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The Strange Career of Public Housing

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Public Housing Timeline, 1933–1993

- 1933:** Creation of the Public Works Administration's Emergency Housing Corporation as part of the National Recovery Act. The program authorizes the federal government to clear slums and to construct low-income housing.
- 1934:** The National Housing Act of 1934 establishes the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to back long-term, self-amortizing mortgages and to offer federal mortgage insurance.
- 1937:** Passage of the Housing Act of 1937 (Wagner-Steagall). The Act establishes the United States Housing Authority (USHA), which offers loans and subsidies to local housing agencies for the construction of public housing projects.
- 1940:** The Defense Housing and Community Facilities and Services Act (Lanham Act) authorizes the use of federal public housing funds for defense industry workers.
- 1944:** The Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) provides mortgage loan guarantees for home purchases by veterans as well as funds for higher education.
- 1947:** Congress establishes the Housing and Home Finance Agency to consolidate and oversee most federal housing programs, including public housing.
- 1949:** Passage of the Housing Act of 1949 (Taft-Wagner-Ellender), authorizing slum clearance, funds for the FHA, and the construction of 810,000 public housing units.
- 1954:** The Housing Act of 1954 sets new targets for public housing and jump starts the urban renewal program.
- 1956:** The federal government commits to the expansion of public housing for the elderly with the Housing Act of 1956 and creates a pool of relocation funds for people displaced by urban renewal.
- 1959:** Section 202 of the Housing Act of 1959 provides direct loans for the first time to nonprofit groups for the construction of low-income elderly housing.
- 1961:** The Housing Act of this year authorizes the FHA to insure mortgages for privately owned low-income rental housing.
- 1965:** Congress establishes the Department of Housing and Urban Development as a cabinet-level agency.
- 1966:** As part of President Johnson's Great Society, Congress creates the Model Cities program to target federal funds and programs toward local government planning efforts in distressed cities.
- 1968:** Under Section 235, the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 creates a program to spur low-income homeownership through FHA-insured private housing construction and rehabilitation. The program suffers from massive fraud, costing taxpayers billions of dollars.
- 1969:** The Brooke Amendment limits the rent paid by public housing tenants to 25% of their income (later raised to 30%), necessitating an increase in federal annual subsidies to public housing authorities.
- 1970:** As a predecessor to Section 8, the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970 establishes the Experimental Housing Allowance Program to subsidize the rents of low-income tenants in privately owned buildings.
- 1973:** President Nixon places a moratorium on all new conventional public housing projects except those devoted to elderly residency.
- 1974:** The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 consolidates various U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding streams into the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The Act also establishes the Section 8 housing programs.
- 1976:** U.S. Supreme Court issues decision in *Hills v. Gautreaux*. The court ruled unanimously that HUD contributed to racial segregation in Chicago through discriminatory practices and could be held liable. A consent decree eventually led to relief payments to 25,000 people.
- 1977:** After a long fight, housing activists push Congress to pass the Community Reinvestment Act, which requires banks to report their lending practices in neighborhoods where they gather deposits.
- 1983:** The Housing and Urban-Rural Recovery Act introduces the Section 8 voucher program, which provides tenants with rental subsidies that are more flexible and portable than the original Section 8 certificates.
- 1986:** Congress authorizes the Low Income Housing Tax Credit to spur the construction and rehabilitation of low-income housing.
- 1993:** Congress authorizes the Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program, or HOPE VI, to provide public housing revitalization grants to local governments. The program seeks to replace high-rise public housing projects with low-rise, mixed-income housing. HOPE VI is ongoing.

The Strange Career of Public Housing

Policy, Planning, and the American Metropolis in the Twentieth Century

Joseph Heathcott

Problem, research strategy, and findings:

Efforts to account for the history of public housing in America are fraught with competing narratives. Many scholars, policy analysts, architects, and planners seek explanations for the successes and failures of housing projects from within the program itself. Some argue that projects rise and fall based on the management performance of housing authorities, while others look to racism, concentrated poverty, crime, and other social conditions. For many, the challenges faced by public housing result from the alienating and dehumanizing qualities of modernist architecture. Still, others argue that the Housing Act of 1937 was compromised from the beginning and, thus, produced compromised results. This article acknowledges all of these factors as important yet insufficient to account for overall public housing performance; it reframes the narrative of public housing within broader urban conditions, suggesting that the fate of public housing is intimately tied to the fate of the cities that surround them.

Takeaway for practice: Current accounts of the fate of public housing tend to reflect narrow managerial, planning, and architectural concerns. As a result, the literature on public housing insufficiently informs long-term policy decisions and planning practices. Solutions will only emerge when policymakers and planners take into account the impact of capital flight, social disinvestment, and the weak powers of cities to overcome such obstacles. After all, these urban conditions apply as much to recently created HOPE VI neigh-

The story of public housing in the United States is typically told in one of two ways. The first version narrates public housing as a fall from grace. In this story, public housing unfolds as a set of good intentions gone awry amid legislative shortsightedness, bureaucratic machinations, and architectural conceits. Without the constant attacks by conservative interests, the programmatic mismanagement by local authorities, or the hubris of architects and planners in thrall to Corbusien visions, public housing could have thrived. The second version narrates public housing as doomed to fail. In this version, public housing unfolds as a program hopelessly compromised from the beginning. Numerous features prefigure the program's downfall in this account, including legislative compromises, built-in racial segregation and poverty concentration, and managerial disincentives. Although drawing on different tropes and literary conventions, these stories have one key feature in common: an inexorable arc of decline.

The purpose of this article is not to replace a declension narrative with a narrative of progress, that is, to substitute a story of failure with one of success. Instead, the article presents the conventional public housing program as historically contingent, emerging from deep moral ambivalence and constant political struggle over the terms of American governance. In substance, then, this is an account of the conventional public housing program from its origins in social reform movements of the 19th century to its consolidation under the Wagner-Steagall Act to its termination by the Nixon Administration in 1973. In form, it is an effort to analyze the always incomplete, contested, and divided nature of American public housing.

borhoods as to the high-rise public housing neighborhoods they replaced.

Keywords: public housing, housing policy, Housing Act of 1937, slum clearance, urban renewal

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Origins of Public Housing

"I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," observed Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his second inaugural address. "But it is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out" (Various, 2009, p. 273). FDR's 1936 landslide reelection came four years into the massive expansion of government in the economic and social life of the nation known as the New Deal. Although the mid-term elections of 1938 would curtail this expansion, for the time being it seemed that the New Deal might fundamentally reshape the nation. For housing advocates, it was the chance of a lifetime to push for the passage of major new legislation for the one-third of a nation ill-housed.

The housing movement in America emerged in the 19th century from transatlantic moral, social, and technological discourses constellating around the basic idea that public problems required public solutions (Lubove, 1962; Rogers, 2000; Vale 2000). Settlement houses, influenced by Toynbee Hall in London, provided the bedrock of the early movement, an archipelago of community spaces in cities such as Chicago, Baltimore, New York, and St. Louis, where people met to discuss ideas and to serve immigrant and poor families (Addams, 1999; Davis, 1985). Campaigns by reform organizations, such as the Octavia Hill Association in Philadelphia, used maps, charts, and photographs (see Figure 1) to alert the public to conditions in America's urban slums. In New York City, the New Tenement Law of 1901 drew on Dutch innovations in limited dividend housing, and applied ideas about human need for light, air, indoor plumbing, and adequate space (Friedman, 1968). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, progressive industrialists created model company towns in Chicago and Detroit, while limited liability organizations such as the Russell Sage Foundation and the New York City Housing Corporation planned new high-density, large-scale developments on suburban land (the latter planned Sunnyside, where Lewis Mumford resided). In World War I, the shortage of housing for war production workers led the federal government, for the first time, to establish a handful of small developments under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor (Bauman, Biles & Szylvan, 2000; Plunz, 1990).

None of these interventions proved catalytic in changing the way Americans housed themselves. In the 1920s, however, a new housing movement began to take shape. Consisting of a loose network of architects, planners, public health advocates, and journalists influenced by European modernism, the movement coalesced around



Figure 1. Photograph (c. 1900) of slum conditions in Philadelphia, taken by the Octavia Hill Association, a settlement house and reform group. Source: Courtesy of the Temple University Urban Archives.

organizations such as the National Public Housing Conference, the Labor Housing Council (LHC) of the American Federation of Labor, and the Regional Plan Association (RPA; K. Jackson, 1987; Radford, 1996). RPA Executive Secretary Catherine Bauer emerged as an especially gifted leader and organizer. Influenced by the work of Edith Elmer Wood and Lewis Mumford, her ideas about housing took shape in the late 1920s and early 1930s through a series of European travels, lectures, and articles that culminated in the publication of her landmark book *Modern Housing* (Bauer, 1934; Oberlander & Newbrun, 1999).

Modern Housing distilled two decades of discourse and debate, drawing heavily on early theories of Benjamin Marsh and Frederick Howe about comprehensive land use planning, and on European examples of modernist mass social housing. Bauer's (1934) book offered a blueprint for a future of large-scale, government-backed mass housing production. She advanced two powerful arguments: Government must intervene where the market has failed to provide a basic human need; and the most desirable, rational, and humane mode of intervention should take the form of well-designed mass housing for the working class. If not original arguments, Bauer presented them with such clarity and power that they came to anchor the growing housing movement, providing a touchstone for future action at the legislative level (Oberlander & Newbrun, 1999).

Housing and the New Deal

Bauer's (1934) book appeared in the depths of the global crisis of capitalism known as the Great Depression. It proved a fertile period for new ideas about the relationship between the citizen and the state, and the role of government in the national economy (J. Smith, 2009). After the stock market crashed, one after another financial institutions collapsed from illiquidity, housing starts ground to a virtual halt, new orders for consumer durables evaporated, and industries laid off workers by the millions, 2 million in the construction trades alone. By 1932–1933, the unemployment rate reached a dire 25%, and gross domestic product fell back to the levels of the early 1920s. The first 100 days of the Roosevelt Administration produced the New Deal, concretized in the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) and a slew of agencies and authorities (Badger, 1989; Leuchtenberg, 1963; McElvaine, 1993).

Amid the intellectual and bureaucratic tumult of the early New Deal, Edith Wood and other housing advocates with close ties to the Roosevelt Administration successfully lobbied for the creation of a housing program under the National Industrial Recovery Act. Established in 1933, the law set a precedent by targeting the oft-theorized *submerged middle class*, those working families who could afford to pay higher rent but could not find decent housing, and who simply needed a leg up to enter the middle class. The new law authorized the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA), headed by progressive planner Robert Kohn, to supply low-interest loans to limited dividend corporations for the construction of affordable housing for the submerged middle class. In Philadelphia, for example, the PWA funded the American Federation of Hosiery Workers to build the Carl Mackley Homes, designed by renowned modernist architects Oscar Stonorov and Alfred Kastner (Radford, 1996). In St. Louis, the Neighborhood Association Settlement House secured a PWA loan to construct the 252-unit Neighborhood Gardens (Heathcott, 2011). The largest of the early PWA projects, Hillside Homes in the Bronx, designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, contained over 1,400 units. Nevertheless, the program proved largely unsuccessful because it depended on the existence of qualifying entities primed to build low-cost housing, and the rents that had to be charged to repay the loans put the projects out of reach of most low-income households (Friedman, 1968; Radford, 1996).

With only seven such projects underway by 1934, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes authorized the PWA Housing Division to shift to direct development of projects on a larger scale. The new policy resulted in the creation of

52 additional projects, including the Julia Lathrop Homes in Chicago, Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, Lockefield Gardens in Indianapolis, Parklawn in Milwaukee, and Techwood Homes in Atlanta (Figure 2). With their low-rise profiles, careful landscape designs, and numerous amenities, PWA projects constitute some of the best government-backed housing ever built. Still, the PWA program proved too costly and slow to have any affect on the nation's critical shortage of decent, affordable housing. Like the first-round projects, the rents required to offset the projects' expenses proved too high for most inner-city families. By the time the final project was completed, the program had only created 29,000 units.

Meanwhile, Congress passed the National Housing Act of 1934 to resuscitate the moribund private housing market. Funded under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Act created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) with the goal of using public capital to reduce private risk. Congress charged the FHA to operate residential mortgage insurance programs that allowed for longer-term and lower-interest amortization, bringing home ownership into reach for millions of families for the first time. Additionally, the Act authorized the creation of the secondary mortgage market to inject liquidity into housing; banks could sell their mortgages through the FHA market in order to raise capital for further investments in mortgages and home building. While exhibiting a clear bias toward new construction of uniform single-family homes for White occupants, the Act would nevertheless democratize access to ownership for many working-class and middle-class families in the decades to come (Hays, 1995; K. Jackson, 1987; Schwartz, 2006).



Figure 2. Techwood Homes, Atlanta (c. 1940). Techwood, originally built for White families, was among the largest of the Public Works Administration projects.

Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

After Roosevelt's reelection in 1936, housing advocates stepped up their campaign for major legislative action. Two competing housing bills had already been submitted to Congress, one coauthored by leading settlement house activist Mary Simkovich and her long-time ally Sen. Robert Wagner (D-NY), the other coauthored by Catherine Bauer (now director of the Labor Housing Conference) and Rep. Henry Ellenbogen (D-PA). Through 1936 and 1937, Wagner and Bauer teamed up to coauthor the compromise bill. The new version emphasized Wagner and Simkovich's commitment of equivalent elimination of one substandard property for every new unit built, which curtailed expansion of the housing stock.

The new bill also established a rent ceiling of 20% of a household's income (later raised to 25% and then 30%), a provision that benefitted worthy low-income families but repelled many middle-class renters. Finally, while Bauer favored direct federal control of public housing, the political and legal realities required devolution to local governments (Hunt, 2005). After all, direct federal action had proved sluggish, and in any case courts consistently ruled to restrict the federal government's powers of condemnation. While local control would speed up the process, it would also result in the continuation of the PWA's practice of building racially segregated projects.

Wagner introduced the compromise bill with Rep. Henry Steagall (D-AL), then chair of the House Banking Committee. The bill had the support of organized labor, civil rights groups, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Notoriously, southern conservative Sen. Harry Byrd (D-VA) introduced an amendment that imposed drastic cost ceilings on new projects that amounted to \$5,000 per unit. Wagner and Bauer understood that the only way to advance the program politically was to accept the Byrd amendment. On September 1, Congress passed the U. S. Housing Act of 1937 (Wagner-Steagall) as amended into law. The Act directed the Secretary of the Interior to create a semiautonomous agency, the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA). To head the agency, Ickes selected Bauer and Wagner's preferred candidate, Nathan Strauss (Oberlander & Newbrun, 1999). With funds appropriated, the conventional phase of public housing was born.

Public Housing in Depression and War

Passage of Wagner-Steagall did not guarantee the production of public housing in America. Rather, the principles of federalism required an intricate series of steps to coordinate the various levels of government. The USHA, along with a series of regional Public Housing Authorities (PHAs),

provided capital, technical service, and oversight. First and foremost, however, it was up to the states to opt into the program. States had to pass legislation that enabled cities to create state-chartered municipal corporations, called *housing authorities*, to exempt these entities from taxation and to provide them with powers of eminent domain. Within the first year of Wagner-Steagall, 30 states had passed enabling laws. In many states, issues of tax exemption and eminent domain caused lawmakers to balk at the program; Missouri, for example, did not pass enabling legislation until 1939, and Iowa held out until 1960.

The cities, for their part, also had to opt in, but could only do so if their state had passed enabling legislation (Bingham, 1975). Once such legislation existed, city lawmakers were required to pass ordinances of their own to request a state charter for a housing authority and to define the scope and limits of its operation. In most cases, a free-standing commission governed the housing authority, with appointments made by a combination of the mayor, city council, and governor or designee. Typically the commission reflected the supporters of the local regime, with representatives from labor unions, downtown business interests, civic organizations, religious groups, professionals, and, in some cases, leaders from the African American community. The commission hired the executive director, who, in turn, hired and managed the staff. Some directors worked in relative obscurity, while several achieved national recognition, such as Elizabeth Wood in Chicago and Ernest Bohn in Cleveland.

To undertake public housing development, local legislatures first had to pass ordinances to declare areas blighted before housing authorities could compel land purchases, clear slums, and build new projects. Funds for the work came from congressional appropriations to the USHA, funneled through the regional PHAs, covering up to 90% of the cost to compensate property owners, clear the site, upgrade infrastructure, and construct the buildings. Most of these funds, however, did not come in the form of grants; rather, the federal government funded public housing through long-term (60-year), interest-free mortgage loans to the local housing authority. Local authorities retired these loan debts primarily through bond issues, rather than direct taxpayer subsidy (Schwartz, 2006). In either case, the large, predictable contracts ensured the enthusiastic support of big construction firms. Finally, while housing authorities received small annual contributions from the federal government to close the gap between income and expenditures, the bulk of operations and maintenance had to be funded through tenant rents.

If public housing arrived as a compromise program, it produced compromised results. On the one hand, the fact



Figure 3. Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, soon after its completion in 1940. Built to house Black families, the project reflects the growing austerity of the public housing program.

Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

that Congress created the program in such a deeply private culture constitutes a signature accomplishment, and illustrates the profound impact of the Great Depression on governance and society. At the same time, the program proved more difficult to launch than expected. Legal challenges, hesitant state legislatures, federal cost cutting, and the Great Recession of 1938–1939 all took a serious toll on the ability of the government to move projects off the drawing boards. The rapid buildup of war production after 1940 further diverted funding and materials from the conventional public housing program. By 1945, only 165,000 units had been built (Friedman, 1963).

Planning and design of USHA projects reflected the ambivalent position of public housing (Figure 3). Against the wishes of many housing advocates such as Bauer and Mumford, Nathan Strauss opted to prioritize the production of the maximum number of units, rather than to create fewer units of higher quality. In order to achieve these numbers, Strauss directed housing authorities to eliminate most community spaces, abandon novel building configurations, and reduce room sizes and quality of appurtenances. Such extensive cost cuts yielded stripped-down environments that were far more austere than those created by PWA (Radford, 1996). Projects such as the Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, San Felipe Courts in Houston (TX), Elyton Village in Mobile (AL), and Puerta de Tierra in San Juan (Puerto Rico) arrayed relatively featureless buildings in barracks formations with minimal landscaping or amenities. Meanwhile, site selection reflected progressive aspirations to eradicate slum conditions, but the location of projects deepened racial segregation. Nevertheless, early

residents routinely reported that the projects offered a substantial increase in the quality of their living environment. Many experienced indoor plumbing, central heat, and onsite services for the first time (Fuerst & Hunt, 2005; Heathcott, 2011).

With the approach of war, housing became a particularly acute national issue. In preparation, the USHA, along with many other federal building programs, shifted to the newly created Federal Works Administration (FWA), which put all construction programs on a wartime footing. Beginning in 1940, the FWA designated over 65,000 units of public housing either completed or under construction to serve defense workers (Figure 4). The Defense Housing and Community Facilities and Services Act of 1940, otherwise known as the Lanham Act, expanded the process, authorizing the use of public housing appropriations to build housing, health clinics, schools, childcare, and recreation facilities for workers in the defense industry (Crawford, 1995). Under the Lanham Act, authorities further consolidated federal home programs into the National Housing Agency (NHA). From 1940 to 1945, the FWA and NHA built 700,000 units of housing, much of it in the form of temporary and modular homes, along with some 200 permanent projects such as the Sojourner Truth Homes and Herman Gardens in Detroit, and Aliso Village and Normont Terrace in Los Angeles (Szyllan, 2000).

After the war, the NHA undertook a massive plan to liquidate and dispose of the defense industrial housing stock. The largest share of this stock, consisting of temporary modular housing, found its way to the scrap heap or was sold off to commercial and institutional buyers. The

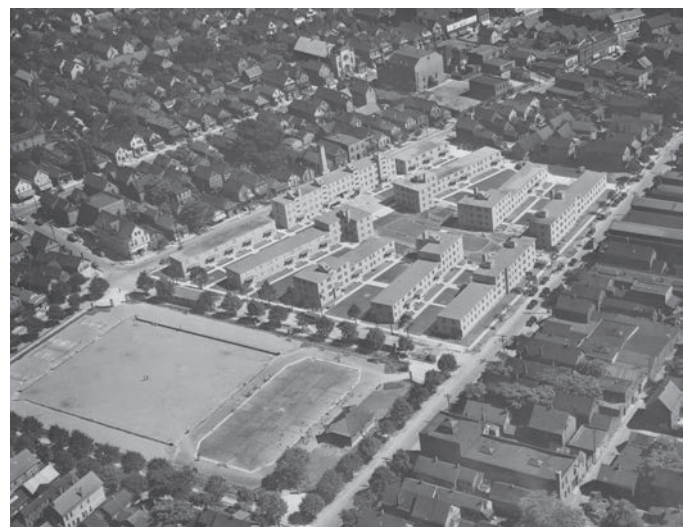


Figure 4. Willert Park Courts, Buffalo (NY), c. 1940. The Buffalo Housing Authority expanded the project under the Lanham Act to include defense housing.

Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

permanent projects were first devoted to housing returning servicemen, and later offered for purchase through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) by veterans and their families. The NHA converted a small portion of the permanent projects (around 2%) to add to the roster of public housing. The war had produced a wide range of innovations in the development and construction of low-cost modular homes, but had added little to the overall stock of permanently affordable housing.

A New Start for Housing

Even before the war's end, planners and policymakers evinced concern about the shape of cities in the decades to come. With the war came a modicum of economic recovery, but it was far from certain whether the country would hold onto these gains or lapse back into economic depression (Bennett, 1999). The housing situation looked especially dire. Between 1932 and 1945, the meager efforts of the USHA and FWA had produced fewer than 200,000 permanent units of public housing, and two-thirds of these were replacement units that did not add to the overall supply of affordable housing. These shortcomings, alongside the general collapse of the private home building market, coupled with the inevitable explosion in new family formation after World War II, suggested to most planners that a housing crisis of unprecedented proportions loomed in America's near future. At least 3 million new units would be needed immediately.

The first tentative step in this direction came with the passage of the landmark Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly called the GI Bill), which provided funding to veterans for college tuition and down payments on new homes (Bennett, 1999). Indeed, universities faced in microcosm what America faced generally: a dire shortage of built space. Colleges, universities, and trade schools quickly acquired thousands of decommissioned Quonset huts to use as temporary housing and classroom space for veterans and their families coming to campus on the GI Bill (Figure 5). But neither the VA nor the FHA were actually in the business of building homes, only subventing veterans and insuring builders, respectively (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; K. Jackson, 1987). The only funding available through the newly reorganized Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) was a relatively meager \$450 million earmarked for temporary veteran housing. Amid such impasse, the need for national action on housing grew ever more acute.

While the housing crisis deepened, the form that legislation would take provoked intense debate. Indeed, the political and economic climate of the postwar period



Figure 5. Millions of Quonset huts produced during World War II were converted to peacetime affordable housing, commercial, and farming use. Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

proved a far cry from the 1930s. Conservative elements in both parties grew emboldened in opposition to New Deal policies, and FDR himself came down firmly on the side of private enterprise as a solution to the housing crisis in his Economic Bill of Rights, outlined in the 1944 State of the Union address. The 1946 midterm elections brought a Republican-controlled Congress and a new crop of anti-communist crusaders, including Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) and Rep. Richard Nixon (R-CA). Democrats retook Congress in 1948, but the margins remained slim as opposition to New Deal programs gained ground in both parties, spurred on by the mounting Cold War and the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and organized opposition at the local level (Parson, 2005).

Despite the heated political climate, Sen. Robert Taft (R-OH) introduced comprehensive housing legislation in May 1948, with cosponsorship from Sen. Robert Wagner (D-NY) and Sen. Allen Ellender (D-LA). Opponents sprang into action. The first challenge came in the form of a "poison pill" amendment devised by conservative Senators John Bricker (R-OH) and Harry Cain (R-WA) to engineer the bill's defeat. Bricker and Cain wrote the amendment to prohibit racial segregation in future public housing projects, knowing that the southern Democrats would turn against the bill. Senators backing public housing had to vote against desegregation, or else have no program at all; ultimately, they rejected the Bricker-Cain amendment and passed the housing bill on to the House. Further challenges came as the bill travelled back and forth from the House floor to the Committee on Banking and Finance, where, despite Democratic gains, an all-out assault by the National Association of Real Estate Boards prompted fierce debate and numerous compromises to benefit private interests.

Finally, the 81st Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949 as part of an omnibus bill in July by the slim margin of 227–204. The *Journal of the American Planning Association* marked the event in its Fall 1949 issue with an essay by William Wheaton, member of the planning faculty at Harvard and a former assistant in the HHFA. Wheaton characterized the passage of the Act as “the most significant event in the development of city planning in the recent history of the United States.”

Ambivalent Policy, Ambivalent Outcomes

The Housing Act of 1949 differed substantially from its 1937 predecessor in that it was not, at base, about public housing. Rather, the law sought to recalibrate the balance of private and public goods in the provision of a “decent home and suitable living environment” for all Americans (p. 1). While it massively expanded the government’s role in housing, the Act overwhelmingly directed public resources toward private home building. After all, attitudes toward direct federal intervention in the economy had cooled since the heady days of the New Deal, and a conservative turn in American political culture sharpened opposition to the activist state. Amid debates over how to prime the American economy after the war, the federal government had settled squarely on the creation of what historian Liz Cohen (2003) has called a “consumer’s republic,” emphasizing federal underwriting of private enterprise through home loans, highway building, and civil infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and scientific research. At the same time, urban housing markets remained almost completely stalled. Thus, the deep ambivalence out of which the Housing Act of 1949 emerged created contradictory outcomes on the social and physical landscape of the metropolis (Von Hoffman, 2000).

These contradictions arose from the form and substance of the Act’s three main titles. Title I inaugurated urban redevelopment, where federal dollars (\$1 billion in loans, \$500 million in capital grants) wrote down the cost of slum clearance for new residential, civic, and commercial construction. It required either half of the area cleared or half of the units created to be residential, and did not require replacement units for those dislocated through eminent domain. Title II authorized an increase of \$500 million for the FHA mortgage insurance program, largely to underwrite the rapid construction of private single-family homes on peripheral greenfield sites. Title III revived public housing with a commitment of 810,000 new units to be started over the next six years.

While the three titled programs of the Housing Act of 1949 ran largely independent of each other, over time they exerted a cumulative, often crossed-purpose impact on the American metropolis. The suburban Title II, with its higher initial investment and longer-term commitments, dwarfed the urban Titles I and III. Between 1945 and 1965, the FHA-backed home building industry constructed 26 million new homes. To date, the FHA has insured over 34 million mortgages, predominantly in new single-family home construction outside of central cities. Along with the GI Bill, the FHA mortgage insurance system dramatically expanded single-family home ownership and democratized private housing as an asset class (Nicolaidis & Wiese, 2006). It reshaped the American city, pulling millions of mostly White middle-class families to newly built tract housing in peripheral subdivisions, leaving working-class Whites and minorities, as well as middle-class minorities, in urban core neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, Title I urban redevelopment (reorganized in 1954 into urban renewal) funded the clearance of tens of thousands of acres of land in or adjacent to the downtowns of large cities (Figure 6). Title I garnered substantial support not only among planners, contractors, labor unions, and housing advocates, but also from powerful downtown business and commercial interests in each city, who saw an opportunity to rid their central districts of slums and to increase the value of urban core properties. Together, these groups constituted what Logan and Molotch (1987) have described as an “urban growth machine” (pp. 50–52). Most of the targeted districts were long-established working class communities, predominantly African American or multiethnic, replete with homes, small businesses, churches and synagogues, and civic and cultural institutions (Fullilove, 2004; Klemek, 2011; P. Smith, 2012). Redevelopment authorities only had to demonstrate that they were making efforts to relocate families, but had no legal obligation to rehouse them either in the redeveloped sites or in public housing. In the end, more housing would be destroyed by slum clearance than would ever be created through the public housing program.

African Americans bore the brunt of these contradictions, facing what historian Arnold Hirsch (2000) has called the triple threat of housing policy. They constituted the majority of people displaced through slum clearance for urban redevelopment, urban renewal, and public housing. At the same time, racial preferences built in to FHA risk assessment criteria, coupled with racially restrictive covenants and gentlemen’s agreements among White real estate agents, trapped working-class and middle-class African Americans alike in the very inner city neighborhoods that were undergoing tumultuous change. Moreover, local

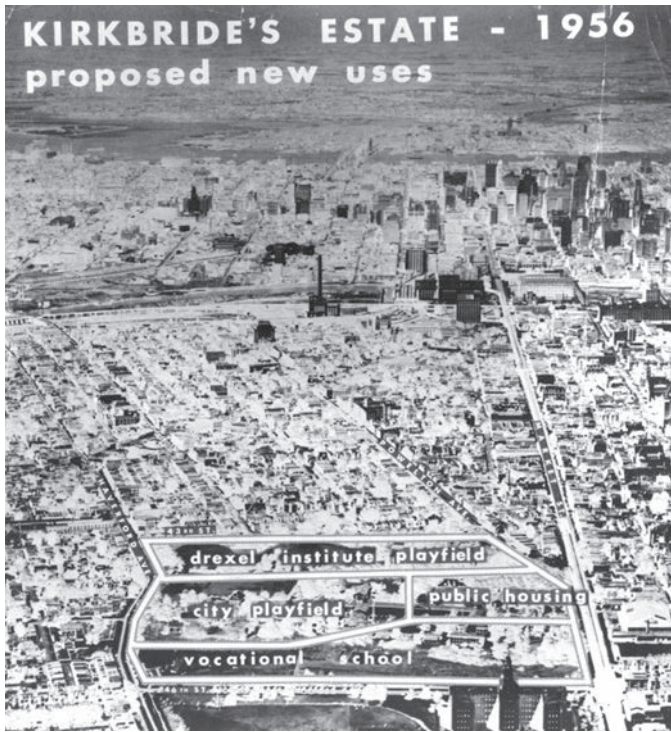


Figure 6. Urban renewal in West Philadelphia, 1956.
Source: Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

housing authorities continued to conceive and build projects within the framework of racial segregation for at least the first five years of Title III. The result was a new brand of super-segregation, so egregious that it would motivate civil rights and Black power activists for decades to come to push for fair and open housing in America (Massey & Denton, 1993; P. Smith, 2012; Williams, 2005).

Public Housing and the Postwar Metropolis

Amid the wrangling in Congress over the Housing Act of 1949, it would be public housing that suffered the most severe restrictions. Housing authorities would continue to charge rents not in excess of one-fifth a family's income, but with strict caps on the amount of federal annual contributions (the difference between a project's income from tenant rents and expenditures for operations and debt service), which eventually placed many housing authorities in a financial bind. The law also banned local authorities from screening tenant welfare histories, and required them "to give preference to families having the most urgent needs (Housing Act of 1949, p. 3)." Perhaps the most penurious feature was the explicit prohibition against projects with "elaborate or extravagant design or materials"

(Housing Act of 1949, p. 4). Economic recession, rising land values, and material shortages during the Korean War induced further belt tightening in the HHFA. This would be the most stripped-down, cost-conscious federal housing program yet enacted (Von Hoffman, 2000).

The scale, organization, and design of the postwar housing projects reflect the politically and economically constrained environments in which they were conceived and built. The high costs and limited budgets forced planners and architects to carry building footprints upward through multiple stories (Bristol, 1991). Many looked for guidance from New York City, where the housing authority had already constructed thousands of high-rise units under the PWA and USHA, including Harlem River Houses, Red Hook Houses, and the nation's largest project, the 3,100-unit Queensbridge (Figure 7). Big-city housing authorities received new briefs from the HHFA on the use of reinforced concrete, steel frame construction, multistory building layouts, and cost-cutting techniques. Most were receptive to the emerging federal preference for tower-block forms. Indeed, in many cases local and national boosters saw high-rise projects not only as a way to save money, but also as a visual register of modern municipal action and progress (Baumhoff, 1950; Bristol, 1991).

While nearly three-quarters of all public housing units before and after 1949 were distributed in low- and mid-rise buildings, the tower blocks garnered the most attention for



Figure 7. When it was completed in 1939, Queensbridge was the largest public housing project in the United States. Many post-World War II housing projects looked to Queensbridge as an example for high density development.

Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Figure 8. Stateway Gardens, Chicago, 1972. The Chicago Housing Authority was among the most prolific builders of housing projects in the nation.

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

their immense scale and stark transformation of the urban landscape. In a few cities, planners favored a mix of high-rise and low-rise buildings. In Philadelphia, for example, Louis Kahn's Mill Creek Houses project featured three enormous 17-story tower blocks, whereas Cambridge Plaza mixed two towers with 124 townhouse units. By contrast, and with much national fanfare, St. Louis bundled all of its postwar federal allotment of 5,800 units into four massive high-rise projects ("Four Vast Housing Projects," 1956). With its 33 nearly identical 11-story buildings, Pruitt-Igoue in St. Louis constituted the largest of the early postwar projects. Officials in Boston, Baltimore, and New York built dozens of new projects within the vertical tower block form. Finally, the Chicago Housing Authority built and sited tower blocks with perhaps the most dramatic visual and spatial effect. Planners arranged Stateway Gardens, Robert Taylor Homes, and the Cabrini-Green additions to provide a buffer around the downtown loop, and deployed the Dan Ryan Expressway as a linear cordon to separate the vast housing projects, occupied by Black families, from White working- and middle-class neighborhoods of Chicago (Urban, 2012). In all cases, the austere, regimented, and massive towers stood in sharp contrast to the older low-rise neighborhoods that surrounded them (Figure 8).

Passage by Congress of subsequent housing acts in the 1950s and 1960s did not alter the basic form of public housing, but did affect important shifts in emphasis. The Housing Act of 1954 reflected the new conservatism of the Eisenhower administration. To advise him on urban issues, Eisenhower surrounded himself not with mayors and planners, but with business leaders, financial and insurance executives, and real estate developers. They concluded that federal funds should be used to build new relationships

between government and business interests to solve urban problems. Consequently, the Housing Act of 1954 shifted emphasis further from public housing to slum clearance for market-rate commercial and residential reconstruction, or urban renewal (Biles, 2011; Teaford, 1990). The Act required local officials to submit to the HHFA, now headed by Eisenhower appointee and conservative banker Albert Cole, a workable program to demonstrate how their urban renewal and public housing efforts were coordinated to maximize the elimination of blighted districts. Mayors such as Richard Lee of New Haven (CT) and Richard Daley of Chicago, along with planners such as Harland Bartholomew (St. Louis), Ed Bacon (Philadelphia), and Robert Moses (New York) made extensive use of urban renewal provisions in the 1950s and 1960s.

With the shift to urban renewal, the pace of the public housing program slowed even further, both because of the magnitude of the task and the vulnerability to attacks in Congress during annual appropriations. While the Housing Act of 1949 set a six-year timetable for the construction of a minimum of 135,000 units per year, fewer than half of that amount were actually ever underway in any given funding cycle. By 1951, only 84,000 units were in one or another stage of development. After the Housing Act of 1954 shifted emphasis to urban renewal, public home construction dropped to 24,000 units per year by 1964. The program had entered a phase of "dreary deadlock," as Catherine Bauer (1957, p. 140) observed, where housing supporters in Congress could readily pass new legislation, but could not win the fight on annual appropriations. It would not be until 1975 that authorities met the target of 810,000 units set by Congress in 1949.

Further changes to public housing came in the 1960s with the arrival of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which brought a new era of liberal activism to Washington, along with a growing awareness among lawmakers of the critical need for action around issues of poverty, civil rights, and housing (Mackenzie & Weisbrot, 2008; Schlesinger, 1963). The most important development in affordable housing legislation during this era came with a succession of housing acts in 1959 and 1961, which together significantly expanded production of public housing for elderly residents, a class of occupants often left out of the design and planning of projects. The Housing Act of 1959 was particularly important because of Section 202, which authorized the federal government to fund nonprofit organizations for the first time to develop low-income housing for the elderly. The landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 set in motion a major series of changes that would culminate in the Fair Housing Law of 1968. While the

Civil Rights Act had little immediate relevance for public housing, the gradual expansion of fair and open housing would significantly impact the occupancy rates in housing projects in the decades to come. The civil rights movement in general emboldened African American residents of public housing to assert their interests and to organize for a greater voice in project management.

Conventional Public Housing Winds Down

In 1965, Congress consolidated most of its housing programs into the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), establishing it as a cabinet-level agency under the direction of housing expert and veteran New Dealer Robert Weaver (Pritchett, 2008). Yet, at the very moment that HUD placed cities and urban housing into the national spotlight, the federal government began to wind down the conventional public housing program. Alongside the riots of 1965, 1967, and 1968, the Johnson Administration effected a substantial shift in U.S. anti-poverty policy away from physical investments such as slum clearance and public housing and toward the War on Poverty approach, which included welfare transfer payments, job creation and economic opportunity, and neighborhood planning and empowerment. Indeed, Model Cities and the Community Action Program constituted the signature urban programs of the Johnson Administration (Cazenave, 2007; Frieden & Kaplan, 1975; M. Jackson, 2008). While public housing tenants participated in these programs, they were administered through different channels, and only nominally coordinated (Figure 9).

Even at the height of the conventional, project-based public housing program, HUD began to experiment with different forms of delivery. The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965, for example, increased funding overall for housing programs, but decreased the percentage of funds for public housing as a part of the whole. Additionally, the Act introduced one of the farthest-reaching, if initially unsuccessful, innovations in the form of Section 23 vouchers, which subsidized residents of slum clearance sites to seek market-rate rental units when they could not otherwise be accommodated in public housing. With passage of the Fair Housing Law of 1968, the Johnson Administration launched Section 235, which provided funds to the FHA to finance low-income private home ownership. While the program proved to be plagued by scandal and inefficiency, it nevertheless signaled a shift toward housing as a means to economic opportunity, and

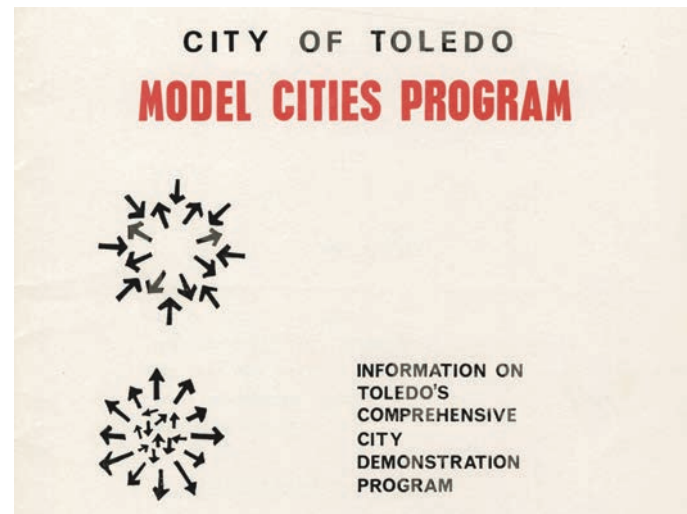


Figure 9. Model Cities reflected a shift in federal urban policy from large-scale physical interventions to social programming. The program proved as confusing as the graphic used on the brochure seen here. Source: Courtesy of the University of Toledo Library.

(Color figure available online.)

decreasing commitment to traditional, public, low-income, project-based rental housing.

While the older industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest underwent large-scale reconstruction through urban renewal and public housing in the 1960s, they also began to lose population as qualifying families moved to new suburban developments, and as American demographic growth shifted to the South and West. Detroit, for example, lost 20% of its population between 1950 and 1970. The population of St. Louis fell by 27% over the same period as 60% of the White population fled the city, while the suburban population more than doubled. Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Baltimore, and many other cities lost substantial numbers of people in the decades after World War II. Gradually, the flight of middle-class White families through FHA-backed suburban expansion opened up new housing options for working-class Black and White families back in the cities. Meanwhile, the push by African Americans and civil rights groups for fair and open housing culminated in Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act. This fair housing legislation would eventually lead to new opportunities for middle-class Black families to relocate to once-segregated suburban neighborhoods.

Throughout the postwar decades, the flight from older Northeastern and Midwestern cities left behind a disproportionately poor and minority population, socially and economically barred from obtaining better housing in the suburbs (Massey & Denton, 1993). Because of the legacies of official segregation in the projects, public housing residents were particularly isolated by race and vulnerable to

crime (Turner, Popkin, & Rawlings, 2008). Additionally, the well-paying jobs in manufacturing and warehousing that had long sustained extended working-class families and communities began to shift to the suburbs and on to the Sunbelt, draining cities even further of their wage and tax bases and pushing crime rates further up (Bluestone & Harrison, 1984; Sugrue, 1996). Inner-city private and public housing neighborhoods alike began to deteriorate from population loss, increased poverty and crime, and lack of investment. Whether the federal War on Poverty and similar policies had no effect on urban decline in the 1960s and 1970s or stanching an even greater catastrophe is a matter for ongoing debate. What is clear is that older cities continued their long decline well into the 1980s and 1990s, and without firm federal commitment, public housing projects deteriorated apace (Biles, 2011; Venkatesh, 2002; Williams, 2005).

The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 marked the coming to power of a conservative revolt against the policies of the New Deal, and the beginning of a federal devolution that, in many respects, continues to the present (Eisinger, 1998; Fraser & Gerstle, 1990; Lassiter, 2007). At the same time, critiques of public housing began to mount from the left as well, constellating around the case of Pruitt-Igoe, which one writer called “public housing’s Vietnam” (McGuire, 1976, p. 7). Scholars, journalists, and activists faulted the St. Louis project for its role in fostering racial segregation, concentrated poverty, Black family disintegration, rising crime, and alienating physical environments (Moore, 1969; Rainwater, 1970). The tower blocks of Chicago and New York also attracted popular media attention as havens of drug traffic, gang violence, and organized crime, although, of course, none of these were necessarily exclusive to public over private rental housing. Television situation comedies made use of tower blocks as residential settings, from *Good Times* (Cabrini-Green) to the *PJs* (Brewster-Douglass in Washington, DC). Cabrini-Green was also featured as the home of pulp novel anti-hero Bosco in Bruce Conn’s *The Horror of Cabrini-Green* (1975) and as the uncanny landscape of the slasher film *Candyman* (1992).

Amid mounting political and popular discontent with public housing, Nixon made one of his first acts as president the placement of a moratorium on all new high-rise projects (excepting those for the elderly), and in 1973 he froze funds for new public housing construction altogether. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Nixon single-handedly terminated the conventional public housing program. Rather, he merely capped a process already well underway for the past decade amid shifting federal priorities, growing disillusionment with place-based housing projects, and the lengthy and costly prosecution of the

Vietnam War. Even measures designed to stabilize public housing yielded contradictory results. The Brooke Amendment of 1969, for example, attempted to relieve tenants of burdensome rents by capping their contributions at 25% of income. But this imposed substantial limits on the amount of money that could be raised from rents, forcing HUD to appeal annually to Congress for increases in operating subsidies, appeals for which Congress had little appetite. With restricted operating funds and declining occupancy rates, projects like Pruitt-Igoe, Rosen Homes, Cabrini-Green, and Robert Taylor Homes lapsed into crisis. By the 1980s, most big-city projects suffered high vacancy rates, large operating deficits, and deferred maintenance.

Beyond the conventional phase, then, public housing entered a long period of devolution in the 1970s and 1980s. The implosion of two tower blocks at Pruitt-Igoe in 1973 provided the first and most visible symbol of these transformations in U.S. housing policy. One year later, Congress quietly retired the conventional phase with the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, effecting a shift to private builder subsidies for new construction such as the Turnkey Program, housing rehabilitation funds, and eventually Section 8 rental vouchers. The Act also consolidated seven distinct categorical programs into the Community Development Block Grant, available to qualifying cities through the states. While these programs have been plagued by shortcomings in funding, implementation, and oversight, they nevertheless constituted the primary affordable housing policy for two decades (Biles, 2011; Hays 1995). Finally, in 1992 HUD launched the HOPE VI program, committing over \$5 billion to date to demolish 90,000 units of the most distressed public housing (Cisneros, Engdahl, & Schmoke, 2009; Popkin, Katz, Cunningham, Brown, Gustafson, & Turner, 2004). Under HOPE VI, nearly all high-rise housing projects in America, outside of New York, have been transformed into low-rise, mixed-income neighborhoods of townhouses and apartments (Figure 10). The HOPE VI program has emerged as HUD’s showcase policy, effectively erasing the most visible architectural and planning legacies of the conventional public housing era.

Public Housing and the Wider World

There have been many attempts over the past three decades to understand what went wrong with public housing. Much of U.S. housing policy today, from Section 8 to Low Income Tax Credits to HOPE VI, emerges from efforts to isolate and identify the causes of public housing’s decline. Beginning in the mid-1960s, scholars, journalists, and activists mounted a critique of public housing that drew largely



Figure 10. Henson Ridge HOPE VI development, Washington, DC, 2010.

Source: Courtesy of Edward G. Goetz.

(Color figure available online.)

on Pruitt-Igoe as a touchstone (see Heathcott, Planning Note, 2012/this issue). Most of these critiques sought causes internal to Pruitt-Igoe and the public housing program, such as project management, tower block design, tenant characteristics, or policy shortcomings. However, the career of conventional public housing narrated in this article suggests the need to contextualize the program in the broader social, political, and economic conditions that shape planning and policymaking over time.

Debates over the causes of public housing decline have intensified over the years, as more scholars weigh in with improved data, deeper analyses, and sharpened arguments. Arnold Hirsch's (1983) landmark book, *Making the Second Ghetto*, placed public housing's troubles in the longer history of racial segregation and White hostility toward residential integration, a thesis reinforced by subsequent scholarship (Polikoff, 2007; Turner et al., 2008). Leading housing policy experts have pointed to the legacy of shortsightedness built in to the original Wagner-Steagall law: for example, in requiring operation and maintenance costs to be covered by tenant rents (Schwartz, 2006), or in the burden of the annual appropriations process (Byrne, Day, & Stockland, 2003). Hunt's (2009) definitive study of the Chicago Public Housing Authority exposed a long history of mismanagement and poor decision making that exacerbated the local conditions of an already compromised federal program. Others have documented the corrosive impact of drugs, crime, police surveillance, and violence on project residents and on public housing programs generally (Kotlowitz, 1992; Popkin, 2000; Websdale, 2001; Venkatesh, 2002).

All of these factors, varying by time and place, have played a role in the seemingly intractable problems faced by public housing. But they cannot alone or even in combination explain the fate of the conventional public housing program. Indeed, most accounts have sought to identify causes of decline from within the specific policies, designs, populations, or environments of the projects. If high-rise projects like Pruitt-Igoe and Cabrini-Green failed because of their design, for example, why do so many people continue to live comfortably in high-rise apartments around the world? Was the crime and vandalism plaguing public housing in the 1970s and 1980s all that distinct from the crime and vandalism that residents of the older, low-rise neighborhoods experienced? If public housing failed because of internal policy and management shortcomings, why have New York City's projects maintained waiting lists in the tens of thousands? To establish an accurate and nuanced account of the history of public housing, we have to come to grips with several broad political, social, and cultural factors.

First, for all of its notoriety, public housing in America was always a relatively small program. Public housing gained ground within the context of a major crisis of capitalism, but even during the Great Depression the program never managed to reshape the broader housing system in any significant way. By contrast, European countries made social housing one of the cornerstones of their national policies beginning in the 1920s: In the Netherlands, for example, 60% of the population lives in one form of social housing or another—35% in publicly subsidized rental units; in Sweden and the United Kingdom, social housing accounts for 20% and 18% of all dwelling units, respectively (Whitehead & Scanlon, 2007). Even at its peak in the late 1960s, American public housing never accommodated more than 2% of the population. Instead, the United States staked its postwar growth economy on a republic of home ownership, with massive federal subsidies fueling the expansion of private market-rate single-family homes for the middle class. However well or poorly designed and managed, American public housing always constituted a marginal program compared to other categorical and titular programs such as agriculture, education, infrastructure, and defense.

Second, the architectural and planning history of public housing is far more multifaceted than most accounts suggest. While housing project design never produced the radiant city sought by modernists, neither did it always result in the barren wastelands depicted by popular media. To be sure, projects like Pruitt-Igoe and the Taylor Homes presented horrific conditions by the end of their lives, although some of that was due to the

official evacuation of tenants to prepare for demolition, which rendered the projects increasingly isolated and lonely in their final days. But early in the life of the projects, tenants routinely reported their new apartments to be a substantial improvement over the tenements from which they came (Bristol, 1991). In the case of New York City, despite many problems and challenges, high-rise projects continue to provide affordable homes for hundreds of thousands of people; indeed, New York could scarcely function without its public housing (Bloom, 2008). High-rise dwellings for moderate and high-income households continue to spring up in New York, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and other cities, providing critical housing options amid limited space (Urban, 2011).

Meanwhile, low-rise public housing projects present an even more complicated case. Some low-rise projects such as the Ida B. Wells Homes and the Sojourner Truth Homes did eventually deteriorate to the extent of the worst high-rise projects; it just took longer for the decline to unfold. Other low-rise projects, however, not only survived but thrived, particularly with a series of large renovation grants by HUD in the 1990s. In fact, most of the low-rise housing projects built in the 1930s and 1940s still contribute to the affordable housing stock in cities around the country (Figure 11). Renewed attention to the design achievements of the PWA has led to a spate of project renovations, converting Neighborhood Gardens in St. Louis, the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, and the Lathrop Homes in Chicago for moderate-income and market-rate housing (Heathcott, 2006). In the end, design has proven to be a highly contingent factor in the history and fate of housing projects, often used to justify one course of action or another. But it is clear that high-rise design is not inherently problematic, nor is low-rise design a given good.

The third factor to consider in the history of conventional public housing is racial segregation and its interconnection to residence and employment. For much of the 20th century, racial segregation structured urban conditions, schooling options, housing and work opportunities, and the framework of metropolitan expansion (Hirsch, 1983; K. Jackson, 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993). Residents occupied public housing, like the private housing that surrounded it, on a segregated basis, even after the de jure end of separate but equal. As African Americans migrated to large Northern and Western cities after World War II in search of high wages, they encountered even higher levels of segregation than they had in the South. Tragically, manufacturing employment began its rapid decline at the very moment Black workers arrived to cities in large numbers (Sugrue, 1996). The once abundant and



Figure 11. Harbor Hills housing project, Los Angeles, 1998. Despite ongoing challenges, Harbor Hills and other pre-World War II projects continue to provide much-needed affordable housing. Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

relatively stable, high-wage assembly line jobs in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Baltimore, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and St. Louis dispersed to far-flung suburban locations. But in their quest to follow good jobs out of the city, Black families faced the racist practices of suburban real estate companies. As a result, African Americans found themselves increasingly trapped in declining inner cities with dwindling employment options (Fishman, 2004; Wilson, 1990, 1997).

While White middle-class and working-class families began their long flight from cities in the 1960s, new housing opportunities opened up for Blacks through residential succession, and eventually through the application of fair housing laws. This loosening of housing markets further undermined public housing, which had been built on the premise of the overcrowded city. Pruitt-Igoe, for example, had been built for a city of 850,000 people facing a massive housing shortage. By 1970, that city no longer existed. St. Louis had lost over 200,000 people, with plummeting real estate values and rising rates of vacancy and abandonment. Increased vacancy rates in housing projects led to a rapid spiral of decline: fewer tenants meant less rental income, which resulted in less operating and maintenance funds, which led to physical deterioration, which in turn pushed more tenants out. In the last days of Pruitt-Igoe, drug sellers and crime networks from other parts of St. Louis began to carve up the nearly empty project.

Fourth, the problems of public housing must be contextualized within the larger problems of cities in the 20th century. Cities enjoy no sovereign rights, only dependent powers conferred by states. Therefore, the capacity of cities

to limit adverse effects of remote decisions is extremely limited (Judd & Swanstrom, 2005; Peterson, 1981). The core problems that beset public housing, then, were always the same as those faced by cities more generally. Cities could not keep capital and people from flowing out of their boundaries. Cities could not unilaterally fix broken federal policies that worked at cross-purposes: On the one hand slum clearance, urban renewal, and public housing were meant to improve cities, but the massive subsidies of suburban housing, expressways, and cheap fossil fuels gradually eroded the wealth base of cities. What is clear from the relatively short career of project-based public housing is that its varied successes and failures resulted from an interwoven set of contingent circumstances, major and minor policy decisions, geographic locations, and shifting political economies.

Finally, it is worth remembering that all of these factors derive to one extent or another from a core conundrum: As a society, we have always been deeply ambivalent about the meaning of *public* in American life, and about the locus of arbitration of the public good (Vale, 2000). Despite a well-developed civil society and a long history of social activism, the United States remains a relatively private and conservative culture, one that favors equality of opportunity (however mythic and yet attained) to equality of outcomes. Unlike Western Europe, the United States never developed a viable Labor Party, and the left played a less central role in the long history of the American labor movement than it did in its counterparts in South America and Europe. Over the course of the 20th century, the scope and purview of government intervention into the social and economic life of the nation expanded dramatically. But this expansion never fully overcame the anxieties of many Americans, since the notion of the government as the arbiter of the public good sits uneasily with the private character of the culture. Charges of “socialism,” however much a shibboleth, were never far from the public housing program.

Over time, the constant attacks on the idea of the government as the broker of the public good, coupled with the rise of the neoconservative movement in the 1970s, contributed to the unraveling of the New Deal order. These challenges to the government’s active promotion of the public good produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the government is the arbiter of the public good, then defunding government programs leads to deterioration of the public sphere (i.e., parks, playgrounds, libraries, schools, and housing projects). The deteriorating public sphere, in turn, provides the circular confirmation that the government cannot produce the public good, and that such matters should be left to private initiative and private enterprise.

Still, the conventional public housing program created by the Wagner-Steagall Act 75 years ago reflects a commitment to the idea that housing is as much a public as a private good. As the conventional era fades, the key question remains: will we continue to treat affordable housing as a public good? The evidence to date suggests a mixed answer. In 2010, the U.S. government provided \$137 billion in housing subsidy. However, 64% of that subsidy came in the form of the mortgage interest tax deduction for home owners, and the majority of funds for affordable rental housing were devoted to private subsidies. Public housing never achieved a central place in American housing policy, and, more often than not, constituted the adjunct, leftover, poorly funded counterpart to the sprawling programs of the FHA. At its worst, conventional projects embodied the basest aspects of society, from racial prejudice and class inequality to concentrated poverty, moralistic attitudes toward poor families, and the isolation created by superblock planning. At its best, conventional public housing represented a commitment to decent, safe, and permanently affordable housing for all Americans.

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