

High Ambitions: The Past and Future of American Low-Income Housing Policy

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Abstract

In the 1930s, idealistic reformers attempted to create a vast public housing program using modern architectural design. Instead they created a distinctive look that would later stigmatize its occupants. After the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, visionaries attempted to rebuild American cities by placing the poor in high-rise buildings, an experiment that was soon deemed a disaster. Today some believe that placing the poor in environments inhabited by wealthier groups will help to address the problems of poverty.

By focusing on three periods of the low-income housing movement, this article examines how visionary idealism has led to disillusionment with housing programs. In the future, supporters of good low-income housing should present housing programs not as panaceas for deep-rooted social problems, but rather as important elements in social welfare policy. Advocates of housing should fight for programs that will produce as many units of housing as possible.

Keywords: Low-income housing; Policy; History

Introduction

This article explores the often unexamined assumptions that shape and delimit discussions about housing policy. Usually policy debate focuses on the efficacy of specific programs, but such debate, which often takes place in the midst of political struggles, leaves little time to examine the logic and philosophy that drive policy. To understand the underlying thinking behind American housing policy, the article examines the public housing program during the 1930s, the midlife of public housing in the 1950s, and the present situation.

The argument presented here is that the failures of public housing have been less in the area of housing (despite the well-publicized disasters of a minority of projects) than in the area of expectations. The disillusion, which has dogged the program, arose in large part from the high and idealistic ambitions of its proponents. The idealism of public housing advocates has often taken the form of environmental determinism, a belief that an

ideal or improved residential environment will better the behavior as well as the condition of its inhabitants.

In the 1930s, advocates of the new federal public housing program hoped to cure the social ills of the city and aspired to rehouse up to two-thirds of the American people in European-style public housing projects that would eliminate slums forever. Although they established a public housing program, they were unable to escape political controversies over location of the projects, and their design innovations would later come back to haunt the program. After the passage of the Housing Act of 1949 created a much larger public housing program, visionaries attempted to help by placing the poor in high-rise buildings, an experiment that was soon deemed a disaster.

In the face of frustration and failure, housers reluctantly accepted that a single public housing program for the majority of Americans was unfeasible and abandoned the notion of introducing new architectural styles through low-income housing projects. Yet visionary idealism, in particular environmental determinism, persists in the housing movement. Today heterogeneous communities are latter-day versions of the public housing and high-rise environments that housers once believed would eradicate the evils of the slum. Thus, some contend that programs of mixed-income housing development, scattered-site public housing, and geographical dispersal of low-income families will achieve social betterment for the urban poor.

But the shattered dreams of the past are a warning that today's popular housing policies are not panaceas. The future of public housing and related programs depends on setting goals that the movement can reasonably and readily address.

Early public housing programs

The idea that living environments influence people's lives has been a part of the housing movement from its earliest days. Beginning in the mid-19th century, idealistic philanthropists and moral reformers attempted to solve problems related to the housing of the urban poor. They firmly believed that the slums of the city were a malevolent environment that threatened the safety, health, and morals of the poor who inhabited them. By clearing slums and convincing or coercing property owners to improve the housing in the slum, reformers hoped to create a better environment that would uplift the poor. By the time of the New Deal, housing reformers had accomplished the passage of

stringent building regulations, the construction of dozens of model tenements and industrial villages, and, most important, the dissemination of the belief that housing reform was necessary to solve the social problems related to urban poverty (Birch and Gardner 1981; Cousineau 1989; Lubove 1962; Wright 1981).

The economic crisis of the Great Depression created a favorable climate for federal government intervention in the housing industry. The housing industry had been in recession since the late 1920s, unemployment rates reached painfully high levels, and many American homeowners could not make their mortgage payments. Overwhelmed by soaring demand for relief and by plummeting tax revenues, local governments could only look on helplessly. During the 1930s, the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt responded by propping up the financial system of credit that supported homeownership.¹

At the same time, Roosevelt's New Deal programs intervened directly in the production and maintenance of housing for middle- and lower-class Americans. Besides the planning experiments of the Resettlement Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority, the government's initial housing production program came as part of an employment program. When New Dealers and their congressional supporters drafted a jobs bill during the spring of 1933 to cope with the unemployment crisis, veteran housing reformers such as Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch and Edith Elmer Wood persuaded them to include provisions for slum clearance and low-income housing. The result was the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA). During a tenure that lasted until 1937, the PWA Housing Division built 51 public housing projects containing 21,800 dwelling units (Cole 1975; Keith 1973; McDonnell 1957; Straus and Wegg 1938).

Housing reformers were not satisfied with the PWA because they felt that it was a temporary agency committed to creating employment, not low-income housing. With the support of such groups as the American Federation of Labor and the National Conference of Catholic Charities, reformers lobbied successfully for the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937, which established the United States Housing Authority (USHA) and put public housing on a permanent footing in this country. The USHA had built 100,000 units in over 140 cities by 1942 (when it was folded

¹The Federal Home Loan Bank Board supported savings and loan associations. Its offspring, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, offered long-term loans to homeowners, and the Federal Housing Administration insured long-term mortgages offered by housing lenders.

into the National Housing Authority) (Biles 1990; Keith 1973; McDonnell 1957).

Visionary goals inspired the advocates of New Deal public housing. As heirs to the environmentalism of the 19th century, the housers of the 1930s condemned the slum districts for breeding disease, delinquency, and crime and believed that the elimination of the slums would cure urban social ills. They argued that the government should fight the problems of the slums by providing good homes furnished with abundant light and air, sufficient space for privacy for family members, adequate plumbing, and adequate heating, at a cost that unskilled workers could afford (Bauer 1933, 1934b; Ford 1936; Walker 1938; Wood 1931).

Housing experiments in Europe and Britain inspired breathtaking ambitions in the leaders of the movement for public housing. Edith Wood and the brilliant young writer Catherine Bauer, among others, envisioned a massive housing program that would house not just the working poor, but two-thirds of the American population. They believed that private enterprise constructed good homes only for families whose income placed them in the top third of the population. This view relegated those in the lowest income group to the dangerous slums and those in the middle income third to shoddy subdivisions that were frequently potential or incipient blighted slums. The audacious goal to house all but those in the luxury market exceeded both the popular understanding of the need for a housing program and the liberal agenda of political leaders such as PWA director Harold Ickes and President Roosevelt (Bauer 1934a; von Hoffman 1995; Wood 1931).

To create an environment antithetical to the urban slum, housers mixed American architectural traditions with European modernist styles that, for better or worse, gave public housing its distinctive image.² For decades, reformer architects had experimented with single-family houses planned in Garden City-style groupings (after the innovations of Unwin and Parker), perimeter apartment blocks, and garden apartment buildings. In the

² The literature concerning the modern movement in architecture is vast. In a recent work, Peter G. Rowe defines the important characteristics as follows:

The by now familiar modern functionalist doctrine consisted of four central considerations: material integration and suitability; the expression of contemporary building construction and fabrication techniques; efficient use and layout of buildings; and the propagation of a new spatial order devoid of all references to the past. (Rowe 1993, 43)

1930s, Bauer and designers such as Henry Wright heralded recent European innovations in housing, applauding the streamlined functional-looking image championed by the modernist or international school. The modernist-oriented designers particularly celebrated the German Zeilenbau style, in which parallel rows of two- to four-story apartment buildings were aligned along an east-west orientation and situated in superblocs (large blocks that exceed standard city block sizes) (Bauer 1934a; Plunz 1990).

During the 1930s, public housing architects and officials fashioned the Zeilenbau style to American cities and created a mold for much subsequent public housing. Oscar Stonorov created an early prototype of the American Zeilenbau style at the Carl Mackley Houses, built from 1933 to 1934 in Philadelphia for the Hosiery Workers Union.³ His design softened the severe Zeilenbau lines of the apartment buildings with indentations and added American amenities such as courtyards, laundries, and parking garages (see figures 1 and 2) (Bauer 1934a; Bauman 1987; Plunz 1990; Pommer 1978; Sandeen 1985).

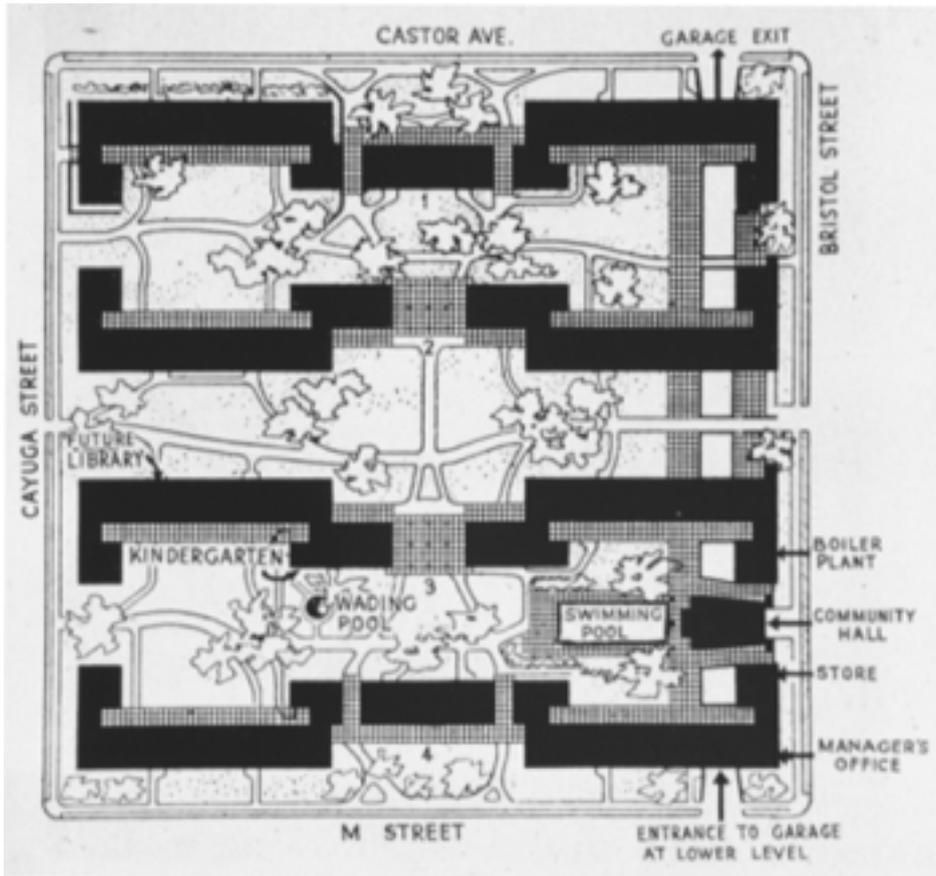
Figure 1. View of Children's Wading Pool, Carl Mackley Houses, Philadelphia, PA, W. Pope Barney, Architect



Source: Architectural Record 78(5), November 1935. Photograph by F. S. Lincoln. Permission for use granted by Architectural Record.

³ The Carl Mackley Houses project was begun before the start of the public housing program and was financed in part by a loan from the PWA (Straus and Wegg 1938).

Figure 2. Plan, Carl Mackley Houses, Philadelphia, PA, W. Pope Barney, Architect



Source: *Architectural Record* 78(5), November 1935. Permission for use granted by *Architectural Record*.

The aesthetic designs and amenities in some early public housing projected an image of superior housing, especially when compared with the old, dilapidated housing of the slum districts. Particularly good designs characterized, for example, Techwood Homes in Atlanta, a handsomely landscaped project that included parking garages and modern kitchens; Harlem River Houses, an attractive restatement of the garden apartment typology; and Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, Ohio, where the Zeilenbau style was adapted to a sloping site above Lake Erie. These projects compared favorably with commercially produced apartment building complexes of the day (*Architectural Forum* 1938; Pommer 1978).

Many, perhaps most, of the first generation of public housing projects, however, fell short of these high architectural standards. The apartment blocks in developments such as Old Harbor Village in Boston, the Jane Addams Houses in Chicago (see figure 3), and Willert Park in Buffalo lacked the graceful doorways and roof lines and the varied landscaping found in the better-looking projects. Their interpretations of functional-looking modern design appeared austere rather than elegant. If mediocre in architectural terms, these projects were quite serviceable nonetheless and well appreciated by their communities and residents. A few projects such as Parklawn in Milwaukee, La Salle Place in Louisville, and Cheatham Place in Nashville resembled traditional domestic architecture. Adorned with familiar pitched roofs, doorways, and backyards, these intimately scaled one- and two-story row houses were more homey than many of the modernist projects (*Architectural Forum* 1938).

Whatever the quality and type of design, the idealistic planning principles used in all early public housing developments also helped endow them with the “project” identity that public housing would wear for decades afterward. To distinguish public housing complexes from the tawdry environment of the slums and to incorporate the community planning principles espoused by Henry Wright, Clarence Stein, and others, the government developments invariably were designed as discrete residential

Figure 3. View of Jane Addams Houses, Chicago, IL



entities. By placing the housing complexes in superblocks, the designs separated them from surrounding streets and neighborhoods (Plunz 1990; Pommer 1978). The fact that the new housing developments were composed of apartments also contributed to the distinctive image of public housing. At the time, over three-quarters of all American families lived in single-family houses; public housing projects presented a contrast with the types of residences occupied by most Americans.

Despite the deviations of public housing in type and appearance from other American homes, early academic research into the effects of public housing seemingly confirmed the principles of environmental determinism. Chapin (1940), for example, claimed that public housing actually improved the social behavior of the poor. However, his use of sophisticated mathematical analysis of survey data disguised methodological assumptions that were heavily biased toward the optimistic findings.

The establishment of a public housing program in the United States was a remarkable achievement, but the vaulting ambitions of public housing's supporters created pitfalls for the program. Location of the projects, for example, proved vexing. Many of the supporters of public housing planned to build most new public housing on inexpensive land on the outskirts of cities and let the inner-city slums gradually wither away on their own. This approach, however, flew in the face of their own rhetoric about the need to solve the immediate crisis of the slums and contradicted the wishes of conservatives who believed government should house the very poor only in inner-city low-income neighborhoods. As a result, the program soon became embroiled in disputes over the location of housing projects (Bauman 1987; Fairbanks 1988; Straus and Wegg 1938). In addition, the principles of modern design, originally intended to distinguish the projects in a positive way, would in time become a stigma for public housing.⁴

Troubled midlife of American public housing

After a hiatus in the low-income housing program caused by World War II and rising conservative political sentiment after

⁴ Another grievous fault was the tendency to segregate public housing tenants by race. Although the supporters of public housing were liberals and certainly did not consider racial segregation as part of a housing program, Ickes inaugurated a policy, later followed by many federal and local officials, that allotted projects to a single racial group according to the previous composition of the neighborhood.

the war, the passage of the Housing Act of 1949 restarted public housing in the United States (Davies 1966). Reflecting mainstream reformist thought and the demands of the real estate industry, the 1949 law renewed the war against the slum through provisions for slum clearance and new construction, under the rubric of urban redevelopment. Although Congress never met the Act's ambitious goal of appropriations for 810,000 new public housing units or 135,000 per year, tens of thousands of new units were built annually during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.

Continuing the design traditions of earlier projects, public housing (except in a few large cities) usually consisted of buildings of no more than three stories. Such complexes may have appeared dull from an aesthetic viewpoint and often contained small apartments, but at least they offered some convenience to their inhabitants. The low-rise designs provided a human scale and allowed tenants to view the playgrounds, courts, and gardens under their windows. Thus, the designs allowed residents to supervise their children and maintain surveillance over common areas (Newman 1972).

Contrary to Pommer's (1978) assertion that the public housing program produced no interesting architecture from the late 1930s to the 1960s, the government sponsored some noteworthy projects in the 1950s. The city of San Antonio, for example, produced an interesting variety of one- and two-story row houses and flats that offered ventilation and hillside views, and in Greenwich, Connecticut, city and state housing authorities sponsored a complex of three-story apartment blocks that reiterated Zeilenbau principles on a hill above the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad tracks (*Progressive Architecture* 1952a, 1952b).

During the late 1950s and 1960s, nonetheless, high-rise projects came to dominate the image of American public housing. Again European modernism provided the inspiration, but rather than its low-rise Zeilenbau manifestation, it now took the form of Le Corbusier's airy visions of towers rising out of vast expanses of grass and greenery. Le Corbusier, a Swiss-born modernist-style architect, exerted a powerful influence on a generation of designers who were mesmerized by his bold drawings of what he called the contemporary city. The movement for tall modernism also gained support from city officials and developers who saw sleek skyscrapers as a way of modernizing the aging urban landscapes of postwar America (Hall 1988).

The arguments that housing should take the form of tall modernism had little to do with reality. Before the war, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and other modernists had argued for a new urban environment made up of “towers in the park” by appropriating traditional housing reformers’ rhetoric about the need for low population densities and open space in the city (Le Corbusier 1947, 1967; Sert 1947). In a bizarre twist on the community planning tradition that had informed Garden City–style housing projects in the United States and Europe, tower-in-the-park theorists subscribed to the notion that elevator buildings would reproduce earthbound neighborhoods in the air. Accordingly, wide, often external, building corridors would somehow duplicate the complex functions and vitality of sidewalks and streets in the city below (*Architectural Forum* 1951; Yamasaki 1952). From the early 1950s, some designers and housers expressed qualms about what Bauer condemned as supertenements, but in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Chicago, officials embraced high-rise design with an almost insane tenaciousness (Bauer 1952, 1957; Bauer et al. 1957; Jacobs 1961; *Journal of Housing* 1952; Plunz 1990).

The ambitions of the housers of the 1930s pale when placed next to the idealism of the housing officials, designers, and planners who believed that city dwellers had to live in skyscrapers. In cities such as St. Louis and Chicago, the high-rise apartment building was a key component in sweeping urban redevelopment plans meant to turn back deteriorating physical and social conditions. Without discussion and perhaps without much thought, the supporters of high-rise redevelopment simply assumed that modern structures would transform the low-income people who were streaming into America’s large cities (Chicago Housing Authority 1956–1963; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1950, 1961; Teaford 1990). Explaining long-standing policy in 1965, the chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority declared, “Families who must or want to live in the inner city will have to learn to live with the high-rise building” (Brodt 1986, 18). Economy was often alleged as the reason for such large-scale structures, although the costs of sinking caissons, building elevators, and maintaining open spaces made tower-in-the-park public housing more expensive than low-rise developments.

The new public housing schemes defied both common sense and the overwhelming evidence of Americans’ housing preferences. As it turned out, only the wealthy in luxury apartment buildings and the poor in public housing projects actually adopted this supposedly inevitable new form of urbanism. The well-to-do occupied their luxury apartments for only part of the year and

used their wealth to dine out, hire nannies, and otherwise make their lives easier. In contrast, low-income residents had to live in their high-rise apartments year-round without such conveniences. For them, the task of supervising children was complicated by living in high-rise buildings where neither the galleries with their loud acoustics nor the great expanses of open spaces were particularly apt recreation areas (Jacobs 1961; Newman 1972).

The point here is not that effective child rearing is impossible in high-rise buildings—families live contentedly in the high-rises of Hong Kong and even New York City—but rather that the commitment to tall buildings was unrealistic and out of keeping with American tastes and values. While officials insisted on high-rises, the working and middle classes were rejecting apartments and flocking en masse to inexpensive single-family homes in the suburbs of every American city.

To be sure, designers produced some interesting interpretations of tall modernism. At Philadelphia's Mill Creek housing project, for example, Louis Kahn designed three 17-story apartment buildings so that only four units shared a common corridor on each floor. In addition, Kahn's plan included adjacent clusters of low-rise apartment buildings with their own courtyards and related tall and low buildings to one another within the larger site plan (Bae 1995; Bauman 1987).

More typical, however, were the severe slabs with rows of apartments lining either side of a central corridor. In St. Louis, the housing authority hired the well-connected local firm Hellmuth, Leinweber, and Yamasaki. After Minoru Yamasaki's design for the John J. Cochran Garden Apartments (an arrangement of 6-, 7-, and 12-story buildings with balconies to serve as porches) won honors in architectural circles, the authority built his design for the mammoth Pruitt-Igoe project of thirty-three 11-story buildings (see figure 4). Along one outer wall, the firm included deep hallways or "galleries" that were to function as playground, porch, and entryway to laundry and storage rooms, attracting residents and creating "vertical neighborhoods." In Chicago, housing officials over a period of years constructed a four-mile strip of public housing high-rises along South State Street, climaxing in 1963 with the completion of the world's largest public housing project, the Robert Taylor Homes, a two-mile stretch of twenty-eight 16-story buildings containing over 4,300 units (see figure 5) (*Architectural Record* 1954; Bailey 1965; Bowly 1978).

Figure 4. View of Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project, St. Louis, MO, Hellmuth, Leinweber, and Yamasaki, Architects



Source: Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

Within a few years, such behemoths were beset by a myriad of serious problems. When federal authorities held down unit costs, local housing authorities compensated by increasing the number of apartments in high-rise complexes. In St. Louis, as Eugene Meehan has shown, authorities called for small apartments when the low-income demand was for large ones. To make matters worse, landholders, contractors, and unions progressively inflated their charges in every large project. Caught between stingy federal unit cost ceilings and skyrocketing project costs, the authorities skimped, eliminating such basic construction and safety elements as insulation for heating pipes (Meehan 1975, 1979).

The open spaces evolved into dangerous no-man's-lands. At Pruitt-Igoe, vandalism and crime made a mockery of Yamasaki's galleries and other aesthetic pretensions. In 1965 the project, which by then had a significant number of vacant apartments, was deemed a failure, and the federal government initiated a \$7 million rescue effort. Yet as late as 1966 the Chicago Housing Authority insisted, over the objections of federal housing officials, on building 22- and 16-story towers at the Raymond

Figure 5. Bird's-Eye View of Robert Taylor Homes, Chicago, IL, Shaw, Metz, and Associates, Architects



Source: Photograph by Bill Engdahl. Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.

Hilliard Center (*Architectural Forum* 1966; Bailey 1965; Bowly 1978).

Social problems also plagued the public housing program. In the 1930s, the clientele for public housing was working-class families who had adjusted to city life and were seldom recent immigrants. After the war, the constituency for public housing became lower-class rural migrants from the South and Puerto Rico, many of whom were uneducated and had little experience with the city and its institutions. Much to the dismay of local public housing authorities, in the late 1940s conservatives in Congress and the federal housing authority pushed through a federal policy of evicting families whose income exceeded poverty-level ceilings. The enforcement of income limits excluded many stable and upwardly mobile tenants. To make matters worse, housing acts of the 1950s forced the admission into public housing of people who had been uprooted by urban renewal and highway projects. Some of those families were plagued with

problems of instability, violence, and alcoholism (Friedman 1968; Gelfand 1975; Wood 1982).

At the same time, officials attempting to integrate existing public housing or locate new projects in outlying neighborhoods encountered stiff, sometimes violent, resistance. In response, housing authorities chose to situate most family projects in the slums. Public housing became associated with the inner city, impoverished dependency, African Americans, and crime. The design of projects as separate environments—a legacy of the idealism of the 1930s—and the monumental institution-like quality of the high-rise developments underscored the role of public housing developments as stigmatized warehouses for the poor (Hirsch 1983).

In the 1960s, public housing had begun to project an image of disaster. Caught between rising costs and falling rents, city officials began to cut maintenance and security budgets for the deteriorating projects. Then the Brooke Amendment to the 1968 Housing Act placed a ceiling on rents of 25 percent of the tenants' income, further reducing the amount of funds available for operating expenses. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, public housing became the subject of fierce attacks. In his book, sociologist Lee Rainwater (1970) condemned Pruitt-Igoe and other giant projects as human disaster areas. Portraying a bleak world of crime and violence where the strong persecute the weak, the architect Oscar Newman (1972) disparaged the design of the high-rises for their lack of security. The demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe project in the early 1970s, after repeated efforts to rehabilitate it had failed, symbolized the despair that surrounded the program. When Richard Nixon placed a moratorium on federal funding for all housing programs in 1973, many felt that it seemed appropriate to end a bad program.

Yet despite the well-publicized failures, the disrepute of public housing was not all justified. From the 1960s, many local housing agencies produced elderly housing that was accepted without controversy and that, along with the Social Security and Medicare programs, helped enhance quality of life among older Americans. Moreover, many thousands were and are content to live in the inexpensive apartments that public housing projects offered, as long as some semblance of personal security was included in the bargain. The failure of public housing, although few seemed to realize it, was simply that the program by itself could not solve social problems, integrate society, or usher in a new high-rise urbanism.

From the 1960s, housing advocates and officials began to retreat from the concept of public housing as an appropriate response to the problems of the urban poor. Policy makers devised new programs that provided indirect and direct subsidies to private, not public, developers and landlords of new and rehabilitated low-income housing. For example, the Section 221(d)(3) program (as it was first passed in 1961) and the Section 236 program (enacted in 1968) allowed mortgage lenders to dispense low-income housing mortgages at rates below the current market. Later Section 221(d)(3) was amended to provide direct subsidies to cover the difference between a calculated potential rent and 20 percent of the tenants' income. Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 created a complicated set of subsidies and tax incentives for constructing, rehabilitating, and maintaining buildings with low-income rental units. (The privatized construction programs were also bedeviled by problems, especially financial scandals.) In the 1980s, the Reagan administration began to promote Section 8 rental vouchers for tenants as a housing program that would avoid spending public monies on construction of low-income housing (Hays 1985; Listokin 1991).

Meanwhile, the designers of low-income housing began to reject the distinctive modernist-style architecture that had characterized, and now stigmatized, public housing. The new thinking about the form of low-income housing, foreshadowed in the criticisms of Bauer and others in the 1950s, received official standing in 1968 when a presidential commission condemned the idea of large-scale high-rise projects (National Commission on Urban Problems 1968). Although some monumental housing projects continued to be built during the 1960s and 1970s, designers groped for more responsive subsidized housing forms. In Boston's Villa Victoria, John Sharratt mixed building sizes by combining towers with row houses. Other projects—such as the Martin Luther King Community designed by Hartford Design Corporation in Hartford and Woodlawn Gardens designed by Stanley Tigerman in Chicago—consisted of courts of low-rise buildings that retained some of the austere image of public housing (Bowly 1978; *Progressive Architecture* 1971, 1980).

But architect Hugh Stubbins demonstrated the wave of the future in the late 1960s when he designed Warren Gardens in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood as a town house development. Abandoning the extreme modernist style altogether, Stubbins demonstrated that low-income housing could be made to look indistinguishable from housing for the middle-class market (see figure 6) (*House and Home* 1972). In the 1970s, architect Oscar

Figure 6. View of Warren Gardens, Roxbury, MA, Hugh Stubbins and Associates, Architects



Source: Photograph by Jonathan Green. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

Newman published a set of design principles formulated to ensure the maximum amount of safety through private entrances and enclosed semiprivate open spaces (Newman 1972). Applying Newman's principles, designers began to build new housing and rebuild old public housing in ways they hoped would give their low-income residents a sense of connection to, not isolation from, the community at large.

Persistence of high ambitions

During the 1980s, the advocates of good low-income housing responded to the budget retrenchment of the Reagan administration by finding new ways to produce housing. Community development corporations and other nonprofit groups emerged as leading developers of subsidized low-income housing. Funded at first primarily by foundations and corporations and later, under Presidents Bush and Clinton, by government, these groups now produce about 30,000–40,000 units of housing annually, equal to the levels of production of public housing during the 1950s.

Although housing advocates of today have learned much from the experiences of the past, the visionary idealism that has characterized the housing movement in the past persists in new forms. The idea that the manipulation of the environment can improve the social circumstances and behavior of the poor still persists, but not in the form of a vast public housing program or avant-garde architecture and urban design. Instead many housers believe that they can address the problems of the poor by placing them in economically and ethnically heterogeneous residential areas.

Mixed-income tenancy, for example, is now seen as a road to uplifting the poor. In its more moderate form, this argument makes a great deal of sense. The departure of stable working- and middle-class households from areas where low-income people live has deprived the poor not only of role models but also of churches and other organizations that promote the order and values necessary to a healthy community (Wilson 1987). To combine the residences of the poor with those of somewhat better-off households, housing advocates and officials have called for removing the maximum limits to income in housing projects and setting aside units for varying income levels in low-income housing projects (for example, see Spence 1993). These are practical policies that have helped to counteract the effects of population shifts in recent years.

But the more extreme versions of mixed-income housing call for combining elements of the population that differ radically in class and ethnicity. Like the earlier enthusiasms for policies related to the public housing program, the arguments for this policy are vague about precisely how the poor will benefit from living next to wealthy neighbors with whom they have little in common (Mulroy 1991). The virtue of recent urban housing developments that combine luxury market units with low-income units (Tent City, a project completed in 1988 in Boston's South End, is one example) is that they provide poor families with good homes they would not otherwise have. By itself, however, the mixing of extremely diverse income groups does not solve any social problem other than that of housing.

Similarly, the policy of scattering the sites of low-income housing across the city aims at uplifting the poor through contact with the financially better-off. Although a great improvement on the policies that concentrated masses of single-parent families on relief, this program often attracts adventurous and upwardly mobile families who probably would persevere in any case. In addition, scattered sites of low-income public housing can be

developed only in small numbers and, according to Fuerst (1985), are more expensive than centralized projects to maintain and provide with social services.

The most impractical and therefore perilous version of contemporary environmental determinism is the policy of aggressively dispersing low-income families into middle- and upper-income suburbs. That policy is based on the idea that thriving suburban locales will impart superior schooling and employment to the poor who are moved there. Pioneered as the Gautreaux program in the city of Chicago, the dispersal policy originated as a civil rights, not a housing, initiative. A court order devised the Gautreaux program as a remedy to the patterns of racially segregated tenant placement of the Chicago Housing Authority. The program found available units in the suburbs and placed low-income households with Section 8 certificates in them. The Gautreaux program was implemented with great care; officials found cooperative landlords and screened tenants for reliable rent payment, good housekeeping, and large families. Despite its origins, housing advocates soon celebrated Gautreaux as a way that poor urban dwellers could improve school performance and obtain better jobs (Rosenbaum 1991).

Demonstrating the historic tendency of housers to overreach, the Bush and Clinton administrations instituted the Moving to Opportunity demonstration program to expand the Gautreaux-style dispersal policy to Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The task of duplicating the carefully constructed Gautreaux program all over the country will not be an easy one. The implementation of large and complex government programs in housing and other fields has rarely run smoothly. Indeed the program stumbled at the outset when officials failed to educate the residents of blue-collar suburbs outside Baltimore about the limited scope of the plan. Because of the ensuing storms of protest, the Clinton administration delayed the implementation of the program in Baltimore (De Witt 1995; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1996).

As its early problems indicate, the Moving to Opportunity program risks the kind of political disasters that beset the public housing program. In blue-collar neighborhoods, the words "Section 8"—like the words "public housing"—have become a pejorative term associated with loud, unruly, and possibly dangerous tenants. (Only a minority of subsidized families fit this description, but as with public housing, a few bad actors ruin the reputation of the whole group.) In Boston, for example, neighborhood residents became aggravated over the influx of holders of

Section 8 rental certificates into buildings owned by absentee landlords and complained so bitterly that the mayor convened a special task force to calm the situation (Committee on Subsidized Housing/Absentee Landlord Issues 1993). Just the threat of an influx of inner-city poor triggered large-scale protests in Baltimore. If resumed, an aggressive dispersal program will only provoke more controversies and resistance. At a time when many are fighting to keep basic social programs alive, right-wing commentators have begun to use the threat of a campaign to enforce socioeconomic heterogeneity throughout metropolitan America as ammunition to suppress all government housing programs (Bovard 1994).

Yet even if the Moving to Opportunity program had been able to copy Gautreaux perfectly, it would have failed to solve the problems of the poor. A second look at survey data shows that Gautreaux achieved far less impressive results than earlier conclusions suggested. Although more likely to obtain jobs, low-income arrivals in the suburbs neither earned nor worked more than their counterparts located in the city. As might be expected, the new suburbanites complained that they were isolated from child care, adequate public transportation, and the kinds of support provided by a shared community. But most important of all, individuals who had been on welfare for a long time or felt they had little control over their lives—the crucial group that such a program is supposed to help—had a harder time finding jobs in the suburbs and made less money when they did find work (Popkin, Rosenbaum, and Meaden 1994).

The preceding analysis of the flaws in recent policies should not be interpreted as an objection to either socioeconomic integration or vigorous prosecution of fair housing laws. Rather it demonstrates the continuing tendency of housers to view housing policies as panaceas and, in particular, to overstate the importance of environment in determining social behavior. Perhaps the intensity of political debate encourages this inflation of claims for policies. Nonetheless, advocates of good low-income housing might be better off admitting that the physical environment is only one of a complex of problems—including cultural values and individual behavior patterns—that block the upward mobility of the poor. To do otherwise is to court bitter disillusionment and perhaps even jeopardize the housing movement.

Lessons of the past

History does not provide precise prescriptions for the future, but it does indicate that, to be successful, housing advocates should

not promote large-scale politically controversial programs (such as Moving to Opportunity) as panaceas for deep-rooted social problems. Instead history suggests that flexibility and political pragmatism are the best guides to shaping housing policy. Thus, since current housing programs enjoy considerable, although not overwhelming, political support, housing advocates should try to protect government funding to preserve and renovate viable public and subsidized housing developments and to maintain the number of rental vouchers and certificates. In addition, advocates should work to preserve tax credits to assist nonprofit community-based low-income housing efforts.

In an era of drastic reductions in government expenditures for social programs, the success of housing developments as safe havens and places of social betterment will depend not on new, expensive social programs but on screening tenants and coordinating with local social service agencies, schools and educational services, and the police. And if, as President Clinton has stated, the era of big federal government is over, then advocates for effective housing policy now should refocus their energies on state and local governments and the private sector.

For many housing advocates, such pragmatic approaches to policy may seem too modest. The simple goal of providing decent and safe housing to low-income people where they now live is not as lofty as creating modern housing, a high-rise civilization, or a socially heterogeneous society. Yet it is just as worthy and, in these perilous times for social policy, has the advantage of being remotely possible.

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