

THE PLANNED TRANSFORMATION: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CHICAGO HOUSING AUTHORITY

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In the early 1990s, the Chicago Housing Authority began a wide-scale initiative to overhaul its public housing system by demolishing some of its most notorious high-rise towers to replace them with new mixed-income housing developments. This effort was a means of encouraging integration in some of the city's many segregated communities. The initiative, called the Plan to Transformation, was a highly controversial issue, and raised numerous concerns regarding residents of the high-rise towers. This paper attempts to analyze the initiatives of the Plan to Transformation and its implications for the future of housing and segregation in Chicago and its metro area.

Chicago is considered the cultural and economic hub of the Midwest because of its large population and rich culture. While the city's population of more than 2.8 million is about one third black, one third white, and one third "hispanic," it nevertheless ranks 83 on the scale of segregation (Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance, 2001).¹

If Chicago is such an economically successful and culturally diverse metropolis, one might ask how such intense segregation could exist. While there are many factors contributing to the existence and persistence of segregation in the City of Chicago, a partial response to this question can be found in the history of the Chicago housing project. Originally intended as transitional housing for predominantly white families thrown off track by the early periods of economic depression, the projects have evolved into permanent "vertical ghettos" that virtually imprison their inhabitants—largely, African Americans. Recently, policy makers, government officials, and select organizations began to question the merit of the public housing system in Chicago, and they came to the realization that it serves as merely a medium through which African Americans are ostracized from society and forced to remain in impoverished conditions.

In the early 1990s, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and the federal government (through the Plan for Transformation and the Hope VI program, respectively) initiated a proactive campaign to rid the city of the monstrous public housing towers in the name of creating more viable, mixed-income communities. While the CHA has already demolished a great majority of the towers and is well into the middle stages of its attempt at urban revitalization, there are still major loopholes in the initiative. The most critical issue is that of placement of former high-rise tenants. What will become of the thousands of residents who were forced to leave the projects all at once? How will these abrupt changes contribute to the mitigation (or perpetuation) of segregation? What is the impact of these revitalization attempts on Chicago's future? This paper attempts to analyze the initiatives of the CHA in urban revitalization and its implications for the future of housing and segregation in both Chicago and its metropolitan area. A brief introduction of the history of the public housing system in Chicago

¹ The scale ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 representing extreme segregation.

will be given, along with a detailed description of the change in perspectives about public housing. Next, the plan's impact on African Americans and housing will be assessed, along with current successes (or failures) of the program. Last, closing remarks about the initiatives will be given and areas for improvement will be considered.

Chicago public housing was formed after the Great Depression under the Housing Act of 1937 as a source of transition for middle-class families caught in the economic disaster (Atlas and Dreier 1994). Initially intended for whites, public housing was built in white neighborhoods and soon became the most desired form of housing, envied by all, including residents of private housing. Public housing was such a success because of the leadership and management of Elizabeth Wood, then Executive Director of the CHA (Fuerst 2003).² Public housing had become popular, and everyone wanted to jump on the bandwagon for a better quality of life. This fascination with public housing had not become a problem until African Americans became part of the dream. Following the Second World War, there was an increased demand for housing to accommodate the enclaves of African Americans who came to Chicago to settle. Due to this mass influx, Chicago had to make some major adjustments because African Americans began to integrate previously all-white neighborhoods, much to the dismay and discontent of whites.³

Despite the violent response of white city residents at large, the CHA managed to continue the integration of neighborhoods under the guise of "veteran housing" until 1948, when City officials intervened and started denying the CHA permission to build in white areas. In turn, the Authority was required to build all its public housing in black neighborhoods.

While the demographics of the City's core experienced a drastic change, the Housing Authority's representation endured a similar change. Over the course of two decades, Wood and her Board of Directors resigned, and a new Board of Directors took over. The new administration continued to build new high-rises, but the existing ones were no longer maintained under the new leadership. Rules were no longer enforced, the excuse being that no federal funds were available for upkeep of the properties (Fuerst 2003).

Consequently, people who had the capacity to do so left the projects and migrated toward the suburbs or to private landlords in other places in the City (Atlas and Dreier 1994). The exodus of working class families, in conjunction with the Housing Act of 1949 which established that the poverty-stricken should be the recipients of public housing, contributed to the demise of public housing projects. With the lower-middle class gone, there was no longer an incentive for property managers to maintain the units, which became centers of decay and, soon, sources of violence and illegal activity.

In 1995, however, there was a sudden interest in improving the conditions of the ghettos in which these monstrous towers existed. The public housing projects under the management of the CHA had

2 Elizabeth Wood was the Executive Director of the Chicago Housing Authority for almost two decades. Under Wood, the staff of the Authority as well as public housing residents had to meet requirements. Tenants of public housing in Chicago were responsible for maintaining the appearances of their units on the inside and out, and if they failed to do so, they were fined. Chicago Housing Authority officials were dedicated to the preservation of these communities; some of them even arranged for health officials to provide services to tenants of public housing. They also provided after-school care for children whose parents worked.

3 Allan Spear, in Hirsch (1983), describes the conditions of public housing, mentioning that prior to World War II racial barriers had been "successfully defended," but soon thereafter "the number of technically 'mixed' census tracts increased from 135 to 204 between 1940 and 1950," and only 160 of the city's 935 census tracts were without a single nonwhite resident in 1950, compared with only 350 such tracts just ten years earlier" (Hirsch 1983, 5).

become so horrific that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took over the properties in that same year. HUD management would continue until the Authority could prove itself capable of effectively managing its housing again (Socialist Worker Online 2002). Not long before the takeover, HUD established the Hope VI program to help revitalize distressed public housing.

The following year marked the birth of the viability test, under which housing officials were given the authority to demolish buildings whose rehabilitation costs would exceed costs of complete destruction and rebuilding. Under the viability test, public housing officials would also be required to give displaced families Section 8 vouchers (now called “Housing Choice” vouchers) to subsidize their move to housing markets in the private sector. According to the results from the test, a total of 51 buildings of high-rise housing—18,500 units—throughout the City were considered damaged beyond the government’s ability to repair them (Whitman and McCoy 2000). The demolition began quickly, and in the midst of the chaotic frenzy of the wrecking ball, Chicago was able to regain its control over the Housing Authority. In 2000, the Housing Authority, backed by HUD and supported by Mayor Richard M. Daley, established the Plan for Transformation, which included a \$1.5 billion plan to create mixed income neighborhoods in place of demolished high-rises over a period of ten years (Paulson 2003). A description of the future mixed-income housing communities is noted in Paulson (2003):

The vision is a grand one: new mixed-income neighborhoods replacing old high-rises. Homeowners living in town houses alongside public housing and affordable-housing tenants. A plethora of shops and diversions in now deserted areas. In the process, every resident will be relocated at least once, to transitional public housing or to the private market.

Although in theory these new mixed-income communities seem like ideal places to live, some are unmoved by the plan, and the general question among those who voice concern is: *what happens to all of the tenants who are forced to leave the buildings?* What makes this question even more valid is the *Gautreaux* decision of 1969. In this case, Dorothy Gautreaux and a group of public housing residents filed suits against the CHA and HUD, claiming that they allowed for discrimination against African Americans by placing nearly all public housing in all black neighborhoods. The plaintiffs were angry with HUD because they believed that although it was in a position to counter the actions of the CHA by withdrawing funding, it failed to do so and was thus promoting discrimination against these groups. The result of *Gautreaux* was the three-for-one rule. Under this rule, CHA was mandated to build three housing units in white areas for every one unit built in a black area, defined as those neighborhoods containing a population more than 30 percent black. Later, three-for-one was changed to one-for-one (see Oldweiler and Rogal). When Congress introduced the viability test in 1996, the previously established one-for-one replacement rule was suspended. This suspension could have huge impacts on the future of public housing residents. Without the existence of the one-for-one rule, the CHA could virtually wipe out all of the public housing units and would not be obligated to build any more to accommodate those low-income residents who were forced out.

Currently, the CHA is in the middle stages of the Plan for Transformation, and, by the end of the year 2009, it will have completely finished its goal of demolishing and rebuilding, or rehabilitating 25,000 units (Chicago Housing Authority 2003). At the time the Plan was being made, the CHA counted 6,100 units that would be redeveloped for mixed-income families, 9,500 units that would be rehabilitated and reserved for senior housing, and another 9,400 that would be “either reconstructed or rehabbed” (2003). Under the Plan, The Housing Authority intends to build one-third public

housing, one-third affordable housing, and one-third market-rate housing, all within the same complexes.

The CHA emphasizes “choice” in the Plan for Transformation. The CHA has prepared Relocation Rights Contracts for its tenants—one for those who lived in public housing before October 1, 1999 and one for those who came to the Housing Authority units after that date. The contracts inform tenants of their options for housing under the Plan. Lease-compliant tenants who lived in any of the public housing units prior to October 1, 1999 will receive “priority” in their choice. In their contracts, they have (1) a right to temporary housing, in which they will be able to live for one to five years, (2) a right to permanent housing, for which they would be given Section 8 vouchers, or (3) newly rehabilitated housing. It is necessary to note, however, that a disclaimer in the contract reads: “*Preference to return to public housing = You can choose to come back to public housing, but there is no guarantee that public housing will be available for you*” (Chicago Housing Authority 2003).

Rules for tenants that moved into the Chicago public housing projects after October 1, 1999 are somewhat similar. These tenants have (1) a right to Section 8 housing as a permanent alternative to public housing, with provision for temporary housing until such tenants find permanent housing of their choice, or (2) a “right to a *preference* to come back to public housing.” However, this second choice would be second in priority to those in the pre-October 1st cohort—only after they choose that they would not prefer to stay with public housing would priority be opened to those in the post-October 1st cohort (Chicago Housing Authority 2003). In both cases, tenants must be lease-compliant, and both cohorts of tenants will have the right to transitional services that would help them move, although, according to some critics, the services came too late (Rogal 2005).

According to a study conducted by Venkatesh and Celimli (2004), approximately 75 percent of CHA families would *prefer* to return to their old neighborhood. However, as the Relocation Rights Contract makes clear in the fine print, one’s preferences may not have much weight in the grand scheme of things. Furthermore, the rules and regulations with which tenants must comply before they are considered for return are quite stringent. Some of the automatic disqualifiers for return include (1) a tenant who has a utility balance with the Authority, (2) one who is not current in rent, and/or (3) a tenant who exercises bad “housekeeping.” According to Venkatesh and Celimli, this means that less than 20 percent of the public housing tenants expressing interest in returning would be able to do so.

While the Plan’s contracts seem rather inconsistent with realities in that there is really no “choice” for a majority of people, the Plan also has a negative impact on those tenants who actually would prefer to move to the private sector. While the CHA is informing tenants that they will have the right to temporary and/or permanent housing through Section 8 vouchers, the numbers of vouchers readily available for low-income individuals is insufficient to meet the current demands for subsidized housing. As of 2003, the number of families in line for Section 8 vouchers was documented at 56,417. There are only 76,803 vouchers in the state of Illinois, and a significant number of public housing agencies that provide Section 8 vouchers stated that their lists were closed, and they would not be opening them for the rest of that year (Rynell 2003). The CHA’s waitlist is among those that are currently closed. From these figures alone, it is evident that the Plan for Transformation is not as promising as its proponents would like to believe.

According to Laurene Heybach of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “more than 260 families (a total of 800 people) were displaced from the proceedings of the Plan for Transformation and sought homeless shelter” (Heybach 2005). That number does not include the scores of former

tenants who had to move back with family members or friends in order to avoid being placed in the streets. One former CHA resident even crossed the line when she and her family moved into a vacant apartment in the Robert Taylor homes on Chicago's south side without permission. When the police found out, they arrested the tenant and the family and friends that had also set up shop in the apartment. When asked about the ordeal, the tenant said that she had to do what was necessary to avoid the streets (Rogal 2000). As a result of the mass destruction of the public housing buildings, it is apparent that there is a mismatch between the availability of housing and the needs of displaced low-income families—there is simply not enough housing to accommodate the displaced.

Although a great majority of original public housing tenants are on waiting lists for Section 8 vouchers, some residents have been successful in obtaining the vouchers and are able to look for apartments in other parts of the city or even the suburbs. However, the process is quite difficult. In addition to the high rents charged in Chicago, some Section 8 tenants are met with opposition and hostility from neighbors and landlords (Thigpen 2002). Thigpen notes that the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing reported that "nearly 75 percent of the city's landlords illegally refuse or rebuff apartment-seeking tenants who present housing vouchers" (Thigpen 2002, 3). Those who are able to overlook the disdainful glares of neighbors and the condescending speech of the landlords have managed to tackle a major obstacle. Sometimes landlords of Section 8 tenants may not even provide regular maintenance and upkeep to those apartments in a timely manner. The experience one woman had with a Section 8 landlord was described by Thigpen: "[The] landlord, she recalls, discouraged her from complaining about rats, telling her, 'You're from Cabrini [Green]; you should be used to rats'" (Thigpen 2002, 3)—as if the tenant's poverty justified criticism and neglect.

While it is not always the case that former public housing tenants are forced to relocate to neighborhoods with less than mediocre buildings, it is not uncommon for these tenants to relocate to the same types of areas from which they moved, primarily because their low incomes limit the extent to which they can really choose where they would like to live. In order to qualify for Section 8, a one-person household must earn no more than \$20,850, and a four-person household must earn no more than \$29,750 (Rogal 1998). Under the Section 8 program, low-income families would be required to pay only the amount of rent equivalent to 30 percent of their income, with the remainder subsidized by the federal government.

With such low incomes, most of the time former public housing tenants are led to low-income, black communities to find housing. As noted in Rogal, a majority of the census tracts in the City receiving CHA families are at least 97 percent black and have per capita incomes of only \$10,000 (Rogal 1998). Equally interesting are the findings of a study conducted by politics professor Paul Fischer of Lake Forrest College that looked at 1,000 public housing families and their relocation patterns. The study showed that "almost 80 percent of relocation families are living in census tracts that are over 90 percent black, and over 90 percent are in census tracts that are under \$15,000 median income." (Socialist Worker Online 2002). This re-concentration of low-income public housing tenants in neighborhoods similar to the ones they were so quickly forced to leave raises the question: *why were they forced to leave in the first place?* Allowing former tenants to re-concentrate in that manner defeats the purposes of *Gautreaux* and the three-for-one rule, or its one-for-one replacement, as well as the goals of the Plan for Transformation to create "mixed income communities." If the CHA is adamant about suddenly forcing these tenants out of the substandard public housing that existed for decades in order to "revitalize" the area, why would it allow tenants to jump right back into that hole of poverty? The intent of the CHA then becomes questionable. Toward what group or groups is the revitalization Plan truly aimed?

Critics use these examples to back their beliefs that City officials are just using the Plan to move poor people around—or rather, out of the way—so that middle-class whites can return to the center, where their downtown jobs and entertainment sources are a quick train ride away. Venkatesh (1997) comments on the revitalization initiatives of HUD by writing:

HUD likes to tout Chicago as a model for public housing reconversion in the rest of the country. But in the current environment, what assurance is there that the displaced tenants will be taken care of? Subsidies for low-income housing are being cut back. At this writing, the 1997 housing bill, calling for the demolition and dilution of public housing projects, has passed the House and is awaiting action in the Senate. The bill would remove large numbers of very poor people from public housing without providing for alternatives. Essentially, it ‘solves’ the public housing problem by evicting many tenants and importing a better class of poor people.

As reported in Claiborne (1999), Rich Wheelock, another critic of the CHA’s Plan for Transformation and a Legal Assistance Foundation Cabrini-Green tenants’ lawyer, suggested that in executing this Plan, the Authority is not really addressing the needs of the people; rather it is acting on the opportunity to seize “prime real estate on the western edge of the downtown residential and commercial” districts and adorn it with condominiums for “higher-income residents.”

As if to reinforce the doubts of skeptics, in February of 2005, newly developed apartments all over the city had gone un-touched, awaiting public housing residents for months after their completion. CHA officials blamed the delay on court mandates establishing strict guidelines for move-in, based on previous court cases such as *Gautreaux* that encourage mixed-income communities, and the one-for-one rule, although that rule had been suspended well before 2005. One redeveloped site, in particular—Lake Park Crescent, along the Lake Michigan waterfront on Chicago’s east side—is struggling to meet the requirements of the courts regarding the income distribution of prospective residents. As of February 2006, the court required that one-half of the public housing units at this development contain families that earn between 50 and 80 percent of the median income. Another rule enforced by federal tax regulations prohibits the Authority from giving apartments to those families earning more than 60 percent of the area’s media income— \$63,800 for a family of four (Olivo 2005). According to Gail Niemann, general counsel of the CHA, “That ends up being a very thin slice [of qualified applicants]” (Olivo 2005).

On a more optimistic note, however, some CHA revitalization efforts have been successfully carried out, and some are currently underway. North Town Village, which is the redevelopment of the former Cabrini-Green site, located at a prime location in Chicago’s west side close to the loop, has already sold out. Most of the 93 market rate homes at this complex sold out within the first month, some at quite expensive prices (Grossman and Lawrence 2001). About half of the units at this site are being sold or rented at market rate. Another site in process of becoming a mixed-income community is the Shakespeare Townhomes in North Kenwood, a neighborhood on Chicago’s southeast side, close to Lake Michigan. These homes, like those at North Town Village, are selling at competitive market prices (63% of the homes have been sold at market rate).

While some apartments and homes at the redeveloped sites have been bought out, some people in their vicinity still have doubts. A contributing editor of Newsweek magazine states, “I don’t think the objection is as crass as ‘we don’t want poor people here,’ or ‘we hate people from the projects.’”

It's about whether my property values are going to hold, whether my kids are going to go to a decent school, whether my wife is going to be able to walk the streets.” (Grossman and Lawrence 2001). Likewise, former public housing tenants are concerned about how they will fare in the new residences. For example, Rhonda White, a former tenant, feels “incarcerated” and “would rather live someplace [she feels] comfortable” (Grossman and Lawrence 2001).

There is no doubt that creating mixed-income communities in the midst of a city in which segregation has such firm historic roots is not an easy task, and some truly doubt its merit. If taken at face value—that is, if the CHA promoted the mere implementation of mixed income neighborhoods, neglecting to provide any additional transitional services to its former public housing residents—the initiatives would surely fail. Rosenbaum and colleagues prove this concept in their discussion of the geography of opportunity, which demonstrates that low-income individuals are better off in mixed income neighborhoods that provided access to services and other resources that serve as platforms to help them gain stability in the socio-economic realm (Rosenbaum 2002). This existence in mixed-income communities would help improve low-income individuals’ sense of self-efficacy, resulting in increased motivation for the individual to succeed. Thus, the immediate and continued provision of strong support programs and services for former public housing tenants in the new mixed-income communities is an essential component of the program. Although it took longer than it should have, the CHA is now very active in providing services for former public housing tenants, and CHA authorities understand the weight of this factor in creating successful mixed-income communities.

The CHA’s revitalization of its properties for the creation of mixed-income communities, with the provision of social support services to those public housing residents moving into these communities, is an impressive step toward the social and economic restructuring of the city. However, the problem that arises concerns the process of this restructuring. In creating these mixed-income communities, the Authority had to demolish more than half of its units in which thousands of tenants resided. The Authority was somewhat remiss in carrying out this portion of its plan. A total of 14,000 units will be lost during this transformation process, and the CHA was not well prepared to handle the “what-ifs” of those tenants who would be left out. Authority officials say that if they could, they would redevelop more units, but the funds simply are not there because the government will not pay for it. This revitalization closely resembles the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe in that the poorest of the poor were left out of the plan. This concept is quite disconcerting, considering that HUD was the organization that initially and so frantically wanted to intervene in this “crisis.” Now, when the time to act has come, there are no funds available.

In order to amend this situation, the City of Chicago, as well as HUD, must quickly create funds for affordable housing in mixed-income, mixed-race communities for the tenants it displaced. One potential method for raising such funds is the imposition of a developer fee or dedication requirement for developers who want to build in or around the former public housing sites. Developers that choose to incorporate affordable housing into their sites could be rewarded with density bonuses. The Balanced Development Coalition of Chicago is pushing for such inclusionary zoning methods. Another potential method is to provide property tax incentives to landlords with well-maintained affordable housing, while giving tax penalties to those with poorly maintained units. (Nyden 2003). A traditional method for ensuring that the stock of low-income housing is not clustered in one area of the city is to update current zoning to include a variety of uses—multi-family with single-family, retail, and commercial.

While some of the above methods may spark controversy among NIMBYists and even political

figures in the City, something must be done quickly. It is not acceptable that former public housing residents are living in conditions similar to the ones they left when the intent was to create better opportunities and conditions for them. By creating relatively few spaces for public housing residents, the CHA may pacify some supporters of public housing and protect itself from major lawsuits. But if these tenants are simply left in similar low-income communities in the suburbs or in areas further away from their old sites, then the goal of the CHA may well have been gentrification rather than “transformation.”

Looking back on the past mistakes the City has made in public housing decisions, this revitalization effort marks a crucial point in time, and officials could potentially use this Plan as a model for cities struggling with the problems of segregation and concentrated poverty across the country. However, in solving these problems, authorities must be careful to include every detail of the situation—its origins, processes, potential weaknesses, and impacts on future generations. Mayor Daley, in his Inaugural Address of 1999, strengthened this idea:

We have challenged the old ways of thinking and fashioned new ways of solving problems...and today, Chicago is moving forward on many fronts. But there is always more to be done. We can't claim victory until every community is liberated...and we can't claim victory until every neighborhood enjoys a good quality of life.

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