NEW DEAL RUINS

Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy

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Introduction

PUBLIC HOUSING AND URBAN PLANNING ORTHODOXY

The local housing authority of the future must be a locally focused, opportunity seeking, full service real estate development and holding company, developing and managing the value of its investments for the good of the community.

—Richard C. Gentry, former director of the San Diego Housing Commission

It is a measure of the degree to which public housing is a policy of the past that there is a Museum of Public Housing in Chicago. Furthermore, there is some irony that the museum should be located in that city in particular, for those who ran public housing in Chicago and those who were responsible for it failed miserably. In fact, they failed catastrophically and almost willfully—but that story has been told. The fact is that public housing came to ruin in Chicago. The great New Deal enterprise to provide decent, stable housing for the lower-income and working classes was gradually destroyed through mismanagement, underfunding, poor design, and civic neglect. And so one wonders why, of all places, a museum of public housing would surface there.

Perhaps the intention was to erect an enduring reminder of the dangers of overzealous social engineering or the limits of the welfare state, to enshrine public housing forever as the Titanic of American social policy, launched with great hubris but sunk at the cost of so many lives.

On the other hand, Chicago could be seen as the perfect location for such a museum. Deverra Beverly, a lifelong resident of the ABLA public housing project on the West Side of Chicago, and her neighbor, Beatrice Jones, looked around their community in the 1990s and saw the Chicago Housing Authority poised to “transform” public housing in that city by demolishing virtually all of it, scattering the residents, and rebuilding new communities that would mix market-rate housing with a drastically reduced number of public housing units. Beverly and Jones want the museum to commemorate those who lived
in Chicago public housing: "We want to leave something so our children or grandchildren will know we were here... that we existed as a community." In that sense, then, no place is more appropriate for the museum than Chicago, for nowhere has the early promise of public housing disappeared so dramatically and so completely. It stands as a memorial to the lives of low-income residents who claimed these places as home, and who created community under the most difficult circumstances.

Although the discourse of disaster dominates discussions of public housing, the reality is that in most places it worked—and still does work. Even the congressional commission formed in the late 1980s to investigate what was called "severely distressed public housing" noted in its 1992 report that "approximately 94 percent of the units are not in such a state; thus, the public housing program continues to provide an important rental housing resource for many low-income families and others." This reality, applying as it does to so much public housing, is at odds with perceptions of the program fueled by popular press accounts of the worst public housing in our largest cities. Indeed, even in those cities, and in those specific projects that have manifestly failed to provide decent and safe housing for its inhabitants, there are contradictory experiences and more complexity than suggested by the disaster narrative. Deverra Beverly lived at the epicenter of public housing dysfunction and yet still celebrates the community that she and others built. Beatrice Harris, another Chicagoan and resident of Wentworth Gardens public housing, told researchers in the 1990s, "This is our community. This is our home... And I'm telling, ain't nobody puttin' me out... I love this place, you hear me! I love this place." But public housing residents are being put out. More than a quarter million units have been demolished or sold off, some to make way for newer, mixed-income communities, and some simply eliminated. Whether they are defiant like Beatrice Harris, or supportive of the change and anxious for the opportunity to move, residents are being displaced.

The Dismantling of Public Housing

These two narratives, one of catastrophe and the other of quiet success, are stark opposites and they reflect dramatic and fundamental disagreement about the legacy of public housing in the United States. The disagreements about public housing, though, have always been dramatic. Few other social policies pursued by the federal government, and certainly no other housing program, has generated the controversy that has surrounded public housing almost from its beginning. Hailed by progressive reformers and housing advocates, public housing was vociferously attacked by real estate interests and others who called it socialism, and/or claimed it would destroy communities and enflame racial conflict. We are now in a period when the conflicts about public housing are resolving themselves in a nationwide effort to dismantle the program. Demolition is the main means by which the system is being dismantled. Most of the demolition has taken place within the context of the HOPE VI program, which was authorized by Congress in 1992 (and will continue as part of its successor, the Choice Neighborhood Initiative, or CNI, which began in 2010). Sometimes demolition is accompanied by redevelopment and sometimes not. In addition to demolition, public housing units are being lost through sale and conversion to other uses (a process the Department of Housing and Urban Development calls "disposition"). What demolition (with or without redevelopment) and disposition have in common is a reduction in the stock of public housing. In the following pages I refer to the dismantling of the public housing system in the United States to denote these efforts to reduce the public housing stock. Alternatively, I refer to the transformation of public housing, and to the removal of public housing units. Each of these phrases is meant to identify this overarching trend toward elimination of public housing units (through demolition or disposition) and reentrainment in the provision of public housing for very low income households.

Some may question my characterization of this effort as a dismantling of the program. They are likely to point out that many public housing units are rebuilt in the new mixed-income communities that replace the old projects. The new communities are designed in ways that make the subsidized units indistinguishable from the market-rate housing built beside them and thus they offer simply a new way of doing business for public housing. Alternatively, one might point to the fact that despite three decades of unprecedented demolition of public housing, most of the stock still remains standing. Thus, the argument might go, references to the death of public housing or to its ruins are hyperbolic at best and misleading at worst.

The evidence for the dismantling interpretation, however, is strong. First, there has been a significant reduction in the number of public housing units across the country. Though advocates of redevelopment position it as the solution to ongoing problems of public housing and as a means of creating stable and decent living environments for the poor, there have been no attempts to use this new model to expand the public housing stock. In fact, the new model is employed almost exclusively to reduce the scope of the program and the number of subsidized, very-low income units. HOPE VI and CNI projects do not increase the number of public housing units within a given city—and rarely have they adhered to even a one-for-one replacement of the demolished public housing. Instead, in most projects there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of public housing units from pre- to post-redevelopment. Nationally, the early
projections were that only 60 percent of the public housing units torn down by HOPE VI would be replaced.

HUD and local public housing authorities (PHAs) have also demolished projects outside the confines of HOPE VI and sold units to private and nonprofit entities through the Demolition and Disposition process built into the original public housing legislation. In fact, the elimination of units outside of HOPE VI has now exceeded the number of units demolished by that program. As of August 2012, HUD reports that over 285,000 units have been approved for demolition (including HOPE VI) and more than 250,000 had already been demolished. Thus, the agency has approved demolition of close to 20 percent of the public housing stock nationwide. In some places, the reduction is much greater. In the city of Memphis, Tennessee, local officials gleefully anticipate the elimination of all public housing in that city. At a 2009 ribbon cutting ceremony for a new mixed-income development replacing the old Horn Lake public housing project, Robert Lipscomb, the city’s housing director, said, “We’re almost there. We have only a few more sites to go before we can eliminate the words ‘public housing’ from our vocabulary. Wouldn’t that be great?” Atlanta, however, has beaten them to the title of first city to demolish all of its family public housing. Las Vegas, Nevada, is eager to follow Atlanta’s lead.

A second dimension of the dismantling of public housing is in the shifting of housing assistance to tenant-based forms of subsidy (vouchers), and to the shallow subsidies of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) and other affordable housing programs. These changes bring two of the most consequential elements of public housing: the long-term commitment of the subsidy and its depth. The system of permanent affordability and the deep subsidies represented by the public housing program are being exchanged for the short-term contracts of vouchers and the relatively higher income targeting of LIHTC.

Finally, the current efforts to demolish and dispose of public housing are, in all likelihood, a death blow to the program. Public housing—as it was conceived during the New Deal, and as it has operated during the subsequent decades—is no longer seen as a viable policy option for meeting affordable housing needs. Though it was once the centerpiece of national efforts to provide housing for very low income families in the United States, it has been many years since the number of public housing units nationwide has expanded by an appreciable amount. In fact, in the current policy environment public housing is no longer seen even as a resource worth preserving. The units that avoid demolition and continue to operate do so because of the long-term contractual obligations embedded in the way the program works. That is, public housing (like other housing assistance programs) has an afterlife—units remain long after the program has ceased to be an option for future policy and even though policymakers have moved on to new and different ways of meeting affordable housing needs. Thus, the transformation taking place in cities across the country represents a new, neoliberal, post-New Deal policy strategy aimed at ending the welfare state approach to housing assistance embodied by public housing.

This attempt to turn public housing into a museum piece is heralded by many and championed by notable public- and private-sector leaders. Henry Cisneros, first as HUD secretary in the Clinton administration and for years since, has consistently called for demolition of obsolete public housing communities. Private developer Richard Baron has been a leading figure in creating the new mixed-income model that is replacing public housing in many cities, and has been active in disseminating the idea. Peter Calthorpe, a leading urban planner identified with the New Urbanist movement, claims that public housing demolition and redevelopment “diminishes the historic isolation of public housing blocks, creating safe, socially diverse neighborhoods.” Noted civil rights attorney Alexander Pollikoff, the lead attorney in the landmark Gautreaux public housing desegregation case, calls the movement “a hopeful and important step in the direction of deconcentrating poverty.”

The initiative to dismantle public housing is, however, misrepresented as an effort to improve the lives of public housing residents. It is, in fact, better understood with reference to three historical dynamics: (1) the centrality of racial issues in defining urban America; (2) the political shift from New Deal social welfare to neoliberal governance strategies; and (3) the economic revitalization of central cities that occurred after the 1990–91 recession. Looming above the entire effort and threatening its viability and undermining its rationale is the sporadic and inconsistent pattern of benefits that ensue for the public housing residents forcibly displaced by the demolition of their communities.

"Useful Work under Government Supervision"

U.S. public housing in the twenty-first century is in many ways a historical artifact. In a physical sense, the earliest public housing buildings from the 1930s and early 1940s are among the best surviving examples of New Deal architecture. These units, the “semi-enclosed courts with walk-up buildings,” were frequently well built and have held up well over time. The shift to modernist design themes in the later 1940s and 1950s generally increased the scale of public housing developments and incorporated much more open space for common use and introduced more fresh air and light into urban landscapes that had lacked both. Today, the New Deal designs seem quaint while the modernist projects generate almost universal opprobrium as outdated and socially dysfunctional. Where public housing designers wanted a clear separation between public housing and
the slums that often surrounded them, planners now look for developments to seamlessly integrate with the rest of the community. Where New Deal and modernist principles celebrated community and openness through the creation of undifferentiated open space, planners now argue for individual space that clearly demarcates ownership and maintenance responsibilities.

In addition to being widely considered outmoded in a physical sense, public housing policy is an artifact of ideas ranging from Keynesianism to the New Deal social welfare state. Large-scale and direct government intervention such as public housing was a product of a political economy that no longer exists, an expanding welfare state underwritten with the surpluses generated by a powerful industrial economy. Politically, public housing’s moment was one characterized by a willingness to use the public sector to spread the benefits of prosperity and expand social welfare rights. Conceived of, in part, as a giant public works project, public housing helped put people back to work during the Great Depression. It was then reauthorized and expanded in an era of unprecedented economic prosperity in which surplus state revenues were directed to meeting growing postwar demand for housing and to large-scale renewal efforts to reverse the fortunes of declining central cities. Public housing thus represented a form of government investment in infrastructure that was of benefit to the working class both as a source of jobs and as a source of decent and affordable housing. Each new project was an affirmation of the importance of government investment in contributing to economic and social well-being.

At the dedication of the first completed public housing development in the nation, Techwood Homes in Atlanta, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said:

Within sight of us today, there stands a tribute to useful work under Government supervision... Here, at the request of the citizens of Atlanta, we have cleared out nine square blocks of antiquated squalid dwellings, for years a detriment to this community. Today those hopeless old houses are gone and in their place we see the bright cheerful buildings of the Techwood Housing Project.

His brief talk that day was an elaboration of the idea that government has a necessary and proper role in generating economic activity, contributing to the expansion of employment, and building the nation’s infrastructure. Public housing, like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other New Deal efforts to propel a lagging economy and put people back to work, reflected an acceptance of the idea that public works were an important and valid economic intervention. Furthermore, it was an intervention aimed at producing benefits for the submerged working class who were suffering as a result of the Great Depression. The fact that housing was an important economic stimulant with considerable ripple effects throughout the economy had been well appreciated even during the Hoover administration that preceded Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. Whereas Hoover’s political ideology kept him from initiating large-scale public interventions into economic matters, Roosevelt used the deepening crisis of the Depression to justify a series of grand public works projects, including the initiative aimed at clearing the nation’s slums and producing new and needed affordable housing for the working class.15

Racial Identification and Increasing Economic Marginalization

Over time, as the country climbed out of the Depression, the white working class benefitted from government investment and support for expanded housing choices, including the homeownership initiatives of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Rising incomes in the post-Depression era allowed whites to move to new suburban communities being built in metropolitan areas across the country. African Americans, sharing less in the postwar prosperity and having fewer choices in a segregated and discriminatory private housing market, began to see in public housing the best opportunity for decent and affordable living in urban areas. With little demand from whites, the projects became more racially identified over time.16 Residents with choices moved out voluntarily and those with rising incomes were forced out by program rules. By the 1960s, after little more than twenty years in existence, public housing in the nation’s largest cities had become the housing of last resort to an increasingly impoverished and economically marginalized African American population.17 For fifty years now, the resident profile of public housing has been disproportionately people of color and, in most places, disproportionately black. Though African Americans make up less than 15 percent of the U.S. population, they constituted 48 percent of the residents of public housing nationwide in 2000. In larger cities, two-thirds of public housing residents were black. In some cities, such as Detroit and Washington, D.C., virtually all public housing residents are black.

Although public housing’s political support had never been widespread or entirely secure, the shift in its clientele from “the deserving poor” (as represented by the intact families of working, albeit low-income residents) to marginalized single-parent, welfare, and minority families has meant consistent underfunding and a steady disinvestment, both literal and political, from the commitment to provide safe, decent, and affordable housing through public ownership. In too many places the physical stock was allowed to decay, and maintenance was deferred or ignored. As the residents of public housing became more impoverished so, too, did their physical environments. The neglect by public housing
managers in some cities and the lack of adequate funding often turned the green open spaces of public housing campuses into hardscrabble dirt, littered with broken glass and debris. Outdoor common areas in the worst projects were dotted with rusting and jagged-edged metal piping, the fossil remnants of swing sets and play areas that had been systematically torn apart and left. The projects were, by the early 1990s, seemingly useful only as a means of evoking memorable metaphors of disaster. Public housing complexes were, according to national leaders, "monuments of hopelessness" and "as close to the approaches to hell" as one could find in America.  

Increasingly identified with its growing African American clientele, public housing was stigmatized and became one more wedge driven between working-class whites and African American members of the no longer certain New Deal coalition. The urban riots of the 1960s and the largely white union movement that had once seen a commonality of interests in public housing. Public housing had thus become another reflection of the racial segregation and unresolved racial conflicts of American cities. The growing awareness of concentrated poverty perfectly complemented and in time contributed to the narrative of public housing disaster. The no-go zones that had developed in American cities were increasingly depicted in the popular media as contested spaces of urban gangs and wrecked by the scourge of crack cocaine and its attendant human fallout. In sum, public housing projects were urban wastelands of violence and predation. In time, scholars made the connection official, demonstrating that public housing complexes built in previous decades were significantly more likely than other communities to become concentrations of poverty in the 1980s. Perceived to a large degree as synonymous, the problems of concentrated poverty and the problems of distressed public housing suggested therefore the same solution: dispersal of the incumbent low-income population coupled with a radical physical redevelopment of the area. Importantly, all of this is being pursued without public or official reference to race and racial segregation in American cities.  

Though race may be ignored in the statements made by HUD and PHA officials engaged in the dismantling of public housing, it is nevertheless central to the process. Since 2000, public housing demolition has been aggressively pursued in cities where the public housing population is disproportionately black compared to the rest of the city. The racial targeting of public housing transformation efforts extends even to the project level. Indeed, the displacement of very low income residents through public housing demolition is being disproportionately borne by African American families. The demolition of public housing has systematically targeted projects with higher black occupancy. Thus, as with the urban renewal program of the 1950s and 1960s, one of the main outcomes of public housing demolition has been the forced removal of blacks from their homes.

Neoliberalizing Public Housing

Stagnation and the restructuring of the U.S. economy in the 1970s brought an end to the prolonged period of postwar prosperity and undercut the basis of support for a growing social welfare infrastructure. The neoliberal politics emerging in the 1980s questioned the wisdom and utility of government stimulus efforts and the efficacy of social welfare policy. The persistence of poverty was taken as evidence that "big government" solutions had not worked. Economic dislocations associated with economic restructuring were used as an occasion to scale back regulation and allow the market greater freedom to produce new investment and profit opportunities. The disappearance of public housing is part of this larger dynamic and reflects the failure of the political coalition that supported it and the end of a policy era in which large-scale interventionist policy was a widely legitimized strategy. In perhaps a final irony, some cities used federal stimulus funds authorized in response to the economic crisis of 2007–08, funds that were modeled on the public works initiatives of the New Deal, to demolish public housing. Neoliberal policy prescriptions are based on the belief that the market is a better way to provide for the social welfare of the population than are redistributive government programs, which, according to the neoliberal model, are antagonistic to growth and prosperity. This core preference for the "discipline of the market" over the alleged excesses and inefficiencies of government has marked many domestic policy reforms since the 1980s. Initiatives begun by U.S. president Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s were aimed at reducing the influence and power of organized labor both in the workplace and in national politics, deregulating industry, and downsizing large government initiatives in favor of the market allocation of goods. The first large-scale strikes against Keynesianism and social welfare-oriented government intervention were jarring. Federal budget cuts in domestic social programs in Reagan's first term reduced subsidized housing program allocations by more than 80 percent over a six-year period. On the labor front, Reagan broke the air traffic controllers strike in 1981 by firing more than eleven thousand union members, setting the stage for a more generalized corporate attack on unions that rolled back workplace gains earned over the previous decades.
Government was reduced by cutting back on revenues through tax cuts and by further deregulation that diminished public control over and participation in the marketplace.

In terms of public housing policy, an entirely new vision of the program was created over a short period of time in the mid-1990s. No longer would public housing communities consist entirely of the poor; they would be mixed-income neighborhoods of low- and middle-income residents. No longer would public housing be configured in large superblocks set off from the neighborhood surrounding it. Instead, it would be re-integrated into the fabric of urban neighborhoods. Similarly, public housing would no longer be set off from the housing market around it but instead connected to it by a mixed-income, mixed-ownership model. The institutional look of barracks housing and the cold and soulless high-rises would give way to a mix of housing types featuring porches and personalized design amenities, making public housing indistinguishable from the market-rate housing within which it was to be embedded. To the designers of these policy changes, all of these improvements required more than tinkering around the edges of existing projects; they necessitated wholesale demolition and redevelopment.

By the time the new model of public housing emerged, disinvestment by HUD and by local housing authorities in the existing stock of public housing was already fairly widespread. PHAs in many cities had simply begun to abandon some of their properties by neglecting to make repairs, allowing units to become and remain vacant, and by not spending repair funds they had received from the federal government, a process that came to be known as de facto demolition. During the 1980s, HUD passively supported these actions and routinely approved the requests for demolition that were the inevitable end result of this process of neglect. In the 1990s though, HUD moved from passive to active on demolition. During Bill Clinton's initial term, Henry Cisneros became the first HUD secretary to advocate openly the demolition of public housing. Some local housing authorities were quick to embrace the change and accelerated their nascent efforts. In Houston, where the housing authority had been trying for years to figure out a way to rid itself of the Allen Parkway Homes, the city's largest public housing project, a HUD grant in 1993 made it happen. Elsewhere, demolitions became opportunities for public celebrations. In Baltimore, the first city nationwide to tear down all of its family high-rise buildings, crowds of people gathered to watch and parades were held to celebrate the first demolitions. In Tucson, the city's housing director and a city councilmember each took a swing at the Connie Chambers public housing complex with a sledgehammer at a celebration complete with mariachi bands and speeches about improving the lives of the poor.

The plan of action for public housing was embodied in a federal program that came to be known as HOPE VI. The effort began with a congressional call in 1989 for a commission to look into the conditions of "severely distressed public housing." As a first step, the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing (NCSDPH) called for an incremental response, a program of rehabilitation and modernization that would allocate millions of dollars toward the repair and renewal of the broken buildings and the broken communities of public housing. This limited approach was abandoned almost immediately, however, in favor of a bolder one—the complete demolition of the old communities and their replacement with entirely new, mixed-income communities. This more aggressive approach emerged within the Clinton administration, and could be viewed as an attempt to "end public housing as we know it," a fitting companion piece to Clinton's effort in the welfare policy arena.

Simultaneously, many public housing authorities reinvented themselves and shed the image of social service agencies providing lifeline support to the
very poor. Some have become dynamic real estate developers, building mixed-use, mixed-income developments that have provided affordable low-cost housing, only in the context of gentrifying neighborhoods where Starbucks replaced pay-day loan centers, and a revived real estate market was reflected in the shiny windows of Bed, Bath, and Beyond stores, Pottery Barn outlets, and half-million-dollar townhouses. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) rebranded its logo to "CHAnge" to emphasize its new direction. The Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) privatized most of its internal administrative practices and all of its management operations and "repositioned itself as a diversified real estate company with a public mission and purpose." Renee Glover, head of the AHA and the doyenne of demolition, has become one of the unofficial spokespersons for the movement. The AHA website for many years called Glover a pioneer in the movement to establish "master-planned, mixed-finance, mixed-income residential developments where families of all socio-economic profiles live next to each other in the same amenity-rich community. In fact, the model Glover created at AHA is now used as the redevelopment blueprint by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Though officials in Washington, D.C., and other cities might contest it, Glover claims this approach, used across the country, as her own and calls it the "Atlanta model." Glover travels from city to city spreading the word about demolition and redevelopment, and changing the old ways of public housing. Her message is frequently infused with warnings about the dangers of concentrated poverty and the dehumanizing aspects of the old public housing model. "Families were broken or non-existent" she contends of the days of public housing residences in large complexes. "Education was broken. Economic success was unattainable. The threat of crime was a daily, sometimes hourly, reality." Privatization is one of the central means by which public housing is changing. Some PHAs have sold part of their housing stocks to private developers to convert to market rate or to operate as assisted housing if other subsides can be found. Management responsibilities are routinely subcontracted to private firms, especially after redevelopment. The AHA's privatization, for example, has left only a skeletal administrative staff for the agency itself. Newly redeveloped mixed-income communities are generally governed by private management companies that impose screening criteria, which disqualify large numbers of previous public housing residents, and work requirements aimed at disciplining the poor. In an extension of the objectives and impulses behind welfare reform, the 1996 public housing reform bill required unemployed public housing residents who were able-bodied to do unpaid community service each month. Some PHAs adopted stricter employment requirements for the residents of their new communities. As the director of the Charlotte, North Carolina, PHA put it, "public housing should not be a 'safe harbor' for those who 'lack a work ethic.'"

Though the new tenant screening policies reflect neoliberal concerns about the provision of social welfare benefits, they are in some respects a return to policies followed by PHAs in the early years of public housing in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, public housing in most cities was seen as a resource for the working poor. PHAs deliberately marketed their units to employed households and limited it if not completely avoided residency by "welfare families." The New York City Housing Authority is one of the few in the nation that has retained policies over the decades that have continued to target the working poor and has largely avoided turning public housing into housing of last resort for a submerged urban underclass. In most other cities, however, the allocation of public housing units soon came to reflect a social welfare orientation that targeted the neediest families, which increasingly meant those on public assistance. In some cases, this was the will of Congress, which changed resident preference policy to favor, at various times, those displaced from the slums cleared to create public housing, previously homeless families, and families paying more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

The new regime of public housing management policies, however, goes beyond the mere reinstatement of original tenant screening standards. In 1996, President Clinton signed an executive order commonly referred to as "One Strike and You're Out" that allowed the eviction of public housing families if anyone in the household was convicted of a crime. This policy, enacted during a period of national moral panic over crime and drugs in U.S. cities, was an extreme form of Congress's "Three Strikes and You're Out" policy that called for severe sentencing rules for third-time offenders. The three-strikes policy itself was the culmination of repeated congressional efforts to "get tough on crime" in urban America, in which each session of Congress tried to outdo the previous one by increasing mandatory sentencing, lengthening sentences for crimes most prevalent in black ghettos, and increasing police and investigative prerogatives in fighting crime.

In public housing, the declaration of "federal drug-free zones" in public housing areas allowed the application of stricter federal sentencing rules. This meant the commission of a drug crime on public housing property generated longer sentences for convicted parties than the same offense committed across the street. Although some residents of the most poorly managed public housing welcomed the get-tough approach, public housing residents were in essence being asked to waive some of their civil rights in order to address crime problems that were beyond the management capabilities of PHAs and local police departments.

The core of privatization, however, is the movement of units out of public ownership and control and into the private market. This is being accomplished in
several ways. First, there is the sale of public housing units to residents. This was an initiative of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s, mimicking the Right to Buy scheme for British social housing initiated by Prime Minister Thatcher. Sale to tenants has never accounted for much activity in the United States, however. In more recent years, PHAs have sold off stock to developers, sometimes just to make up budgetary shortfalls. The San Diego Housing Commission eliminated its entire stock of public housing by converting it to private (nonprofit) ownership. Though it continues to operate as subsidized housing, there is no longer public ownership or management. In 2010 the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) announced plans to dispose of all sixty-eight hundred units in its inventory, converting them to voucher-based housing. The most common form of privatization is the demolition of public units, which are either not replaced in any form or are replaced by Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) subsidies used by low-income families to rent private-sector housing.

Gentrification and Inner-City Revitalization

Economic changes taking place in American cities in the postrecession period of 1993–95 generated development pressures that also led to the elimination of public housing communities. Neighborhoods in and around downtowns, especially, were subject to significant investment pressures. The dismantling of public housing nicely dovetailed with the opportunity to leverage private-sector investment in inner-city neighborhoods.

In contrast to previous decades, the wave of gentrification that characterized U.S. cities after the 1990s recession was “ambitiously and scrupulously planned” by corporate developers and public officials. This “third wave” of gentrification had more private-sector involvement, took place in cities “further down the urban hierarchy,” and transformed neighborhoods more distant from the urban core that had been seen as riskier for private investment in the past. These characteristics are not unrelated, according to Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith. They argue that policy devolution to local governments has made those governments more sensitive to local-source revenue production (such as property and sales taxes) and has therefore heightened the responsiveness of local governments to the benefits of real estate development. The diffusion of gentrification to cities down the urban hierarchy and to more remote and troubled neighborhoods requires a more active and sizable public-sector investment to create the conditions necessary for private capital investment. In the case of public housing redevelopment, the public ownership of the land has long been an impediment to private reinvestment on-site, and the deteriorated physical asset has long impeded private investment in the surrounding community.

The government-initiated demolition and redevelopment of public housing sweeps away both obstacles.

The transformation of large public housing sites, sometimes well over a hundred acres in size, necessitates a leading role for local government for two reasons. First, the PHA must be willing to convert the property to private ownership and thus must be a willing partner in the redevelopment. Second, the size and scale of the projects are such that significant infrastructure investments are necessary to accomplish redevelopment objectives. Such action can sometimes generate a powerful reaction in the private sector as the latent market value of neighborhoods is unleashed once the obstacle of public housing is removed.

As Elvin Wyly and Daniel Hammel have memorably stated, public housing in many American cities had by the 1990s become islands of decay in seas of renewal. Neighborhood changes in the Mission Hill area of Boston, for example, had left the BHA’s Mission Main project an isolated enclave of poverty, surrounded by more affluent neighbors. (It was torn down for redevelopment in 1996.) The St. Thomas public housing project in New Orleans sat in the path of revitalization and, as a community of very low income families, soon became isolated in a part of New Orleans, near downtown, that was experiencing upgrading. (St. Thomas was demolished in 2001.) Wyly and Hammel call the Cabrini-Green public housing project in Chicago “the most vivid” example of this phenomenon. Cabrini-Green occupied seventy acres in the middle of the city’s gentrifying Near North Side. Its size, however, and the deplorable conditions at the site kept private investment at bay for years. Long identified as a potential site for redevelopment, Cabrini-Green was marked for demolition in 1993 and, though delayed by the lawsuits of residents, it began coming down in 2003. No sooner had the CHA begun clearing the site of public housing residents then developers began building condominiums, which sold for $650,000, and commercial nodes that had been dominated by check-cashing and small-scale convenience stores, quickly converted to shopping areas anchored by upscale coffee shops, home furnishing stores, and franchise clothing stores.

The coupling of public housing demolition with private-sector reinvestment to trigger large-scale neighborhood change quickly became a prominent objective of the HOPE VI program. HUD began to assess possible projects for their potential in leveraging private investment to remake the surrounding residential and commercial environments, and local officials began to use public housing demolition and transformation to achieve much larger urban redevelopment goals. Richard M. Daley of Chicago regarded the transformation of public housing as the city’s chief redevelopment strategy during the last ten years of his tenure as mayor. Bruce Katz, one of the architects of HOPE VI, said that “I always
thought about HOPE VI as something larger than public housing revitalization. It’s one of the premier urban redevelopment efforts of the last 25 years.43

As for the extension of gentrification into more remote and riskier neighborhoods, the transformation of Chicago’s State Street Corridor of public housing, a twenty-five-block-long corridor of assisted housing that included the Robert Taylor Homes, Stateway Gardens, Wentworth Gardens, and several other projects, stands out. Once among the largest concentrations of public housing in the country, little remains now of the buildings that dominated this part of the city. Much of the area today is marketed by the city of Chicago as “Bronzeville,” the historic home of the city’s black community, and a place now of renewal and reinvestment. Where the towers once stood are new communities liberally sprinkled with homeownership and market-rate housing. The finishing touch is the renaming so as to end identification of the area with the old projects and to signal to potential residents and investors the beginning of a new era for the neighborhood.44 Delirdre Pfeiffer argues that this process of altering the discourse about a place through renaming is central to the dynamic of displacement.45 This conversion of what had been a no-go zone into a “place” with, in the case of Bronzeville, historic importance reflects the dramatic changes that have been induced in the area. The black middle class has reclaimed the area in an example of black gentrification that repeats many of the same demographic changes and tensions of typical gentrification without the racial turnover.46

In the Interest of Public Housing Residents

As a policy regime, neoliberalism can take various forms. Although initiated in the 1980s in a manner that did little to disguise its attempt to reduce union power, devalue social welfare objectives, and privilege corporate and market considerations, it is now frequently expressed in more nuanced forms. Contested from the beginning, neoliberalism has evolved into more moderate forms of intervention.47 “Moderate” neoliberalism is expressed in rhetoric sensitive to place, and sensitive to a broader range of felt needs. Concerns about crime, the desire of homeowners to protect their investments, the desire to protect consumers, even antipoverty objectives are all enlisted to justify neoliberal public policy initiatives.

The dismantling of public housing is a case in point, in so far as the discourse surrounding public housing demolition and redevelopment frequently invokes the interests of the tenants themselves. Though public housing has been stigmatized for decades and though it has been regarded by many as a failure since at least the 1960s, the disaster narrative imagines public housing as much more than simply bad. It is, instead, “soul crushing,” the buildings themselves are “monuments to hopelessness,” resulting often in “humanitarian disaster.”48 The worst of the nation’s public housing may well have deserved those descriptions. Mismanagement, malign neglect, and the overwhelming press of poverty reduced some public housing communities in some cities into war zones of gang conflict, and produced virtually unlivable conditions for the families residing within them. The public-housing-as-disaster narrative, however, portrays the entire program in these terms. In the public imagination of the early 1990s, when the demolition movement was emerging, public housing was equated with the worst forms of urban decay, hopelessness, and marginality in American cities.

The primary victims of these horrific conditions, of course, were the residents themselves. Such dire straits suggested radical remedies, or what Alexander Polikoff calls “radical surgery.”49 The public housing prisons must come down, according to the narrative, and families must be assisted in making good their escape from the environments of misery represented by public housing. The “projects,” in this view, need to be replaced by true communities that would attract a mix of residents, some with higher incomes, and a mix of housing options, some for homeowners and those who could pay market rates. The concentration of poverty and the concentration of public housing, it is maintained, must be remade into true opportunity neighborhoods offering the range of resources and amenities available to the middle class.

In this way, then, is it possible for a government official to consider the forced eviction of a very low income family as a means of increasing the housing choice of that family. As a spokesman for the Atlanta Housing Authority said in describing that city’s transformation of public housing, “what we want to do is make sure families can make choices about where they want to live. Government bureaucrats are not telling them where to live.”50 Here, one of the most intrusive forms of state power that can be directed against citizens—that is, their forced relocation followed by the demolition of their homes—is presented as the opposite. It is this discourse that stresses the need to free residents from the dictates of government that makes it possible to conclude that the best way to improve the lives of those who depend on public housing is to tear that housing down. This narrative makes the dismantling of the public housing system a necessary by-product of efforts to create functioning communities. The loss of units is simply a given; “that was the trade-off,” explains noted architect Peter Calthorpe, “fewer public housing units in exchange for communities with more social integration.”51

The reduction in the size and scope of public housing, and the dispersal of the very low income families, is also seen as a necessity in the effort to redress the unequal spatial distribution of poverty within metropolitan areas. To New
Regionalists who advocate cooperative strategies among local governments to address regional inequalities, the concentration of poverty and the unevenness of metropolitan development patterns are both inefficient and inequitable. Spatial inequities in public services such as schools, disparities in access to jobs and in exposure to environmental hazards, and the reproduction of inequality as the result of environmental factors lock in advantages for the affluent and trap the poor in resource-starved communities. The concentration of such housing in core parts of metropolitan areas and its relative absence in developing suburban areas mean that the low-income residents of that housing were consigned to inferior environments that are dangerous and hazardous on the one hand and lack opportunities for advancement on the other.52

Positioning forced eviction as a progressive approach aimed at increasing the social welfare of the poor limits opposition to this intrusive use of state power, even from those who are its target.53 Resident opposition to public housing demolition and disposition across the country has been sporadic. In some cases, however, the coercive nature of forced displacement cannot be obscured and the displaced have made their opposition known. The most prominent example of this is post-Katrina New Orleans when public housing residents were not allowed to rehabit their homes. Chain-link fences kept the tenants from reoccupying the units, and protests outside the buildings and at City Hall resulted in confrontations between police and public housing residents and advocates. Residents have rebelled against the idea of being forcibly removed from their homes in other cities as well. In Chicago they formed the Coalition to Protect Public Housing. Protests have occurred in Atlanta, Seattle, Atlantic City, Minneapolis, and San Francisco as well.54 In Richmond, Virginia, residents organized themselves into RePHRAME (Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Evictions) to demand a set of protections for residents in the redevelopment of public housing in that city. Residents of Los Angeles public housing demonstrated outside the home of HACLA director Rudolf Montiel in 2010 after the agency announced plans to dispose of all of its units.

What is perhaps more remarkable than the demonstrations against public housing demolition, however, is the fact that they do not occur more frequently. Across the country families have been moved out and buildings demolished without any serious incidents of opposition. There are several possible explanations for this. First, many of the demolitions take place after a prolonged period during which the projects are emptied of residents through de facto demolition. As vacancies increase and maintenance and upkeep of the units and the grounds are neglected, more families move out, not to be replaced. The depopulated areas become dangerous as gangs move in or expand their territory by taking over abandoned units. When unlivable conditions have been thus induced the PHA

will ask HUD to approve demolition. By that time few residents remain, and those who do have been made to endure such poor living conditions that they are glad to leave.

Second, in cases where redevelopment is to occur (usually through a HOPE VI-funded project), residents are actively recruited to engage in the planning process. They are asked to make contributions to the vision of the community that will replace theirs. They are encouraged in the belief that they will benefit from the redevelopment by being able to move into the new community, though this is, in fact, a relatively rare occurrence. Residents are given a say in the redevelopment planning—allowed to dream about what their community could look like without being told that their odds of actually moving back in are generally less than one in three. Such a process can establish buy-in from the very residents who will lose their housing as a result of the redevelopment.

The third potential reason for an absence of universal opposition to demolition is that some portion of public housing residents welcome the demolition or at least do not mind being forced to move. They may be willing to take their chances in other neighborhoods just to be rid of the situation they currently face. Their acquiescence, in this case, is support for the objectives of demolition, or at least their acceptance of the justifications for demolition offered by local officials.

Double Jeopardy

The record in returning displaced families to the completed redevelopments, in those cases where redevelopment takes place at all, is not good. Based on a number of studies, roughly four out of every five families displaced by HOPE VI redevelopments do not return to the site to live. For those displaced by non-HOPE VI demolitions or by the sale of public housing, of course, there is no redeveloped site to which to return. So for the overwhelming majority of low-income families, demolition of public housing only means displacement and relocation, typically to other low-income, segregated neighborhoods. Displaced families are given housing vouchers to use in the private market and given modest help to relocate themselves, or they are simply moved into vacant units in other public housing across town. For the most part, these families are moved from one high-poverty, segregated environment into another high-poverty and racially segregated neighborhoods. Despite the expectations of demolition advocates, the families experience only limited, sporadic, and inconsistent benefits from being moved out of their public housing communities. Almost universally they report an increased sense of safety and reductions in visible signs of social disorder compared to the public housing projects from which they moved. But there have been no overall benefits in terms of economic self-sufficiency, physical health, or
in a range of educational outcomes studied by researchers. Most of the families, furthermore, report significant disruptions in their networks of social support.

The disappointments in terms of individual benefits are only half of the equation, however. The research shows that public housing demolition and redevelopment have consistently generated significant community-level benefits. Early results show reductions in crime, increases in property values, and increased private-sector investment in neighborhoods after public housing has been torn down. Although one might argue that the disruptions and lack of benefits experienced by public housing residents on the one hand and the demonstrable community improvements often accompanying public housing redevelopment on the other produce a kind of stalemate or balancing of outcomes, this is not really the case. The constituency for the community benefits produced by public housing demolition is much larger than the one for resident benefits. Improvements in health, self-sufficiency, and education predicted for residents would, if they occurred, be experienced only by the residents. The benefits of neighborhood improvement, however, are more widely experienced. Residents of the surrounding community, investors, property owners, public officials, and people who work, learn, or play in the neighborhood all enjoy its renaissance. Prospective new residents and current property owners all derive some benefit from the community impacts. Politically, therefore, the community benefits generated by public housing transformation have outweighed in importance the disappointing results for the public housing residents.

The discourse of disaster that has dominated our understanding of public housing would have us expecting that families welcome the opportunity to escape the prisons of public housing, regardless of whether they are able to return to the redeveloped site. That discourse would lead us to expect residents grateful for the chance to move away, and experiencing significant life-improvements as a result. But the discourse is an oversimplification of life in American public housing. The teemed author of a book about living in the "projects" of Tucson, Arizona, said of her work:

The reason I stayed writing the book was because I thought that it was my opportunity to tell people that the projects are not a place you pass by and get killed. I want all you people to read this book and learn and see how life in the projects was. . . . I lived there. I know that people have said it was a bad place to go. Some people were afraid to even pass through there because they were scared that the people from the projects would assault or kill them. But that was not how it was.

Even in "the worst" public housing, residents construct networks of support, communities of interaction that provide the emotional and material foundations of life. Being wrenched from that community is painful and frightening to the households who suffer considerable disruption in their lives without materially benefitting from their forced displacement. Although policy makers talk of moving residents into neighborhoods of opportunity and delivering them from the evils of public housing, many residents suffer the loss of their social and support networks, and find themselves in nearby ghettos just as segregated and almost as poor as those they were forced to leave.

Indeed, for the occupants of the nation's worst public housing, the events of the past twenty years and the policy changes in place today must be very striking. As residents they were for years mostly ignored while the mismanagement of politicians and administrators turned their communities into nightmares of physical deterioration, social pathology, crime, and violence. For years they endured these conditions, and then when the political environment changed and their communities were finally redeveloped and renewed, they were displaced to different high-poverty neighborhoods to watch the renewal from afar. The failure of public housing, where it did occur, was induced by public policy missteps and bureaucratic and managerial incompetence. Residents were made to pay for these mistakes by being consigned to horrible living conditions for decades. These highly publicized failures are now being used as pretext for a systematic dismantling of the public housing program, facilitating redevelopment opportunities of interest to local officials and developers, while residents are largely shunted aside into other highly segregated and impoverished neighborhoods. Thus, for residents, the entire history is a long and extended application of double jeopardy—first being forced to endure unlivable conditions through the malign neglect of government officials, and then being displaced to other neighborhoods when redevelopment finally occurs.

The Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 provides a history of the public housing program. This, of course, is a book-length topic of its own, so the treatment here must of necessity be abbreviated and focused on those elements most critical to providing a foundation for understanding the current situation. Thus, I lay out the ways in which the early promise and original design for public housing (at least among some of its supporters) was distorted by political, fiscal, and demographic factors at a fairly early date. The discourse of disaster that came to surround public housing is explored, as well as some of the early policy responses to worsening conditions in public housing developments.
Nascent efforts to dismantle public housing emerged in the 1980s. Local housing authorities attempted to divest themselves of the worst of their housing stock by convincing HUD that the projects had become obsolete. Demolition of public housing at that point was unusual and needed to be justified according to rules and standards established by Congress. As the decade progressed, however, HUD acquiesced more and more frequently to the pleadings of local PHAs in this regard. Advocates for residents began to claim that PHAs in some cases were actually creating the conditions for demolition by conscious neglect of properties, a process that came to be known as de facto demolition. In 1992, Congress, in response to a national commission report on public housing, created the HOPE VI program and within a few years demolition was not only commonplace but essentially the cornerstone of federal public housing policy. I explore this recent history in chapter 2 and explain why some cities were aggressive in the dismantling of public housing whereas others were less aggressive. During the 1990s the explanation hinges on the gentrification pressures that some cities were experiencing. Since 2000, race has become more important; in cities where the public housing stock is disproportionately occupied by African Americans (compared to the city population as a whole) the dismantling of public housing has been most rapid. The examination of public housing transformation in America’s largest cities is extended in chapter 3 where case studies of Chicago, New Orleans, and Atlanta illustrate the dynamics of public housing transformation within specific political and historical contexts.

In chapter 4 the analysis shifts from the city scale to the project scale and demonstrates again the central role of race in the process of transformation. A comparison of the projects removed in the nation's largest cities with the public housing that so far has been left standing reveals a disparate impact on African American families. This suggests that the effort to date has targeted projects where African Americans reside. Advocates of public housing transformation would argue, however, that such a disparate impact is, in fact, a positive outcome on the grounds that being freed from the terrible conditions in public housing is a benefit to families. Others, however, might stress the injurious nature of forced displacement and argue that the disparate racial impact is an adverse outcome. What to think about the racial targeting of public housing demolition, then, depends on a large extent on the experiences of the displaced. In chapter 5 I present the evidence on this question, reporting both original data and summarizing the body of knowledge that has been produced by dozens of studies across the nation.

The neighborhood impacts of public housing have been frequently invoked to justify the recent policy changes. In some cities the dismantling of public housing has served very specific place-based objectives related to improving the environment for private-sector investment. Patterns of gentrification that are induced by public housing removal are common enough, as is public housing removal that is induced by redevelopment and gentrification plans. Rapid neighborhood change is not, however, an inevitable outcome of public housing transformation. In chapter 6 the neighborhood implications of the dismantling of public housing are examined.

The conclusion provides a summary assessment of current public housing policy and a set of policy recommendations. The dismantling of public housing has much myth and hype associated with it. In the end our judgment of this effort to dismantle public housing and the New Deal policy prescriptions that it embodies should be based on a realistic assessment of the condition and place of public housing in American cities, as well as on a more sober and informed assessment of the impact of that transformation on the residents and communities most directly affected. The abandonment of the New Deal commitment to permanent and direct public-sector provision of affordable housing, if it continues, will have a lasting and significant impact on the safety net available to very low income families.
INTRODUCTION

2. ABLA is an acronym that stands for four different public housing projects that sat on adjacent land on the city's near South Side: the Jane Addams Homes, the Robert Brooks Homes, Loomis Courts, and the Grace Abbott Homes.
3. This quote is on the home page of the Museum's web-site: http://www.publichousingmuseum.org/.
5. Quoted in Feldman and Stall (2004, 84). Beverley and Harris are hardly alone in their views of public housing. Typically, whenever asked by researchers, a significant number—sometimes half or more—of residents forcibly displaced by public housing demolition indicate a preference to stay in the community rather than move out. See also Goetz (2009), Gibson (2007), and Kletz and Manzo (2006).
6. HOPE VI is the sixth program in a series first created in the 1990 National Affordable Housing Act. HOPE stands for Homeownership Opportunities for People Everywhere.
7. This information is available at HUD's website http://www.hud.gov/offices/pih/systems/picsincl.
10. "Shallow" and "deep" in this instance refer to the level of affordability achieved by a subsidy. Public housing is a deep subsidy because it provides affordability to extremely low income families (incomes less than 30% of the area median). Shallow subsidies are able to produce affordability only for those with relatively higher incomes, typically 50% to 80% of the area median.
13. The same argument is made about 'social housing' in Europe. As Hall and Rowlands (2005, 47) argue, the large public housing estates of Europe "were planned, developed, and allocated during a socioeconomic paradigm that characterized the four decades following the Second World War, the basic tenets of which no longer apply."
15. It should be noted that FDR came late to the public housing bandwagon. Advocates for the program worked for years in the face of indifference from FDR and even opposition from some of his cabinet members. See Friedman (1968).
21. See, e.g., the description in Goering (2003) of the decision by HUD to focus the Moving To Opportunity (MTO) mobility program on poverty deconcentration instead of racial desegregation.
33. Jones and Popke (2010, 125).
38. See Hackworth (2007); Moore (2009); Hackworth and Smith (2001).
39. This argument is contained in Hackworth and Smith (2001).
40. Wyly and Hammel (1999). This phrase itself is a reversal of the one used by geographer Brian Berry (1985) who, in the 1980s, lamented the limited impact of urban redevelopment efforts, calling them mere islands of renewal amid seas of decay.
42. Reichl (1999).
44. See, e.g., Boyd (2008).
45. Pfeiffer’s (2006) study focuses on Cabrini-Green on Chicago’s Near North Side and, in part, depicts a naming war between the developers of the new mixed-income developments who erected signposts and name plates advertising the new housing being built. Residents responded by spray-painting “Cabrini” onto buildings and signs in prominent areas.
46. See Moore (2009) on black gentrification.
47. As Wilson (2004, 773) argues, neoliberalism is “now anything but a brute economic and political imposition.”
48. These quotes, in order, are from Katz (2009, 17), Williams (2004, 238, quoting Al Gore), and Popkin, Gwiasda, et al. (2000).
52. The coalescence of these policy streams led to the emergence of what imbroscio (2008, 2010) calls the “dispersal consensus.”
56. Pfeiffer (2006, 49) quotes a Chicago public housing resident as saying about the redevelopment of the Cabrini-Green project, “I’ve been here my whole life, I don’t want to leave, especially now, just as it’s cleaning up.”