What Happened to Public Housing?

A Study Guide for the film DOWN THE PROJECT: THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC HOUSING

with commentaries by

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This Study Guide is intended as an orientation to the film DOWN THE PROJECT. It presents the perspective of the film and offers general background material for teachers unfamiliar with the subject. For further reading, a brief bibliography is provided. Study questions teachers might use with their students are to be found on pages 4, 8, 11, and 12. Some of these questions can be answered from the material in the film; others identify issues that the film raises. Some recent newspaper articles related to the topics raised in the film can be used to stimulate class discussions.

The film is one hour long, but may be used in two parts. The first half-hour section presents the history of the public housing program and the story of Columbia Point Project, a high-rise development in Dorchester, near Boston. The second half-hour section tells the story of D Street Project in South Boston and raises issues concerning the future of public housing in the United States.

DOWN THE PROJECT: THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC HOUSING
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America's public housing projects were once considered some of the best housing in the nation. What happened to stigmatize this program?

Public versus Private...

What is the role of government in providing for the lives of the citizens? Most people accept the notion that the government should provide certain "public" goods and services—public education and public parks, for example. But other arenas of government action—the provision of health care or transportation for all citizens—have been more controversial. Although much of the twentieth century has seen the expansion of "public" services, the most recent years have seen a questioning of the public sector and a revival of efforts at "privatization."

The story of public housing is the story of a fifty-year struggle over precisely these issues, for from its inception the public housing program has been at the mercy of market forces.

Fifty years ago, when the first public housing projects were new, these developments were considered among the most desirable shelter for low- and low–middle-income Americans. Today the program is stigmatized—beset with financial and social dilemmas. This film tells the story of two housing developments and places them in the context of a larger chronology—how public housing began, the groups that lobbied for and against it, and how its image has changed. The film reveals one of the most important dynamics at work in American society: the contest between those who advocate public administration and control of crucial services versus those who insist these services are the domain of private individuals and institutions.

(Another Cine Research film, *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston,* may be used in conjunction with *Down the Project. Mission Hill* provides an in-depth look at one neighborhood and shows how early public housing was used and how it changed in the period of "urban renewal.")

THE PUBLIC HOUSING PROGRAM: A BACKGROUND

by Richard Broadman

The Free Market in Housing and the Alternative Tradition

The free market in housing and real estate is a hallmark of the American system. Americans take pride in owning property and buying, improving, and selling real estate. Many strive to own their own home, and to own a second piece of property as an investment is seen as a sign of "upward mobility."

But this free market in real estate has also brought decaying buildings, falling property values, and neighborhoods labeled "ghettoes." In these areas landlords are not motivated to invest the money for needed repairs, and profits are often achieved by overcrowding. Historically, these areas existed throughout America's cities in the era before government intervened in the housing market.

Today these two sides of the housing market remain part of the American landscape. Despite a half-century of government programs designed to eliminate overcrowding and renew "blighted" areas, places like the South Bronx or Watts remind Americans that there is an underside to the American dream of investment and upward mobility.

The Free Market

The free market in housing and real estate is inseparable from the forces of supply and demand, investment and profitmaking. During much of the development of our cities, regulation of building was scanty and what was built—and how—was determined largely by the possibilities for financial return. Countless exchanges between sellers, builders, and buyers produced the great variety of structures that came to make up each city. Those seeking housing on the free market had to contend with standards and prices determined by the circumstances of past financing and construction as well as present demand.

While would-be rentors had to cope with the legacy of past market decisions, those speculators building or renovating units in an older, industrialized city often faced an expensive enterprise. Improving old housing could be too expensive to easily ensure profits. The high cost of purchasing vacant land which has been sold and resold at ever higher prices might force a developer to create luxury housing and exclude low- and middle-income people from an opportunity to rent or acquire new housing. When such factors as expensive land, high costs of demolition or renovation, and the high cost of borrowing converge, investors have been unwilling to create homes for any but the wealthiest Americans.

When urban housing was constructed on the free market for poor people, it often lacked the basic amenities that most of us would consider desirable—roominess, light and air, and sturdy construction. In general, the search for profits has meant that good quality housing has gone to well-off people and the poor have gotten older, less well-kept housing or cheaply constructed units.

In the nineteenth century, the failure of the market to produce adequate housing for poor people led to two types of reform movements. One tendency—typified by the efforts of the photographer Jacob Riis—sought the answer in regulating the private market (i.e., making laws that required adequate ventilation, prevented overcrowding, etc.) and in promoting non-profit housing ventures. Other groups, spurred by the protests of the propertyless, backed land reformers like Henry George (calling for sweeping changes in taxation) and demanded systemic change. These two reform traditions carried over into the twentieth century.

Alternative Trends: Public Financing and Planned Development

Public Financing and the Example of Berlin

One alternative to unplanned speculative development arose in a Europe devastated by World War I. In ruined cities, housing had to be created quickly and in new ways. There were many innovative experiments—built and financed by trade unions or by local or national governments.

Before 1914, Berlin had been plagued by land speculation—it was simply too expensive to buy land for needed construction. During and after the war, in spite of dire housing shortages, there was little building and the market in land remained unstable. Land prices fell and the government seized the opportunity to freeze them and put into effect its own building plans. By the 1930s, the municipal government owned one-third of the city's land. In the years immediately after the war, two-fifths to four-fifths of all land used for dwellings was in the municipal domain. In 1921, a tax was levied on all buildings built before the war and the funds used to provide mortgages on low-cost housing. Between 1919 and 1931 a devastated Germany used these methods to produce three million dwellings.

Some reformers tried to expose the underside of the private housing market through campaigning to regulate housing conditions. This famous photograph is by photographer-reformer Jacob Riis.

A European alternative: Allow government to intervene in the housing market to build modern affordable units, like these in Sweden.

Planned Developments in Europe
As opposed to the more random nature of development inspired by free market speculative forces, several European nations developed construction programs emphasizing planning for the needs of particular constituents. Sweden, England, Germany, and Austria boasted new planned communities. In addition, the "new architecture" of Walter Gropius and other innovators encouraged functional design and economies of scale. These architects attempted to influence the industrial production of housing in such a way as to mass produce more livable units at lower costs. Both this new design initiative and the concept of public financing of land acquisition and construction came to America during the Great Depression.

America's Lobbyists: "Public Housers" vs. the Real Estate Lobby

After the stock market crash of 1929 the American financial system collapsed, and with it the production of housing. Houses were foreclosed, rents were uncollectible, and the building trades were struck by massive unemployment. In this situation, private enterprise was incapable of producing housing on a large scale. Special interests in the construction and home finance industry began to lobby to have the old methods of building resuscitated through government support, while reformers saw a chance to intervene with methods based upon European models.

The "Public Housers"

The "public housers" were advocates of government financed and built housing. They were drawn together in 1932 in the National Public Housing Conference (NPHC) and the Labor Housing Conference (LHC). The NPHC leadership was composed largely of well-to-do reformers linked to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. In the tradition of Jacob Riis, they advocated low-income housing construction and slum clearance (the demolition of "sub-standard" housing). The LHC at the outset was inspired by European models of government-sponsored development. They opposed slum clearance because it would reduce the housing stock and minimize the effect of adding new units, as well as being more expensive.

Catherine Bauer was a major figure in the effort to bring new European housing ideas to the United States. She and the other housing activists working with labor claimed that the NPHC position was aimed at bolstering falling private property values rather than creating a new kind of housing system. The LHC organizers called for stronger measures: an end to company housing, a union wage on every construction job, rents on new units to be held to levels wage-earners could afford, demonstration projects in every industrial center, and enabling legislation for the government to condemn and take land needed for housing. In order to gain New Deal support for public housing, they would ultimately give in on many of these demands. (It should be noted that within this split among the "public housers" were the seeds of the later controversy over the national urban renewal program of the 1950s and 1960s, which authorized the demolition of "slums" that other reformers saw as viable neighborhoods.)

Realtors Flail Threat to Private Enterprise

THEY had said it in conventions before, dozens and dozens of times before.

But they said it this time more articulately than ever . . . with a new note of anxiety in their voice.

Private industry – and especially the real estate and home building industry – has a fight on its hands against the forces working among people here and abroad "to get something for nothing."

Perhaps it was because this year's NAREB conventioneers – 3500 strong – met in a New York hotel picketed by men and women carrying signs calling for lower rents, more houses, subsidized housing. Or perhaps it was because on the eve of the convention a television

The National Association of Real Estate Boards lobbied against the public housing program throughout the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

The Real Estate Lobby

Arrayed against the public housers were the representatives of the forces that had created America's housing stock. Each lobbied for a housing bill that would serve the needs of its constituency. The National Retail Lumber Dealers' Association, for example, called for the construction of housing made of wood, opposing construction with concrete, masonry, brick or steel. The United States Savings and Loan League (USSLL) represented those credit institutions that financed housing, opposing direct government financing of land acquisition and mortgages. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) together represented the interests of millions of large and small property owners and developers, and worked to shape a bill that would not create housing that competed with the private market. In addition, the United States Chamber of Commerce represented the business community generally through its many local chapters. These groups formed a broad conservative coalition that advocated public support of the private sector while resisting government interference in general.[1]

These groups espoused the creed of the private market in real estate. They spoke the language of the small entrepreneur, defending property ownership as an inalienable right, and attacking infringements of private property as un-American. The NAHB, NAREB, and Chambers of Commerce were national organizations composed of thousands of local chapters, having ready access to virtually every type of person with an interest in the private market. With strong, clear rhetoric and a well-organized base they represented a massive challenge to the coalition of reformers seeking systemic change.

The Housing Act of 1937 and the "Predestination" of Public Housing: A Series of Compromises

The Public Housers Struggle to Agree on a Bill

The housing reformers were split between the NPHC reformers, radicals like Catherine Bauer, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions that made up their largest base of public support. These groups had first to come to agreement among themselves before a bill could be put forward.

The radicals who initiated the struggle for public housing wanted to put in place new mechanisms for acquiring property and building developments that would effectively remove private profitmakers from the process. They wished to enlist labor's support for legislation that would provide social services—health care and community programs—that would improve working people's lives.

The AFL building trades had developed pragmatic positions on most labor issues and exhibited conservative tendencies when faced with these positions. Labor leaders might believe that housing was part of a broader set of social concerns affecting workers' lives, but such positions were viewed by the AFL leadership as beyond the scope of the current legislation. Far from demanding a total change in the way the American system produced housing, the union leadership acted, like the members of the conservative coalition, to protect the immediate interests of its constituent membership. As a result, the 1934 AFL convention recommended that the radical organizers they were working with reduce the scope of the proposed legislation. By 1935, most of the radical provisions had disappeared. The AFL leadership had seen fit, however, to support provisions like the one advocating a union wage on every job. The activists had won on one provision they cared deeply about, though: the bill put forward with labor's support had no slum clearance provision, which meant that housing in "slum" areas would NOT have to be destroyed to produce new housing units. The radicals considered this critical because their goal was an expansion of the housing stock leading to less crowding, more sanitary living conditions, and a gradual decrease in rents. Though this position was contrary to that of the old-line reformers in the NPHC, it remained part of the original public housing bill because the congressional leadership recognized that labor's support was crucial to the bill's passage.

The Conservative Response Forces a Limited Housing Act

The response of the conservative coalition was another matter. They fought the key provisions of the reformers' bill and forced through several amendments that greatly affected public housing's future:

1. They insisted on the slum clearance provision that was an anathema to the radicals. "Equivalent elimination," the 1:1 destruction of units for each unit built, was to be included in the legislation. In the NAREB view, expansion of the housing stock in a massive way could lead to falling rents and declining property values.

2. They called for—and got—a 4:1 ratio of income to rent. This formula would determine the economic class of people eligible to live in the new housing. (A 4:1 ratio, for example, would necessitate that a family spend one-quarter of its income on rent; a 3:1 ratio, one-third of its income. The latter family would be the poorer group, having to spend more of its income simply for housing.)

The housers had called for a 5:1 income/rent ratio, which would permit normal, stable working-class families to live in the housing. In demanding the 4:1 ratio, the conservative coalition was arguing for a poorer client population. They wanted to ensure that public housing tenants would be those least likely to compete for middle-income housing on the private market.

3. They worked to prohibit elaborate or expensive design and materials, so that public housing would not be competitive with private housing. This would later cause housing officials to practice "stark economies, squeezing down space, minimizing community facilities, eliminating anything that could be thought of as 'glamorizing.'"[2]

4. They demanded that public housing be self-supporting insofar as management and operations were concerned. Real estate interests did not wish to compete with subsidized developments that did not have to pay their own way and at the same time added to the general tax burden.

Catherine Bauer, whose familiarity with European housing experiments had stimulated her initial involvement in public housing advocacy in this country, had been aware from the first of the contradictions inherent in proposing systemic change:

> There is no getting around the fact that "modern housing" and much of the framework of contemporary western society are mutually antipathetic. The premises underlying the most successful and forward-pointing housing developments are not the premises of capitalism, of inviable private property, of class distinction, of governments bent on preserving old interests rather than creating new values. And the full implications have as a rule been better understood by the jealous guardians of the old order of things than by the advocates and the direct beneficiaries of housing. In a sense the housing achievement has constituted a world within a world, hampered by all the contradictions and insecurity attendant on such an anomalous position.

The creation of the Housing Act of 1937 was in many ways a working out of this dynamic. After all, it was only the dislocation of the economy caused by the Great Depression that caused the AFL and the conservative coalition to be interested in anything other than "business as usual." All of these groups wanted to get the system moving again. The idealists of the public housing movement compromised first with their allies in labor and then with their opponents from the private sector in order to get a housing program through Congress. Those compromises in turn did much to determine the shape of public housing to come: its intent, its design, its client population, its reception by the public at large, and its long-term future.

Film-Related Discussion Questions

1. What was your view of public housing before you saw the film? Has the film changed your views? Why or why not?

2. Why did public housing develop?

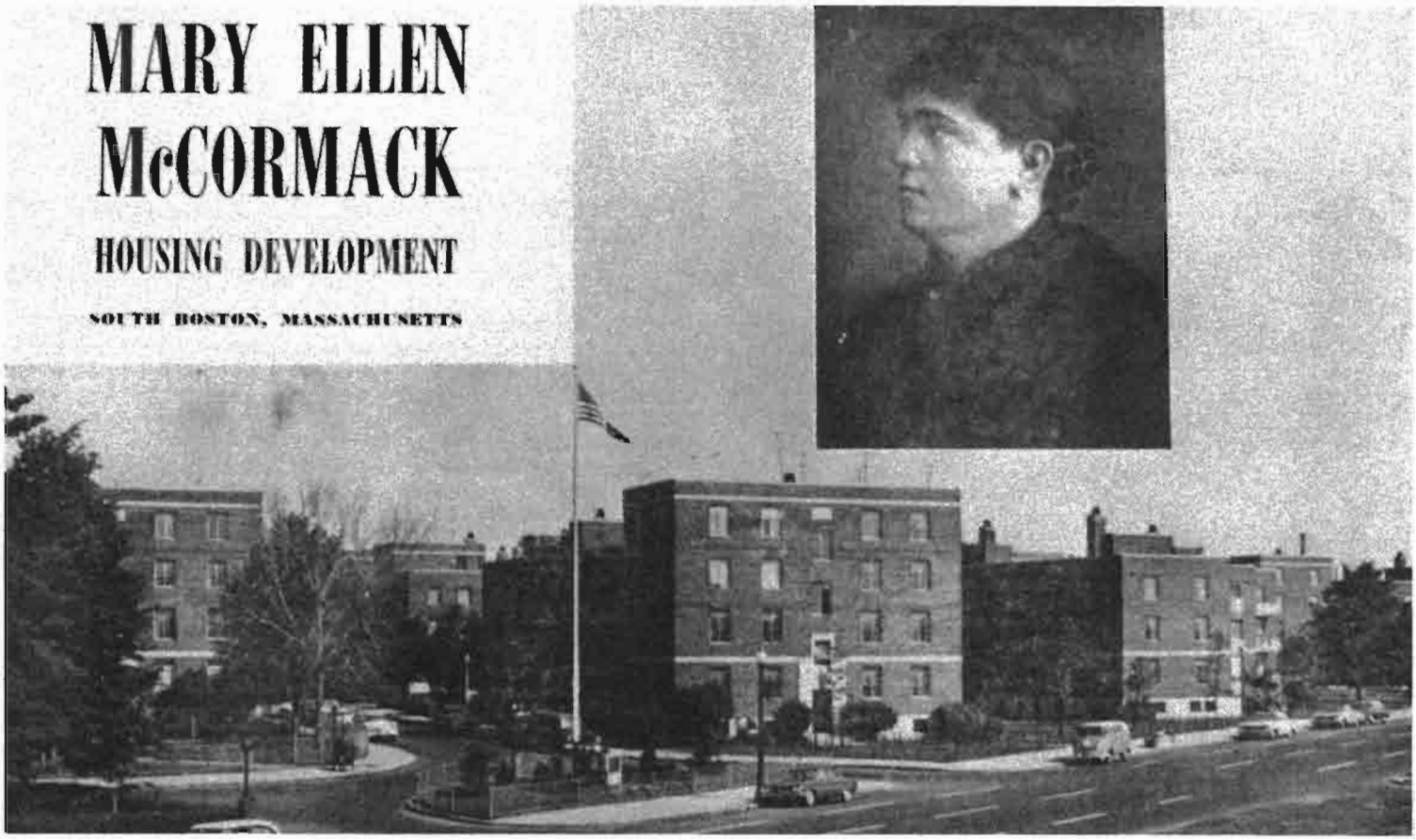
3. In the film you saw photographs and footage of crowded and unsanitary conditions from the 1890s and the 1930s. Do conditions like those exist today? Where?

4. Many Americans own and develop property. What benefits do they derive? Why do you think some property is well maintained and other property is not?

5. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration is often attacked by conservative critics as the period when expensive liberal programs like unemployment insurance, welfare, and public housing began. Yet in the film one commentator says that Roosevelt "did more to save the private enterprise system than anyone." What does he mean?

6. Housing reformers viewed the public housing program of the 1930s and 1940s as a way to improve people's lives. Representatives of the real estate industry saw the same program as a threat. Who was right?

More discussion questions may be found on pp. 8, 11, & 12.



This display segment in a Boston Housing Authority publication advertised brand-new "safe, sanitary, and decent" housing to a largely receptive public.

The First Years of Public Housing

In the years following the 1937 act some 160,000 units of public housing were built across the country. By the standards of that day they easily fulfilled the requirements of "safe, sanitary, and decent" housing. Compared to units available to people of modest means on the private market they were uniformly clean, well-managed, and had superior sanitary facilities. (A toilet in each apartment and hot and cold running water were not common amenities in the 1930s.) They had low rents that included heat and electricity.

The slum clearance provision caused distress in those communities where public housing was to be built. Whole neighborhoods had to be cleared to conform to the equivalent elimination requirement. Then there was the income limitation, which meant that some displaced families would be making too much money to move into the new housing, while others were excluded because they did not make enough to pay the rent. In addition, there was simply no assurance that displaced families would be priority candidates for the new housing. The particular rules and the level of enforcement depended largely on the local politics of the city or town where the housing was built.

Politics: The Boston Example

In the 1930s and 1940s public housing was considered a political "plum," coveted by politicians because it provided local employment and new homes cheaply for people in a given ward. Other politicized characteristics included the site selection process, the admission process, and the degree to which the income limitation and other rules would be enforced. The policies of a given project were determined largely by the relative strength of the real estate lobby versus the New Deal–oriented reformers and labor representatives in a given area, as expressed in the makeup of the local housing authority board.

The early years of public housing in Boston provide one example of how the 1937 act was implemented. Boston was home to some of the first projects (the Public Works Administration—PWA—built Old Harbor Village in South Boston in 1935) and the city had the largest number of units per capita built anywhere in the country. That a city the size of Boston had the largest total number of units after New York City indicates its strength in the New Deal political hierarchy. James Michael Curley (then governor) had been an early Roosevelt supporter and congressman John McCormack was a ranking "bread-and-butter" Democrat.

Throughout the period of demolition and construction by both the PWA and the local housing authority, local real estate groups organized protests of people being evicted, placed test cases before the courts, and agitated against the program as "state socialism... making its debut."[3] But in fact only two constituencies seemed to be unhappy with the way the program was working out in Boston—the realtors and those displaced by slum clearance. For the most part people liked the housing and wanted to live in it.

One other political factor was obvious in the implementation of this program in Boston: the income limitations were not enforced. The various political machines holding power in this Democratic city between 1935 and 1950 allowed many "over-income" people to reside in the housing, including many who worked for the city. Here the price of holding political power included returning favors to the well-organized wards and building trades that supplied Democratic candidates with votes. Whether Democratic officeholders were conservative or liberal made little difference—there were few votes to be had in the 1930s by supporting the 4:1 income limitation in this city, or by opposing the construction of public housing. For Boston those conflicts awaited a later time.

The Housing Act of 1949 and Its Results

During and after World War II a fundamental realignment occurred in housing politics. While in the 1930s the driving force was the desire to resuscitate a collapsed system and send people back to work, policymakers of the 1940s were concerned that massive unemployment not reappear when the war came to an end and millions of American troops came home. This position was most clearly espoused by the Committee for Economic Development (CED), formed in 1942 by leaders of major corporations with an interest in long-term planning.[4]

The conservative lobbies remained on the scene, led by the Chamber of Commerce and, on housing issues, the NAREB. These right-wing groups were consistently against public programs, unions, and the income tax. Supported by small business and sectors of big business, they generally resisted participation in the CED-sponsored planning effort, which they deemed likely to lead to "big government" and big federal budgets.

The pro-housing lobby was still composed of the old reform elements and labor. By 1944 this coalition called for the creation of a housing program that would provide units for the returning veterans as well as jobs building those units. But in other ways their position was very different from that of the Depression era. Rather than seeking a massive government-financed public housing program, pro-housers pushed for a package which would satisfy forces interested in slum clearance and *private* developments while allowing the old public housing program to continue. In fact pro-housers had become a part of the New Deal administration, and their position was now closely tied to the planning-oriented CED elements.

In the housing plans sponsored by Roosevelt's New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal, public housing was to be part of an overall scheme of federally subsidized clearance and housing starts in which the major impetus was the subsidy for private-sector developments. Public housing itself was to be built by private developers, with its bonds sold to private investors, and its client population (as before) those who could not afford to live in private-market housing.

This new vision of postwar housing clearly linked growth in the private housing industry to the nation's economic wellbeing, with government subsidies provided when needed to get large developments started, insure mortgages, etc. This was a far cry from the original vision of the public housers, who had looked to government landbanking, direct financing, and construction to keep housing costs from spiraling ever upwards.

The Conservative Lobby Attacks the New Housing Bill

The battle for a postwar housing bill lasted several years and was part of a broader political struggle. Truman's Fair Deal was opposed by conservative forces which opposed big government, big budgets, the Marshall Plan, a full employment bill, and coexistence with the Communist bloc. The position of the real estate lobby was argued by Joseph McCarthy, among others, who entered the senate in 1946. The fight over the bill was particularly vicious, especially over the public housing clauses, which the right wing attacked as "socialism." Truman countered with a sustained attack on the real estate lobby, calling for a congressional investigation of its activities. When the act passed in 1949, it was by only five votes.

The legislation bears the marks of this battle. Once again the issue of income limits for housing residents was key. McCarthy forced the insertion of this phrasing:

> Every contract shall require that, as between families of equally low income otherwise eligible for admission...the agency shall not discriminate against any such families because their incomes are derived, in whole or in part, from public assistance. In assisting tenants the question of greatest need shall be given due consideration.

In addition, first priority was to be given to:

> families which are to be displaced by any low-rent housing project or by any public slum-clearance project or redevelopment project...

The new emphasis on welfare recipients indicates the degree of compromise forced on the pro-housers. The original intent of idealists like Bauer had been to house the working class and build strong communities based on the European housing model. She had serious doubts about the stability of projects made up largely of a welfare population.

In fact the primary goal of the act had nothing to do with public housing, but "renewal." Now that there was to be a general plan for each city, public housing was meant to fulfill those roles not profitable for the private sector—relocation housing for poor people uprooted by renewal and units for those incapable of supporting themselves without public assistance. Other measures afforded private developers a profit margin by having the government acquire and clear land and sell it to them, and by guaranteeing 90 percent of the cost of each unit.

It was the real estate lobby that had focused the debate on the public housing issue and determined its client population. On the local level it attacked the site selection process and raised local animosities over the slum clearance provisions in the bill. And the realtors were successful: organized in every city and town, they were able to limit public housing construction to 84,000 units over two-and-a-half years, 50,000 less than was authorized by the act.

SOCIALISM SOCIALISM SOCIALISM SOCIALISM

Citizens of Lubbock!

★ ★ ★ ★

Do You Believe in Socialism? *NO!*

★ ★ ★ ★

Is Public Housing Socialism? *YES!*

SOCIALISM: An economic and political theory of social reconstruction, abolishing individual ownership, and making capital and means of production property of the State. (Webster's Ideal Dictionary, World Publishing Co., Copyright 1942)

Is Socialized Housing "Low Cost Housing?"

NO! BECAUSE:

1. IT WILL DESTROY AMERICA, AS IT DID ENGLAND, AND THERE CAN BE NO HIGHER COST THAN THAT.

2. You will pay your pro rata part of city taxes, state and county taxes and school taxes on these tax exempt projects. (The law positively exempts socialized housing projects from taxes, and they pay no income tax.)

3. Veterans especially will pay through the nose. A huge socialized public housing program will drive down Lubbock property values. What then will happen to the G. I. who is trying to pay for a home bought on the present market? It will break that Veteran!

4. LABOR WILL BE THE GOAT of all this. Cheap Socialistic House Rentals will start the downward spiral of prices of all property. When that happens construction will slow down and stop and labor will be unemployed or be forced to accept low wages.

5. THE CHURCHES WILL SUFFER MOST OF ALL FROM SOCIALISM. The leading socialist of this century said, "Religion is the opiate of the people." Christianity can only exist where men are FREE.

Unless you want Lubbock to sell its birthright for this "MESS OF PUBLIC HOUSING POTTAGE."

Vote "NO "April 4th!

SOCIALISM SOCIALISM SOCIALISM SOCIALISM

The real estate lobby organized locally against public housing with ads like this one.

Public Housing in the 1950s and 1960s

The Boston Example: Post-1949

The Housing Act of 1949 opened an era of conflict and decline for the public housing program.

In Boston, the implementation of the act had a profound social impact. Here, as in other cities, early public housing had been generally well received. But after 1949 larger, denser projects were built which were used as a dumping ground for those uprooted by the urban renewal program, and they became linked in the public mind to racial conflict and poverty.

The Boston case is illustrative of how the private sector reacted to this public program and shaped it as part of the postwar dynamic of economic growth.

The initial reaction of the local private forces to the 1949 legislation was negative. The Boston Real Estate Board (BREB) inveighed against public housing as socialistic, costly, and as government interference in the business of real estate. The election of a business-oriented mayor in 1950 (Hynes) led to the enforcement of income limitations in the housing after fifteen years of domination by the more traditional Democratic political machine. As a result, some over-income city employees connected to past administrations were forced out.

But the fact that federal funds were available for public housing construction provided the incentive for massive building by those developers who received the contracts. In this period Columbia Point, Bromley Heath, and Mission Hill Extension were built. These projects were built on cheap land or near the older small projects; and they were high-rise, greatly increasing project density. In their first years they were, like the older units, desirable as inexpensive new homes. They attracted little attention in the midst of the postwar boom in single-family homes spurred by federally underwritten mortgages and loans to veterans. But while the suburbs were growing, Boston proper was not a center of growth that attracted private investment. Rather it was perceived to be in decline, having lost much of its manufacturing base to the South.

In this setting some Boston leaders began shaping a plan for the "renewal" of the city. Such planning was encouraged as the key to getting federal funds for private development by the housing acts of 1949, 1954, and 1960. As early as 1942 CED planners working with Boston businessmen had identified solutions for a stagnant regional economy (see previous page). These were now brought forward in a modified form and included highway construction and university and medical facility expansion. By the mid-1960s they would reach tangible expression in Route 128, a highway circling Boston's perimeter and providing access for many new high-tech industries, and an urban renewal plan that provided federal subsidies for the expansion of Boston's many cultural institutions.

The Housing Act of 1949 opened a new era for public housing—high-rise, dense developments that would house those displaced by the urban renewal program.

Boston's major period of redevelopment began in 1960 with the election of John Kennedy as president. It was clear that if a plan was put in place, federal monies would be there to support it. In December, a $90 million program was approved for funding which was intended to affect one-half of the city's population and one-quarter of its area. It was supported by the whole business community because of the size of the undertaking and the amount of money involved. Even the BREB approved, for here public housing was to have the special role of making private development possible by providing a place to put poor people uprooted by renewal.

By 1963 a specific set of plans was ready which heavily favored university and hospital expansion and residential developments in a number of poor and working-class neighborhoods. As landtakings began, public housing was forced to accommodate people from all over the city. Mission Hill, Columbia Point, and other dense developments soon became centers of conflict as stable housing developments attempted to absorb a new and often troubled population. (The story of the racial confrontation this created in one neighborhood is depicted in *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston,* another film distributed by Cine Research.) Housing Authority budgets did not keep pace with the new demands for social services and repairs. This is the era when project grounds were blacktopped for easy maintenance, when a largely white housing authority staff stopped making repairs, and the more stable families left the projects.

But the effects of urban renewal were much wider. Neighborhood residents across the city reacted vigorously to the spread of conflict around them as well as to the landtakings in their area. From Brighton to Mission Hill, neighborhood groups organized against the plan. Elements of the business community split with the BREB for not representing the interest of small property-owners and entrepreneurs. Finally, in 1965, Boston's "development czar" Ed Logue was forced to withdraw some neighborhoods from the plan. But the public's view of public housing was irrevocable. From this point on locating projects in any Boston neighborhood would be a political impossibility. Other types of projects might be constructed under different formulae, but the neighborhood population was now critically aware of pure "public" housing as an invitation to trouble—because it was synonymous with poverty, new populations, and violence.

Public Housing Today

The Issues of Race and Class in Public Housing

The politics of race and class are seldom discussed in relation to the public housing program, but they have been an important factor. In the early years there was *de facto* segregation, with all-black projects being built in black neighborhoods. Projects built after 1950 were sometimes integrated by public housing administrators, as was Columbia Point in Boston. After 1950 the opponents of public housing, who were organized on a town-by-town basis, were able to frustrate the site selection process by raising local fears about the federal government's intent to integrate new projects. The 1950s had seen the arrival of many southern black migrants who eventually came to live in the big projects of New York, Chicago, Boston, and other major northern cities. With the coming of urban renewal and the use of projects as dumping grounds, the fear of forced integration and the spread of conflict was amplified.[5] In many working-class communities residents could be made to fear the effects of new poor or displaced populations—be they black or white. Sinking property values and racial conflict seemed to come hand in hand with the projects, and real estate lobby spokespeople made constant reference to public housing in these terms. In this way, race and class became the basis of the public housing stigma.

The Public Housing Legacy

It is of course ironic that those who began by opposing public housing have been largely able to shape its destiny. They were able to determine its client population, then made it work for private sector interests as part of the urban renewal plan, and finally stigmatized it by playing on the fears created by these two factors. Never did they acknowledge their own role in the way the program turned out.

In the 1970s and 1980s the real estate lobby continued to push for private sector subsidies like the "turnkey" and other programs. In recent years, private industry operatives have been key in the administration of HUD, which oversees the public housing program. This constituted the death-knell of the old housing reformers' control of the program, which is dying a slow death through underfunding while the HUD leadership pursues initiatives like the "privatization" of public housing—selling it to tenants and letting it become part of the private market. But for most public housing there is no easy solution. Many projects are large and continue to bear the stigmas of class and race, and selling units is not easy. Nor has the original problem gone away: these units are still needed to provide safe, sanitary, and decent housing to those whom the private market provides nothing. As homelessness increases throughout the nation, Americans may well ask themselves what happened to the vision of a viable public housing program.

Despite the decline of the public housing program, many projects throughout the country remain desirable. In New York City, a very expensive housing market, public housing is in great demand among poor people and is in good repair. The same may be said of some projects in Boston, like Old Harbor Village, or of projects in smaller cities and towns. But public housing has been stigmatized. Working-class and middle-class people often avoid living near—or even passing through—these developments, and often resent and mistrust the municipal and federal authorities that built these projects in their neighborhoods. This is largely a result of the conflicts and problems engulfing the housing authorities in the major urban areas. These may in turn be attributed to the uses of public housing put forward in its enabling legislation in 1937 and in 1949.

Did the program have to turn out as it did? The conventional wisdom of the 1980s and 1990s might well say yes. We live in an era in which public institutions—like the post office and even the weather service—are under attack from forces seeking privatization, in which "socialism" and nationalized industries seem discredited. Private enterprise has fostered growth, money, and power for those in the upper tiers of our society.

Yet many Americans have not shared the benefits of these changes, and fear of recession is endemic. And the probability of recession is measured in part by any decline in housing starts. In these ways the world is not so different from that world in which public housing and other public initiatives were conceived. In Europe and throughout the world public housing programs exist without stigma. Depending on the country, they house people of mixed races and cultures and in a variety of income brackets. Many governments continue to build public housing, with landbanking and government financing as part of the programs. As with all institutions, some of these programs have problems, some are better and some worse. But the fact that their housing is considered a public benefit should lead us to re-evaluate our own views on public housing, and to reconsider both its history and its original vision.

D Street project in the 1970s (before renovation) typified the public's vision of public housing.

Film-Related Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think congressman Joseph McCarthy, acting as a real estate lobby spokesperson, demanded that it house the "welfare class"? Why did the pro-public housing lobbyist Catherine Bauer say this would cause her to "disown" the US Housing Act in the 1940s?

2. In the film an aging reformer blames the real estate boards for "making the most of the race threat." What does he mean? How is the politics of race a part of public housing politics?

3. Like the realtors, the housing reformers and labor unions bear some responsibility for the way the public housing program was oriented in the 1930s and the way it has turned out today. Did reformers and labor contribute to the problems public housing later encountered? How would you evaluate the record of America's housing reformers?

4. Public housing in the United States has a bad reputation. But can you think of public housing projects in this or other countries that are solid, functioning homes?

More discussion questions may be found on pp. 4, 11, & 12.

PUBLIC HOUSING: COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

by Rachel G. Bratt

(The following commentary analyzes how structural characteristics of the public housing program produced unanticipated long-term results and how the program has worked in recent years.It is taken from Rachel G. Bratt, REBUILDING A LOW-INCOME HOUSING POLICY,Temple University Press, 1989.)

The Background to the Program's Fiscal Problems

From its inception, the public housing program was aimed at providing housing only for the deserving, temporarily poor—the "submerged middle class." The program therefore targeted those who could not find decent, affordable housing on the private market, but not the so-called unworthy poor and those with no means to pay rent.

The expectation that tenants should pay their own way expressed itself in the formula the federal government devised for financing public housing. Tenant rents were to cover all operating expenses, independent of debt service. Only the principal and interest on bonds, which were floated by local authorities to construct the buildings, were paid by the federal government, through annual contribution contracts. Thus the federal government covered the long-term debt financing, while ownership and management were vested in local public agencies. This arrangement worked well during the early years of the program.

After World War II, however, the country's demographic picture began to shift, and so did the population served by public housing. As Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans Administration (VA) mortgage insurance and guarantee programs became available to vast numbers of new home buyers, and as the interstate highway system took form, most of the submerged middle-class residents of public housing surfaced, to assume full-fledged suburban middle-class status. As a further concession to the private construction industry, the 1949 Housing Act limited public housing to very-low-income people by requiring that the highest rents be 20 percent lower than the prevailing rents for decent housing in the private market, and by authorizing the eviction of above-income families. Publicly provided housing was now available only to the very poor...

But by the 1960s, serious problems with the financing formula had surfaced. Inflation was having an increasing impact on operating costs, while rental income remained static. Starting in 1961, the Public Housing Administration (later merged into HUD) made the first in a series of attempts to alleviate this problem by authorizing additional subsidies up to $120 per year for each elderly household. Within a few years, these subsidies were also provided in behalf of handicapped, displaced, large, and very-low-income families.

During the 1970s, the overall problems facing public housing worsened. Inflation continued to boost operating expenses, and many buildings that were, by then, twenty or more years old, began to show signs of aging and a need for major repairs. At the same time rental incomes were either declining or, at best, keeping up with expenses.

In an effort to insulate tenants from having to make up for operating cost shortfalls, Senator Edward Brooke (R-Mass.) sponsored legislation (known as the Brooke Amendments, 1969–1971) that capped rentals at 25 percent of income and provided additional operating subsidies. Between 1969 and 1972, operating subsidies nationally rose from $12.6 million to $102.8 million. Between 1971 and 1982, operating subsidies jumped more than tenfold, to $1.3 billion. And for fiscal years 1988 and 1989, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1987 authorized a total of more than $3 billion, with an appropriation of $1.45 billion for FY 1988.

Since 1975, operating subsidies have been provided through a mechanism known as the Performance Funding System (PFS). Funding levels under the PFS are set by examining the costs of a sample of housing authorities considered to be well managed and then using these costs to determine reasonable expenses for all authorities. One of the major criticisms of the PFS is that operating subsidies are based on past funding levels of well-managed authorities and do not take into account the actual cost of providing an adequate level of management services.

Thus the original funding formula, by excluding funds for operating and maintenance costs, undermined the public housing program. Despite the assistance provided by operating subsidies, many repair problems worsened to such an extent that very large sums of money were needed to remedy the most physically dilapidated projects. Altogether, the current modernization program, called the Comprehensive Improvement Assistance Program, and its predecessors received $7.9 billion from 1975 to 1986. During the middle years of the Reagan administration, funding declined considerably, with only $707 million expended in 1986, down from $1.26 billion in 1983. With the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1987, the modernization program received a major boost, with an appropriation of $1.7 billion.

The Results of Voluntary Local Participation

The highly polarized nature of the debate surrounding the 1937 Housing Act also helped shape the administrative structure of the public housing program. Administration was to be decentralized, and participation by localities was to be voluntary.

This meant that decisions about public housing—whether to build it and where to locate it—would be made by local officials, who would be under significant pressure from their constituents. The decentralized structure also eliminated the potential for the federal government either to enforce more progressive policies or override local decisions.

The right of local communities not to participate in the public housing program guaranteed that within metropolitan areas, public housing would be most prevalent in large cities. As a result, low-income people, already lacking housing options, were to be restricted still further; the choice to move to the suburbs usually was not available to them. Local control over the program meant that little or no public housing was built in more affluent areas.

As the program evolved, accommodating increasing numbers of blacks and other minorities, local control over public housing contributed to patterns of racial segregation with white areas effectively keeping out blacks. Large cities, with large minority populations, also served a high percentage of minorities in their developments. As of 1976, 83 percent of public housing tenants in twenty large cities were members of minorities, compared to 61 percent for the overall public housing population.

Thus, opposition by the private homebuilding industry, maintenance and operating fund shortfalls, and class and racial segregation have continuously plagued the public housing program. As early as the 1950s, even some of public housing's most ardent supporters began to lose heart.

In 1973, President Nixon called a halt to all federally subsidized housing programs. Since then, the program has limped along, with the full impact of the moratorium being felt from 1976 to 1978. With very little new money appropriated during the 1980s, production declined, once the projects that had been in the pipeline during the Carter administration were completed.

The Domination of Private Sector Programs

The history of public housing not only reveals how several key forces and decisions shaped the program but also reflects how the federal government has changed its thinking about its role in subsidizing housing for low-income people. Although the public housing program started out with management and ownership resting solely with the local public housing authority, as the program came under attack in the mid-1960s, the private sector was looked to as a way to deal with the nation's low-income housing needs.

The Section 23 program was authorized in 1965. Known as the leased-housing program, it served as a prototype for the housing allowance idea and enabled low-income families to rent units in privately-owned housing. The housing authority entered into long-term contracts with landlords and paid the difference between the unit's market rent and a proportion of the tenant's income. Over 100,000 units were financed through this program before it was superseded by the Section 8 Existing Housing program in 1974.

The "turnkey" form of public housing also was introduced in 1965. Under this program a developer entered into a contract with a local housing authority to construct a project. The developer then sold the project (or "turned the key" over) to the housing authority at the stipulated price. Since 1965, about one-third of all new public housing projects have been built in the turnkey method but it is unclear whether it has reduced either the time or costs of development or improved quality. From the developers' viewpoint, the turnkey program was enormously popular. In 1968, the president of the National Association of Home Builders suggested that new public housing authorizations be directed primarily at that program. Calling it "the first attempt in the 30-year history of public housing to use, for the lowest income brackets, the tremendous resources and productive capacity of the private homebuilding industry," he cited the turnkey program for exemplifying "the proper role of government in helping private industry to expand into areas not attainable without such help."

In addition to these changes, new programs (Section 202, Section 221(d)(3), Section 236, Section 8) were initiated that bypassed public housing completely, in effect subsidizing the entrepreneur to provide private housing.

Thus, while the early history of the public housing program was characterized by staunch opposition by the private sector, over the past two decades private interest groups have evolved into active supporters of most housing subsidy programs. Although they are still opposed to conventional public housing, they are certain to show support for government programs explicitly geared to stimulating the homebuilding industry and providing investment opportunities.

A field trip for kids from Columbia Point, 1970s.

Observations about the Record of Public Housing

1. Popular perceptions concerning public housing tenants turn out to be relatively accurate. A majority of residents are nonwhite, with estimates ranging from 62 to 86 percent. White residents tend to be much older than nonwhites, with the latter generally having at least two children. Over three-quarters of all public housing households are headed by single adults, usually an elderly person living alone or a single parent with children. Finally, more than half of all public housing tenants depend on welfare for their income.

2. While conventional wisdom assumes low satisfaction levels among public housing tenants, many surveys of public housing residents make clear that the majority of residents report positive feelings about their housing.

3. Despite its concentration in large cities, public housing is still far more dispersed than many believe. Almost two-thirds of all public housing units are administered by the 2775 housing authorities that operate fewer than 6500 units; the 22 largest public housing authorities administer the remaining one-third of the units. In addition, most public housing developments (54 percent) are relatively small, having fewer than 200 units; most family public housing units (75 percent) are in low-rise buildings (four or fewer storeys); only 7 percent of all family public housing projects are both high-rise and have more than 200 units; and as of 1980, public housing projects were, on average, seventeen years old.

4. A 1988 study conducted by Abt Associates under contract to HUD calculated that about $22.2 billion is needed to repair and modernize the public housing stock; of this, $9.3 billion is needed to repair or replace existing architectural, mechanical, and electrical systems and $12.9 billion is needed to upgrade and modernize the public housing stock.

5. Included in the above estimates is the cost of repairs and modernization for a segment of the public housing stock that may be too distressed to fix. The current number of units in projects that are not economically or socially viable ranges from a HUD estimate of 73,000 with another 95,000 that could fall into this category to an estimate by the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities of some 138,000 units that are facing serious difficulties.

6. The conventional wisdom of what constitutes a physically bad project is not borne out by the evidence: Most stereotypical projects do not exhibit severe problems. Although projects with stereotypical characteristics present problems more frequently than the rest of the public housing stock, they represent only a small percentage of all public housing developments.

7. By going along with the notion that public housing should provide only minimal accommodations, public housing administrators may have given the opposition its greatest ammunition. Indeed, many public housing projects, overly modest and austere, did evolve into bad housing. The public sector's quest to provide no-frills housing, combined with the private sector's unrelenting demand that public housing be different from the rest of the housing stock, undermined the notion that public housing could also be attractive housing.

8. Management has a significant impact on the quality of public housing. Since the 1960s, inadequate management has been cited as a serious deficiency of many large housing authorities. Problems have revolved around two broad issues: financial mismanagment, and inadequate or insensitive handling of tenant-related matters.

9. Over the years, HUD has instituted a series of programs to encourage better management procedures. Overall, the results of these initiatives have been mixed. Some of the programs were not fully implemented or evaluated, while others were only one-shot efforts. One of the most significant efforts to upgrade management was the National Tenant Management demonstration, a program modeled after tenant management corporations in St. Louis and several other cities.

10. Until passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1987, HUD did not offer any programs to local housing authorities to support the creation of tenant management corporations. With the passage of this act, Congress authorized HUD to spend some $5 million in fiscal years 1988 and 1989. Although this is a significant step, it is of such a small scale that tenant management will not, at least at this point, become a dominant feature of local housing authorities' operations.

11. The image of public housing as inaccessible to public services and other facilities is frequently accurate. Because public housing in many large cities was developed quite late in their stage of development, much of the best land was often already built upon. In addition, public housing development costs had to fall within prescribed limits, which also put pressure on local housing authorities to acquire the cheapest land available, usually in less desirable locations. But the most important factor contributing to the location of public housing relates to a key administrative aspect of the program discussed earlier, the power of local governments to determine the location of developments. Opposition to proposed projects was usually vehement, as a result, projects tended to be located less in existing neighborhoods than in more out-of-the-way areas. Local city councilors and chief executives were reluctant to antagonize community residents. Therefore, the easiest and most expedient solution often was to build public housing in areas where no one lived or wanted to live. Boston's notorious Columbia Point public housing project was located on the cite of the former city dump.

12. Public housing generally has not furthered the goal of racial integration. In addition to the program's decentralized administrative structure, which gave local housing authorities the freedom to discriminate at will, segregation in public housing was also the policy of the federal government during the early years of the program. The Neighborhood Composition Rule, formulated by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, stated that housing projects should not alter the racial character of their surrounding neighborhoods. Although housing authorities were permitted to offer units to whites and blacks on an "open occupancy" basis, most authorities chose to provide "separate but equal" housing. As a result of these policies, the earliest public housing projects were built for occupancy either by whites or by blacks. The original plan for Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis was for two segregated projects, Pruitt for blacks and Igoe, across the street, for whites. Segregation patterns in Boston's public housing were also finely drawn. In 1940, the first project to accept blacks was completely segregated. The second project open to blacks had specific buildings earmarked "the colored section."

Notwithstanding this effort and other changes in HUD site selection procedures, years of discriminatory practices have had their effect. At present, public housing, particularly family public housing, is still often segregated. In many cities, such as Boston, predominantly white projects and predominantly black projects may be only a few blocks from one another.

It is important to emphasize that in its racially segregating policies, the public housing program was operating within the norms of society. Discrimination in the private market was standard procedure, and public housing did nothing to challenge the system.

13. Equity (in the sense of "fairness") is also cited as a major reason for opposing public housing and the other subsidized production programs in favor of income supplements. For example, the 1982 *Report of the President's Commission on Housing* pointed out that past housing programs were not equitable "because they provide a few fortunate tenants very high-quality housing at a price less than their neighbors pay for lower-quality housing."

Those who wave the banner of equity when assessing rent-subsidized production programs appear to have a misplaced sense of social justice:

The benefits of the nation's largest housing subsidy are enjoyed by households far more affluent than public housing tenants. All homeowners, regardless of income, are entitled to deduct mortgage interest as well as property tax payments from their income for federal tax purposes. The result is that about $40 billion in tax revenues are currently being lost to the federal government, with this amount expected to increase to over $50 billion by 1993. Even more alarming is that the beneficiaries of this subsidy are those in the upper-income groups. The Low Income Housing Information Service has calculated that about two-thirds of the total homeowners' subsidy is received by those earning over $50,000 a year. Thus, "large" benefits to public housing tenants are not nearly as large as the savings enjoyed by upper-income households.

14. The comparative costs of public housing can be summarized as follows. First, although the comparison is not a fair one because, in the case of public housing, new units are built, and in the housing allowance programs they are not, it is less costly to subsidize a household through the Section 8 Existing Housing program than to subsidize the *construction* of a new unit of public housing. Second, the cost of subsidizing households in *existing* public housing units is no higher than the cost of subsidizing households in *existing* private units through the Section 8 program. Third, although no definitive conclusions can be drawn about the present cost of building new public housing in comparison to the other types of subsidized housing programs that have been utilized in the past, public housing does emerge in a relatively positive position.

15. Another component of the cost issue relates to who owns the housing when the subsidy period terminates. Privately owned subsidized housing is earmarked for low–moderate-income occupancy for limited periods of time. In contrast, local public housing authorities own public housing in perpetuity.

16. The vast majority of public housing developments are financially viable. Although operating subsidies and modernization funds have often been "too little" or "too late," they have managed to keep the vast majority of projects running. In a relatively few instances, local housing authorities have abandoned seriously distressed projects. Some notable examples are Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Columbia Point in Boston, and America Park in Lynn, Massachusetts. In each of these cases, however, inadequate funding to upgrade the buildings was probably not the major reason for abandoning the low-income projects. Instead, poor location and long-standing social problems may have precluded the continuation of those particular low-income developments.

Film-Related Discussion Questions

1. Public housing and government rent subsidy programs for poor people are often attacked for expending tax dollars for the benefit of one segment of our society. Are private homeowners or private developers also subsidized through our systems of building, financing, or taxing property?

2. In the film, people interviewed on the street talk about Columbia Point and other projects as unmitigated disasters. Yet Columbia Point residents remember it as a pleasant, integrated environment. How do you reconcile these two views?

3. What changes beset Columbia Point and D Street projects? How did the problems of these two projects evolve from the original design of the program?

More discussion questions may be found on pp. 4, 8, & 12.

NOTES and BIBLIOGRAPHY

Notes to "The Public Housing Program: A Background," *(pp. 2–8)*

1. This was the setting for the creation of the Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932, which for the first time secured mortgage credit while transferring the risk to the government, planting the seeds of the Savings and Loan Bailout debacle of the 1990s.

2. Architect Albert Meyer quoted in Bratt, 1989, p. 67.

3. A history of this agitation may be traced in articles of the *Boston Traveler* and *Boston Globe* during 1937 and 1938.

4.This planning went forward for many industries; the CED policy-making group was later central to establishing the role of the Marshall Plan, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other landmark institutions of the postwar era.

5. "By 1978, over 60 percent of the residents of public housing were minority-group members, whereas from 1944 to 1951 nonwhite families represented between 26 and 39 percent of all public housing tenants." (Bratt, 1989).

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Film-Related Discussion Questions

1. In the film, a resident of Columbia Point says, "This is our home. You guys, you made it our home. Now you've got to live with it." What does she mean? How are people that don't live in public housing linked to people who do?

2. In recent years the federal government has stopped building public housing. Do you agree with that decision? Should public housing be expanded or contracted? What, in your opinion, would be a workable public housing program?

3. Today there's a lot of discussion about "private" versus "public" sector enterprises. Public housing is a public sector enterprise that began in the 1930s. Can government-operated programs work?

4. One of the solutions to public housing's dilemmas is mixed-income housing. Columbia Point has recently been converted into a mixed-income community called "Harbor Point." What do you think of this as a solution to its problems?

5. The 1980s was a decade in which "privatization" was a popular slogan. Do you agree with this trend? What services should government provide for its citizens(e.g., health care, transportation, schools, water, sewage, parks, etc.)?

More discussion questions may be found on pages 4, 8, and 11.

Some Articles for Discussion Purposes

Attached are several newspaper articles you might find useful to spur discussion about issues in the present that relate to the film.

Please note that in the article on Harbor Point, "Harbor Point" is the new name for the Columbia Point Project.