The End of an Era
The Case of Public Housing in Atlanta, Georgia

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The recent mass demolition of all public housing projects in the city of Atlanta spurred the closure of an era to make way for the formation of mixed-income communities and gentrified centers. By eradicating public housing, officials believe that poverty can be reduced by dispersing low-income residents throughout the city. Yet, individuals displaced from their former communities still maintain ties to, and memories of, their lives within these communities. I argue that demolishing public housing signals to low-income individuals, the majority of whom are African Americans, that city planners and policy makers do not care about their needs. Since 1974, The Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) has issued Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to low-income, elderly, and disabled individuals whose income does not exceed 50% of the median income of their respective county. A housing voucher is a government issued certificate, which subsidizes private housing for low-income individuals. The recent expansion of the Section 8 Program in the 2009 Voucher Reform Act (SEVRA) has been a necessary step to increase voucher portability and streamline eligibility. Voucher reform has long been overdue, with as many as 150,000 individuals facing a lengthy and obsolete application process and no guarantee of immediate housing placements (Sard and Fischer, 2007). To continue reform, social advocates and agencies such as Atlanta's Task Force for the Homeless and the AHA must ensure that federal dollars actually reach Atlanta's poorest communities; otherwise, the cycle of poverty and homelessness will continue.

Policy makers and city planners must look at actual societal constraints inhibiting the poor from fundamental democratic participation. These societal constraints find their roots in historical racial segregation that has pushed African Americans into urban peripheries. Urban housing, education, and health care disparities still exist as reminders of a not so distant past of racial segregation. African Americans born during the Great Depression lived through the Jim Crow "separate but equal" legislation that excluded them from democratic participation and access to private housing equal to their white counterparts. As a result, black urban ghettos emerged as a means of survival to resist the exclusionary policies of private housing and local officials. Redlining began with the 1934 National Housing Act and became a policy through which local officials could deny black ownership of homes through inflated interest rates and denial of loans (Dedman, 1988; HUD, 2007). Slum clearance programs, endorsed by the federal government at the time, became a means to revitalize urban areas while also squeezing out inhabitants of the urban core. Many minorities, including African Americans, could only secure mortgages in certain areas leading to endemic residential racial segregation. In an effort to revitalize urban slums, the Housing Act of 1937 allotted funding to local governments for the construction of public housing projects. These early public housing projects became a new means to serve the needs of the poor.

Years later, however, Atlanta's urban renewal from 1958 to 1968 focused on the construction of the interstate connector, stadiums, the rail system, and convention facilities. These renewal efforts destroyed more than 30,000 low-income housing units, thereby displacing nearly 20% of inner city African Americans (Beaty, 2007). At the start of the 1990s, Atlanta was the fourth most residentially segregated city in the U.S. Historically, policy makers have sought to diminish the African American vote through indirect segregation by rezoning formerly integrated neighborhoods, schools, and congressional districts (Beaty, 2007; Keating, 2001). Furthermore, Dedman notes that residents of South Atlanta (who are predominately African American) have historically witnessed a decline in their property values because of banks' refusal to lend to low-income minority communities: "When people cannot borrow money to buy or fix up houses, property values decline. Real estate agents direct their best prospects elsewhere. Appraisers hedge their bets by undervaluing property [and] businesses close" (1988). The decline in property values places low-income communities at a disadvantage to accessing social services critical to their well-being.

Rather than let urban slums continue to decay, Atlanta City Council and AHA have invested in their renewal by demolishing failed housing projects and encouraging mixed-income communities. Developers commonly remain hesitant to build in areas without established amenities because their existence makes it easier to attract new residents. Dennis Keating suggests that abandoned housing is widespread in the U.S. and occurs when property owners fail to repair and sustain their buildings to "minimal occupancy standards" (2007). The low rent rates in poorer neighborhoods prevent

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landlords from refurbishing and maintaining apartment buildings. Thus, the chances of abandoned lots in low-income neighborhoods become much higher because landlords cannot easily pass repair costs to the tenants. Property remains vacant until developers decide to invest.

The 1996 Olympics provided a catalyst for urban renewal in Atlanta to rehabilitate once desolate areas and generate city revenues. To prepare for the Olympic Games and to pursue privatization of the city's 50 year-old housing projects, planners sought to demolish Techwood Homes, Clark Howell Homes, and East Lake Meadows to transform them into mixed-income communities (Beaty, 2007). Keating argues that the loss of these public housing apartments "destroyed a sociological community close to downtown services and employment" (2001). Techwood Homes, the nation's first public housing project constructed in 1936, is now the site of Centennial Place, where the rent ranges from $850 to $1700 per month. These high rental rates make Centennial Place out of reach for many low-income individuals and families. Long-term Techwood residents deemed the close proximity to jobs, health care, and transportation crucial to their well-being (Keating, 2001). Techwood and Howell Homes formerly included 1,195 units, but Centennial Place only has 360 subsidized units reserved, 30% of which are not available for former residents. Furthermore, East Lake Meadows formerly housed residents in 650 units, but became The Villages at East Lake, which only offers 270 units to low-income residents (Beaty, 2007). After being uprooted and dispersed from their former residences, it is common for low-income families to only move to "slightly less impoverished neighborhoods" (Brown, 2009). Only 20% of former public housing residents return to their communities once they have become mixed-income, and the vast majority of displaced families relocate in "10 of Atlanta's poorest zip codes" (Brown, 2009).

In addition to mixed-income housing, Atlanta City Council members and politicians also support gentrification as a positive means to transform a dilapidated area into an attractive economic center. Atlantic Station – home to shopping, coffee shops, and pricey loft apartments has replaced the former site of the Atlantic Steel Mill Company. While gentrification generates revenue and tourism in formerly distressed areas, it also excludes the poor from newer housing options (Beaty, 2007). Citizens flocking to gentrified centers represent many ethnicities and races, but share one distinction: affluence. Occupants of trendy loft apartments and patrons to coffee shops and specialty stores share a common purchasing power to afford high rental prices and commodities. In effect, gentrification overturns white-flight because people representing diverse races and ethnicities are now relocating to gentrified centers to shorten the work commute (Goldberg, 1993). The city has moved its efforts from assisting those in need to helping affluent members of society who have social mobility and purchasing power.

In spearheading the urban renewal effort, the AHA has established goals focused on de-concentrating poverty, utilizing private sector and market principles, and elevating personal responsibility among residents (AHA, 2010). Local public housing agencies (PHAs) like the Atlanta Housing Authority disperse the federal Section 8 vouchers to eligible individuals. Supporters of Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers claim that people who relocate

from struggling neighborhoods to flourishing conditions have a better chance of finding jobs, and school children have higher academic achievement (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, supporters argue that vouchers incentivize low-income individuals' advancement by granting the poor greater personal responsibility, purchasing power, and mobility to find private housing.

The 2009 Voucher Reform Act (SEVRA) is the recent companion to the 1974 Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program. SEVRA has established an annual budget for each public housing agency to ensure that they receive enough funding to renew vouchers for residents. SEVRA allots an estimated $568 to $758 monthly and $7,500 annually to assist more families in affording secure, clean, and quality housing within the private market. According to the Congressional Budget Office, however, the increased demand for vouchers will substantially drain HUD's budget and further contribute to the federal deficit by approximately $1 million (2009). SEVRA also safeguards against market fluctuations by allowing local public housing agencies to pull from a reserve fund to maintain housing commitments to tenants. Improved voucher portability reduces arduous paperwork and red-tape to allow tenants to relocate with vouchers in the event of a new job offer (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2008). Even so, the AHA's dispersal of Section 8 vouchers to low-income individuals for the purchasing of private housing still perpetuates a class-based power structure through which low-income citizens rely on landlords to participate in the voucher program.

Pushing low-income individuals and their families into private housing has transferred their needs to the market (Brown, 2009). A privatized system gives individual landlords and property managers the authority to grant low income individuals access to housing. Within Atlanta, low-income families face a lengthy application process to verify income level with residents' employers and banks. If applicants meet the eligibility requirements, the local housing authority places them on a waiting list for the voucher; long waiting times are common. Moreover, a landlord can decide not to approve low-income individuals for housing during the background check if they feel uncomfortable renting to voucher-holders. Landlords prefer residents who can already afford the market rate for apartments, so low-income individuals have difficulty seeking housing in more thriving communities. A voucher-holder unable to find a landlord willing to accept the Section 8 housing voucher faces the potential loss of the certificate. To prevent this, SEVRA has streamlined inspections to facilitate and incentivize landlord participation in the program, "by requiring inspections only every two years rather than every year, and by allowing families to move in right away if a property…meets [the] federal housing quality standards" (National Alliance to End Homelessness). Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless Director, Anita Beaty still contends, however, that "the subsidies are ending for thousands of units owned by landlords who [do not] need the subsidies because the market has changed in their favor" (2007). A market approach to urban poverty reduces the role that safety-net structures likes public housing projects formerly played. These issues exhibit the intricacies of new efforts for voucher system reform and responses to the underlying problems pervading impoverished communities.

The Atlanta Housing Authority must continue to reassess the voucher system, and acknowledge that urban renewal efforts do have their costs if projects cater to one echelon of society. Grassroots advocates must work to reintegrate those individuals who have been displaced and make poverty visible in order to generate awareness among decision makers (Shaw, 2001; Zoelle and Josephson, 2005). The Department for Family and Children's Services (DFCS), Atlanta Community Food Bank, Metro Atlanta's Task Force for the Homeless, and religious congregations are some existing organizations at the local level which must pressure the AHA to ensure that federal dollars reach Atlanta's poor. In order to stop the cycle of urban poverty, social workers and policy makers must target root causes of urban poverty though the formation of programs (i.e. job training, health care, and after school care for children of working parents) to mitigate the social problems pervading marginalized groups. These advocates should work to empower the urban poor to demand that the city address their housing needs. This will demonstrate to the city and AHA that all stakeholders including the urban poor must have the opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

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At both the local and macro levels, the state must take the lead in intervening and reestablishing a social welfare safety net to help individuals escape the cycle of poverty. The American socio-political structure has historically been biased against the poor as well as racial and ethnic minority groups. Oscar Lewis's conception of a culture of poverty should not hold true (Zeolle and Josephson, 2005). While impoverished individuals should take responsibility for their choices in life, the structural mechanisms forcing people into poverty are not their fault. Public housing should remain a temporary option for those individuals and families who, due to unemployment, foreclosed homes, and bankruptcy from high health care costs, have no other option.

To reintegrate the urban poor back into the Atlanta, policy makers and reformers can learn from the past to realize the impact that instances of legislated segregation and social exclusion have in the present. Historically, reformers of U.S. social welfare policy operated under the misconception that the poor should work rather than protest inequalities (Zoelle and Josephson, 2005). This conception of poverty fails to understand material conditions, such as limited access to affordable housing and jobs that will pay living wages. Atlanta's urban poor are caught in a fight for their survival, and a continued voucher reform effort and restoration of public housing will work to address the structural inequalities that low-income individuals face. By giving displaced individuals a seat at the table, policy makers can meet the interests of the urban poor. Advocates and policy makers must resist additional gentrification, which further displaces the urban poor away from social services that are critical to their survival. With this understanding, city planners and politicians can then move to target root causes of poverty, and allow low-income individuals a chance to become socially mobile.

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