-wage jobs.

The Mayor's comment that "one of the best ways we can prevent crime from occurring is by listening to community members," is crucial to be sure, but how much more visionary would it have been to also talk about how listening to the community could be used to prevent homelessness, including partnerships with community leaders, residents, and businesses for this express purpose?

And when the Mayor reflected that "We can look back and continue funding a government operating system that was built for another era. Or we can look forward, continue rebounding, continue growing, continue forging ahead and leading the nation," it would have been a perfect moment to describe how the City might work in new, courageous ways with community-based organizations and other non-profit organizations to break with old habits on addressing homelessness and start partnering on efforts that achieve long-term change.

These were the things left unsaid, and I believe we are the poorer for it.

If the Mayor is right that "the future starts here," in this City, then let's resolve together to be a model for a future that underlineexplicitlyunderline includes *all* of our citizens. Otherwise, as the Mayor acknowledged, "progress is not inevitable." Like the Mayor, I believe we have the right stuff to do it. Unfortunately the Mayor missed a golden opportunity to inspire and lead us in that direction.