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THE PERSISTENT DESIGN-POLITICS OF RACE

Power and ideology in American public housing redevelopment

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Introduction: The design-politics of public housing

The long, troubled saga of low-income public housing in the US can be narrated as a tale of race and space, brought together to advance certain ideological preferences while resisting particular cultural practices. This story is made both tangible and visible by close examination of the roles played by architecture and urbanism in supporting such deeply politicized agendas. Subsidized housing for low-income residents is more than a matter of laws and policies; it entails controlling and redistributing space. Decisions about public housing reveal the confluence of ideological assumptions about social structure and environmental determinist beliefs about spatial order. Decisions about where to build what kinds of housing developments for which kinds of people permeated the processes and practices of constructing public housing in the mid-20th Century. Power and ideology, expressed through racialized class-based hierarchies, clearly colored the initial emergence of places known as *the projects* – the colloquial term adopted by both residents and the general public to describe low-income public housing developments, places that have principally housed non-white families at least since the 1960s. Importantly, the same ideological hierarchies continue to inform contemporary practices that raze and replace such benighted realms with new developments referred to as *mixed-income communities* – a blanket term conflating a variety of income mixes that pair returning public-housing households with wealthier neighbors, often including the re-importation of white households. Here again, once attuned to the ways it gets expressed, we can read racialized decision-making in the resulting cultural landscapes. This chapter explores such socio-spatial convergence through the lens of what I term *design-politics*, focusing upon the racialized redevelopment of public housing in the US since 1990.

Deploying a term like *design-politics* entails embracing definitions of *design* and *politics* that are, simultaneously, focused and inclusive. Design, for me, includes both *products* – buildings of various types, as well as the spaces between them and the way buildings meet their neighbors – as well as *processes* – encompassing finance, policy, community engagement and governance. Looking at the inhabited built world through a design-politics lens requires us to take these process categories as an intrinsic part of what counts as design. This necessary engagement with

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the views and positionalities of other stakeholders – rather than narrowing a definition of design to connote merely the aesthetic vision of a designer or design team – helps build the bridge to politics. Politics, for me, is the negotiation of civic order between the governors and the governed. It is about power – who holds it, who contests it and how this gets exercised. But it also matters what that power *looks* like: how is authority enacted on the landscape in ways that are mute but viscerally visible?

That last question bridges design and politics, a bridge that is typographically rendered as the hyphen in design-politics. In other words, my argument is that if we uncover the political assumptions encoded into design, we will see that design itself – especially when the subject is public housing – is also wordlessly expressing views about such matters as community engagement, governance, policy and finance. And, within those same design-inflected realms, design silently helps transport ideologies. In short: objects encode objectives.

In the design-politics of American public housing, ideologies matter in multiple dimensions. The forms and norms of this housing are products of complex cultural belief systems advancing moral judgments about the primacy of heteronormative family structures, supporting the aspirational aims of homeownership while demonizing renters and naturalizing the operations of racial capitalism. By penalizing characteristics dismissed as socially or politically deviant by what Black feminist scholar Akira Drake Rodriguez calls "white supremacist spatial logics," the development and redevelopment of public housing demonstrate the complicity of planners and designers in the racialized production of the 20th and 21st Century American city.[1]

Structure and methods for detecting racialized design-politics

Structurally and methodologically, this chapter collects, repurposes and extends a set of analyses of public housing development and redevelopment that I conducted over the last 30 years in Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco and New York City. Drawing on hundreds of interviews with public housing residents, designers, developers, lawyers, social service providers, community activists and housing officials, this larger body of work traced the evolving ways race and poverty have been managed by a variety of governance constellations in various American cities. These interviews are brought into dialogue with the drawings, representations and physical built realities of constructed places. I do this to seek a fuller multi-perspective understanding of how and why public housing projects were created and how and why they have subsequently been torn down and redeveloped. What does it mean to inhabit, visit or resist such places? In what follows, I bring my own work into dialogue with others who study the redevelopment phase of these complex public housing sagas, introducing some of the mechanisms by which a design-politics lens can focus attention on the ways that racial and class hierarchies exemplified in public housing have been exacerbated through the silent power of architectural and urban placemaking.

In recent decades – accelerating recently – there has been belated but extensive attention given to ways the history and current practices of architecture and urbanism are inextricably bound up with white supremacy and structural racism. This engagement has taken the form of analysis of specific buildings, building types, exhibitions and urban-scale city designs, and also included examination of discriminatory labor practices and segregated environments. From single-family homes to skyscrapers, scholars and journalists excavate the motives of designers and their sponsors and endeavor to ask ever more probing questions about how both monumental and quotidian aspects of the built environment are received by the diverse publics that encounter these ideologically freighted products.[2] Deployment of a design-politics lens continues this larger quest. In examining multiple instances of design-politics-in-action, I emphasize five particular aspects:

1. The racialized design-politics of implementation: what changes along the way?
2. The racialized design-politics of welcome: who feels included?
3. The racialized design-politics of the unit mix: which households are wanted?
4. The racialized design-politics of curtailing vistas: whose views matter?
5. The racialized design-politics of incorporated exclusion: who feels resisted?

Before turning to focus on the redevelopment phase of public housing, it is important to underscore some of the ways that racialized design-politics played out during the earlier development phases of this housing.

Developing public housing: Implementing a racialized design-politics

During the mid-20th Century, local municipal governments in most American cities introduced large housing projects – targeted exclusively to the poor – on a racially segregated basis, in advance of civil rights challenges to such practices. This happened as one part of a larger system of legislation, policy directives and design practices shaping patterns of investment in cities. Combined with a racialized system of redlining that signaled declining areas of racial minority occupancy that lenders should avoid, federal government programs and policies also drove patterns of disinvestment.[3] Undergirding all this, early housing policies both implicitly and explicitly rewarded certain kinds of households – small, heteronormative, two-parent families with stable employment histories – while resisting (or actively displacing) households judged to be too large (either because they had 'too many' children, included multiple generations, or contained unrelated individuals), or contained children born out of wedlock. Architects and their clients avoided the need to house large or extended families by choosing to build apartments with fewer bedrooms.[4] The ideal of the small nuclear family, both explicitly through selection criteria and implicitly through the sizing and design of apartments, conjoined spatial standards with social standards.

Taken together, especially when city leaders built public housing as replacement for cleared areas judged to be "slums," mid-20th Century tenant selection processes sought to replace displaced slum-dwellers – a world of immigrants, extended families and boarders – with a more ideologically palatable type of household seen as deserving of government largesse and unlikely to need such support for very long. Policymakers – pressured by local real estate interests that regarded government housing subsidies as anathema to free market operations – intended public housing to be a temporary waystation. Most early public housing served white households, viewed as part of a 'temporarily submerged' middle class and soon able to move onward and upward toward the 'American Dream' of owning a single-family home.[5]

In some cities, such as Atlanta and New Orleans, this meant that public housing development itself contributed to the segregation of neighborhoods that were once more racially integrated.[6] In other cities, such as Chicago, city officials used the siting of public housing, in combination with the routing of new highways, to reinforce existing racial boundaries – overlaying a *second ghetto* on top of the first.[7] Other cities used public housing to segregate on both an ethnic and racial basis: San Francisco built Chinese-only projects; San Antonio assigned whites, Mexicans and Blacks into separate developments; Boston targeted separate developments to particular white ethnic groups, favoring the Irish, while displacing other ethnicities.[8] In sum, public housing construction often involved razing slums that housed diverse populations and replacing them with uni-racial households composed almost entirely of two-parent households headed by US citizens.

Architecturally, the early public housing projects shared many similarities. Most were low-rise brick structures arranged around semi-enclosed courts during the 1930s and 1940s, featuring more open superblock constructions during the postwar public housing resurgence in the 1950s.[9] Whatever the physical similarities, the accelerated racial sorting of the city followed the unstated white supremacist spatial logic allocating non-white projects to the most disinvested areas of the cities.[10] Even as public housing proponents sought to find the worthiest among the needy to reward with modern dwellings, other policies undermined any sense of uplift.

This initial heady phase of reward and waystation did not last long. By the late 1950s or early 1960s, depending on the city, old ideological preferences for such selective collectives grudgingly and fitfully gave way to a broader embrace of the increasingly more-impoverished households that now demanded entry to public housing from waiting lists. Civil rights pressures prevented housing authorities from confining occupancy to two-parent households headed by a man and forced these local agencies to stop reserving some developments solely for white occupancy. Gradually, but inexorably, old ideological preferences for a certain kind of "deserving poor"[11] yielded to a new target demographic – the welfare-receiving poorest of the poor, who were increasingly also members of racial and ethnic minority groups. With this shift of beneficiary, public housing became more of a coping mechanism than a reward. By the end of the 1960s, acknowledging the economic desperation of those seeking entry into public housing, the federal government amended legislation to tie public housing rent payments to no more than 25% of tenant income (later raised to 30%). This made it possible, and appealing, for increasingly poor households to afford public housing. As this happened, public housing authorities faced shortfalls in rent receipts, coupled with a lack of adequate operating subsidies. This caused deferred maintenance, leading to increasingly poor living conditions. Public housing became widely viewed as housing of last resort.[12]

As public housing came to be associated with politically marginalized populations of the minority poor, new investment disappeared, yielding a situation where redressing deferred maintenance alone would cost tens of billions of dollars. Since the 1990s, in the absence of such a large influx of cash, redevelopment efforts have proceeded on a much more piecemeal basis. Public housing came to be seen as the poster child for concentrated poverty – and, indeed, nine of the ten poorest census tracts in the US were dominated by public housing projects, inhabited chiefly by African-Americans.[13] This prompted calls to remake such developments in ways that could attract a broader mixture of incomes. In turn, this meant city leaders and their developer partners gravitated toward those sites that offered the highest chance of enticing renters or homeowners who could afford to pay market rates, thereby encouraging state-sponsored gentrification.[14]

This process of reimagining the target demographic for public housing reverted to an earlier area of racialized ideological preferences. As urban public housing authorities redeveloped their projects, they typically limited the right of low-income households to return after redevelopment.[15] The selectivity of the earliest era of public housing admission returned with a vengeance in the 21st Century.

Redeveloping public housing: Racialized design-politics persists

Over the last 30 years, nearly all large public housing authorities with substantial older portfolios have faced the need to redevelop these projects. Once again, their design decisions combined space and race, linking the presumed panacea of 'mixed-income' redevelopment projects to an ongoing racial politics aimed at restoring mainstream ideological norms while resisting expressions of non-white identities.[16]

Proponents of mixed-income approaches typically put forth four kinds of rationales for such investments. The presence of higher-income residents is said to provide (1) increased social capital for low-income residents; (2) direct or indirect role modeling of social norms for work and behavior; (3) informal social control leading to safer and more orderly communities for everyone; and (4) gains for the broader community through enhanced engagement of political and market forces.[17] Researchers assessing inhabited mixed-income communities have consistently found little evidence for the first two kinds of postulated gain – scant signs of instrumentally productive cross-income interaction and slight indication that such communities help bridge racial divides or promote ties between renters and homeowners. Researchers find somewhat more empirical support for the third proposition, but note that greater informal social control may be more the result of stricter management practices than resident action. The fourth notion garners the most consistent corroboration: attracting higher-income individuals often generates more resources for the neighborhood, though this may also encourage gentrification that prices out low-income residents.[18]

In what follows, I provide some examples of redevelopment stories – both from my own work and from that of others – that are broadly consistent with such findings. Moreover, I argue these rationales for income-mixing entail more than policymaking; they are also matters of design. Mixing across race, income and tenure status occurs only in environments of welcome and trust. By contrast, many kinds of design and programming decisions quietly work against such possibilities for inclusion – and often exacerbate tensions.

Importantly for the idea of design-politics, in the 1990s the federal government's Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) teamed up with Congress for the New Urbanism – both informally and, often, formally – to execute the HOPE VI program. HOPE VI, an acronym currently translated as Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere, constituted a concerted design-politics effort to resurrect the fortunes of public housing. It did so both literally – by importing higher-income residents (often including homeowners) – and figuratively, by dramatically recasting its architectural presence. Once HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros signed on to the *Charter of the New Urbanism* in 1996, and his secretarial successor Andrew Cuomo copublished a booklet entitled *Principles of Inner City Neighborhood Design: HOPE VI and the New Urbanism* in 2000, the ideological marriage of policy and aesthetics was consummated.[19] Instead of the stripped-modernist masonry masses of mid-century slabs and towers, the neo-traditional animus behind much of the New Urbanist aesthetic nostalgically recalled a pre-modern era, deploying an urban and suburban mashup. Gone were CIAM-informed superblocks with their vast open spaces; now, once again, buildings could be arranged along streets and semi-private courtyards. Seen most broadly, the architectural and the cultural codes of the new developments shifted backward in time and space. They returned to streetscapes more reminiscent of an earlier image of middle-class America, replete with porches or even white picket fences, as typified in Figure 17.1. It is a new round of environmental determinism, one that – just like the slum clearance era of the mid-20th Century – once again masks the accompanying social transformation of the community. In other words, the architecture and urbanism of the neighborhood changes, but it is not that old residents are transformed by their new surroundings. Instead, just like the processes that created the projects in the first place, once the neighborhood is cleared, few of the old residents are chosen to return.

Nationally, during the mid-1990s, the HOPE VI program dropped any requirement to replace lost public housing units on a one-for-one basis.[20] Retaining such a mandate clearly constituted a disincentive to developers, while eliminating it facilitated pursuit of a wide vari-

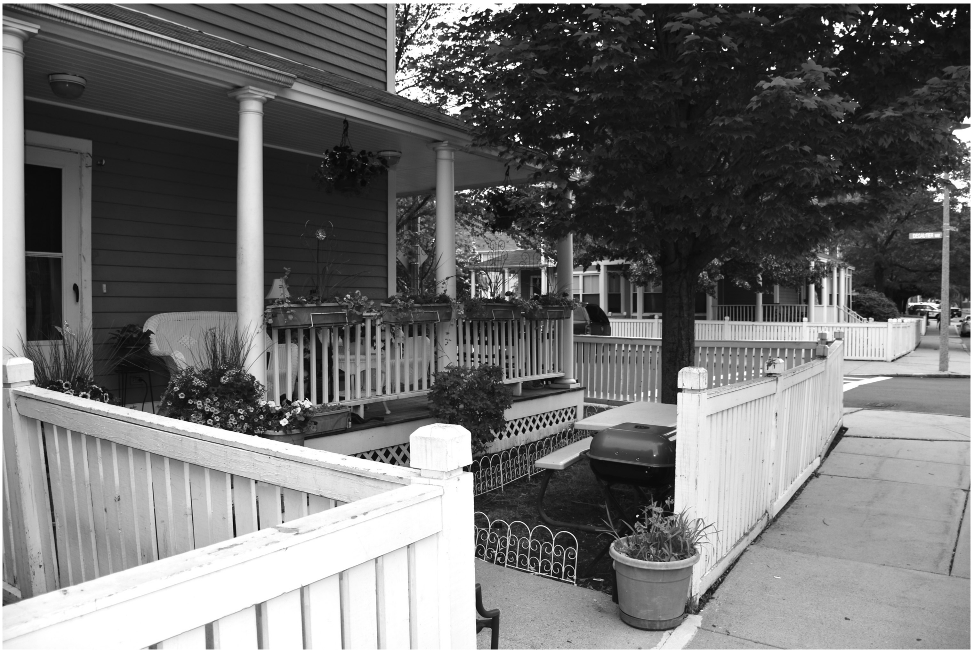

Figure 17.1 Boston's Orchard Gardens development replaced the 1940s-era Orchard Park project with a New Urbanist alternative. Instead of three-story brick slabs containing multiple apartments, this successor to HOPE VI neighborhood featured many wood-frame houses, each with a private entrance, a porch and front yard, separated from the sidewalk by a white picket fence. Photograph by Lawrence J. Vale, June 2016.

ety of income mixes, as well as efforts to introduce homeownership options.[21] Especially with market-sensitive for-profit developers calling the shots, developers and their site management partners introduced screening practices and rule systems intended to satisfy investors. Taken in combination, the choices of apartment sizes coupled with the choices made during tenant selection not surprisingly meant most public housing redevelopment efforts displaced most former residents. Some left happily, offered portable vouchers that would enable them to deploy their subsidy elsewhere in the private sector, while all too many others signaled a wish to return but were rebuffed – or, if they did manage to return, felt marginalized and resented by new systems of renewed ideological preference for smaller, whiter households, often coupled with homeownership. Because so many of these real estate transformations were also transformations of class and race, the resultant tensions carried particular import. And, as with the original designs and policies that merged when first creating public housing, these redevelopment efforts also used architecture and urban design as a silent expression of power politics.

The racialized design-politics of implementing public housing redevelopment

Typically, the world of design is seen as a binary world of 'before' and 'after' but this misses the design-politics of the *during*. Architectural plans and other representations are iterated not only within the realm of design firms and their professional partners; this iterative process is also a protracted relationship with one or more communities. The *during* is not equivalent to construction; it also includes the variety of design solutions that have to get publicly presented or privately shared, often in the form of drawings, renderings and models. That design process can be quite fraught, both with existing public housing residents and with outside neighbors – and within the design team itself.

Politics enters design through multiple portals. As a process, iterating a design begins with a set of assumptions, stated or not, about who will inhabit, use or visit the resultant place. Such assumptions may be rooted in the beliefs and preferences of the designer, but are also almost inevitably skewed by the agenda of the developer-client or even, in the case of multi-family housing, the future manager. Unfortunately, designs rarely get coproduced with public housing communities. Mid-course adjustments to designs occur for myriad reasons, and iteration of ideas is intrinsic to the very meaning of design as a practice.[22] Often, if not always, adjustments come in response to financial exigencies, with shifts often explained by the seemingly rational term *value engineering*. But we can also ask: which values – and whose values – are being engineered?

Many things change during the course of implementation. Often, early proposals prove to be over budget or face community backlash. Especially in the case of public housing, such backlash will often come from a community that has previously been promised many things, but carries deeply rooted mistrust about the institutions that have failed to deliver, manage and maintain their previous housing. Often the community backlash is not about design decisions of a narrow sort, but about the social, political and cultural *implications* of those decisions. Whose open views are now to be blocked? Will different income groups be segregated into architecturally distinct housing types? Who gets to decide how the public realm of the community will be programmed if priorities differ? Which people from the old neighborhood get to come back, and which do not? A decision to build a project in a single phase may sound like a perfectly logical way to maximize construction efficiency or bulk purchasing of materials or a necessary way to handle a narrow financial time window to gain Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. Yet this is only the way it is seen by professionals. To residents who may have previously been promised a multi-phase project that permitted them to remain on-site during construction, a change in phasing strategy will not sound like a logical financial approach; it will feel like a deliberate act of forced displacement and a profound breach of trust.[23] These, then, are the kinds of design-politics pressure points that may trigger contestation during implementation.

Choosing [in]visible neighbors: The racialized design-politics of tot lots, dog parks and apartment types

The redevelopment of Chicago's Cabrini-Green public housing project exemplifies racialized design-politics in many dimensions. At its peak, it contained 3600 apartments built over several phases: Cabrini rowhouses erected in 1942, two phases of Cabrini Extension that opened in the 1950s, and a final phase, the William Green Homes, completed in 1962.[24] It took two decades to build Cabrini-Green; the effort to redevelop it has taken even longer. This began in the early 1990s, at the dawn of the HOPE VI public housing redevelopment program, with the last tower demolished only in 2011. More than a decade later, Cabrini-Green's reinvention as mixed-income housing remains protracted and contested. The stated goal is to spread low-income apartments into the broader neighborhood, with mixed-income housing projects constructed both on-site and on the fringes. Three decades into the process, there are spaces for just a few hundred ex-Cabrini households, instead of 3600. Typically, the new developments each reserve between 10% and 30% of their units for former Cabrini residents, with the remainder of their residents either paying market rates or assisted with much more modest subsidies (Figure 17.2).[25]

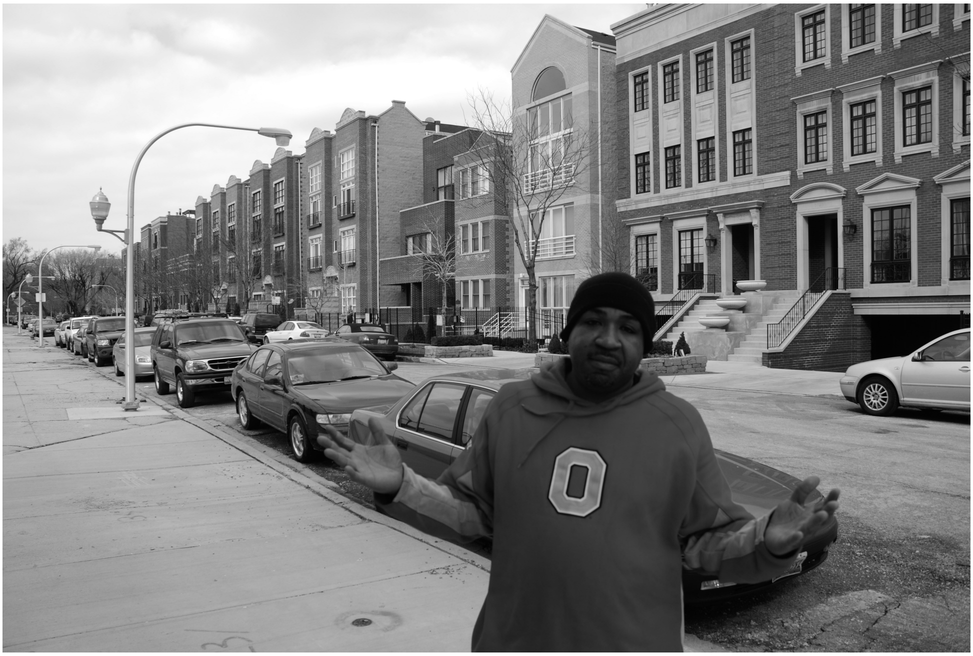

Figure 17.2 Immediately following an interview with me, a Black male former Cabrini-Green resident wearing a red Ohio State sweatshirt with bold letter "O" posed on a sidewalk across the street from his new home in the Mohawk North mixed-income development. At Mohawk North, the property management company screened 78 Cabrini families to choose those 16 units reserved for public housing tenants. This man, whose street name is Pookie, says he is glad for the apartment but remains highly skeptical about the mix and the constraints of the management's rules. Standing with his arms spread, palms up, he indicated his frustration with the changed neighborhood. Photograph by Lawrence J. Vale, taken with permission following compensated interview, March 2009.

Immediately adjacent to the now-demolished William Green Homes is the mixed-income community of North Town Village (Figures 17.2 and 17.3). The design-politics of the winning plan, by Holsten-Kenard, commendably chose not to separate out the various income groups. As developer Peter Holsten said in an interview, "Our site plan showed everybody living next door to everybody. So you had residents who had bought a fairly expensive townhome, and in the townhome right next to him was one of the [public housing] replacement units." The mixing approach did "cause some tensions," Holsten noted, since "you're putting pretty different people next to each other."[26] At base, the differences had to do not just with class, but with race, family composition and life cycle stage. The 'typical townhome buyer' was a white two-income childless couple, whereas the returning Cabrini-Green residents were all African-American, many of them single parent households with multiple children. The Holsten-Kenard team remained committed to meeting a quota of 30% of the apartments set aside for returning Cabrini-Green households, but struggled to find families to fill these. In many cases, households simply mistrusted the deal, based on decades of false starts and broken promises. In other cases, they worried that the new forms of housing would come with new norms of screening and behavioral expectations, seen as ideologically skewed to favor white middle-class preferences. At base, they worried about both eligibility and fit. Holsten acknowledged the extreme difficulty of finding

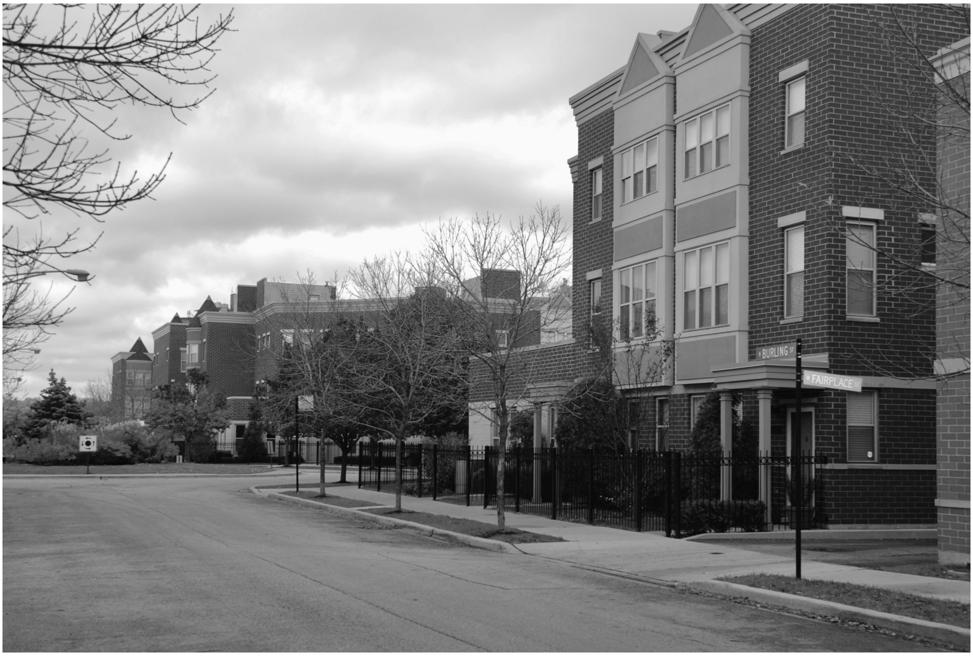

Figure 17.3 View of a streetscape of North Town Village adjacent to Cabrini-Green public housing in Chicago, featuring three-story townhouse style buildings, with mostly brick facing and neo-traditional images such as cone-shaped roofs, columned porticos and ornamental metal fencing separating small front yards. In the middle distance is a densely planted traffic circle. Photograph by Lawrence J. Vale, October 2009.

mutually acceptable matches: there were "only about one in five that work out OK."[27] Design-politics explains some of this perceived misfit.

The winning bid from Holsten and Kenard, according to the interview with Peter Holsten, featured tot lots and "a splash area for the hot summer days." Yet, Holsten wistfully notes, "that stuff was all shelved" at the behest of the Kenard firm, Holsten's for-profit development partner in charge of the market-rate housing. As Holsten puts it, Kenard's Hal Lichterman "really worried about not being able to sell the for-sale units with kids playing out in everybody's faces." Similarly, Holsten "wanted to put park benches around the traffic circle, but [Lichterman] was adamant that these things would be magnets for lots of people that would be perceived by prospective buyers as a problem."[28] Instead of the tot lots that appealed to Cabrini families with multiple young children, the design team executed a cultural switcheroo: they substituted a dog park, targeted to appeal to childless white couples and their puppies. My point here is that it is possible to look at an early drawing of a tot lot and a splash park, then look at the as-built place that instead has a dog park and no places for kids to play, and ask a design-politics question whose answer reveals the underlying tensions of the development partnership, the clash of conflicting conceptions of community and the power dynamics of decision-making. Nobody actually had to verbalize, "We don't want your large Black family here." The design-politics did that for them.

The racialized design-politics of welcome

Programming decisions that, disproportionately, quietly cater to young white households with small dogs do more than signal welcome to one set of desired new neighbors. Simultaneously, these are also racial and ideological decisions about what *not* to do: promote alternative design signals that might attract Black households. As landscape architect Walter Hood argues in *Black Landscapes Matter*, the contested history of Black life spaces exists in a state of "constant erasure."[29] When it comes to redeveloping predominantly Black public housing landscapes, erasure of the places that supported past conviviality seems an unspoken part of the design-politics agenda. This agenda includes a series of visual cues that help orient and sort who gets welcomed and who does not.

Sociologist and geographer Brandi Thompson Summers writes of the "spatial aesthetics of race," by which she means that "race operates as an aesthetic language and a visual logic" that enables "blackness, but not necessarily Black people," to "be cool."[30] This operates by branding spaces as 'Black' as "an aesthetic to draw in tourists, customers, capital, and authenticity"[31] – just Black enough to attract whites without becoming scary. As Summers puts it, "[b]lackness is transformed to become palatable and consumable while some of its edginess remains."[32] One result of this, she writes, is "in gentrifying neighborhoods, poor and working-class Black residents experience cultural displacement, in which they feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in areas where they have lived and roamed for years."[33] Similar instances of racial capitalism play out in Latin communities. In *Abstract Barrios*, Latinx Studies scholar Johana Londoño documents a long history of "brokered Latinization" and "highly regulated and mediated inclusion" through which white elites maintain aesthetic and political control in changing neighborhoods by deploying such means as "the spatial politics of racialized color."[34] She argues that colorful facades "attempt to downplay the injuries of gentrification by gesturing toward cultural diversity," even as such gestures become "a spectacle of neoliberal urbanism whereby once-marginalized people and their cultures are distilled and sanitized for their exchange value."[35] This kind of design-politics, she concludes, is "not to be mistaken for the social belonging of low-income residents of color in cities."[36] In such contexts, the rebranding of public housing aimed at income-mixing and developed by for-profit corporate entities is not the place for anything as politically challenging as what architect Sekou Cooke characterizes and catalogues as *Hip-Hop Architecture* – which he defines as "Hip-Hop culture in built form."[37] Of course, this too can be appropriated.

The racialized design-politics of the unit mix

Design enters into the construction of meaning through basic decisions about how many units of what size get built in which particular configuration. It is design-politics when a housing organization or developer chooses to emphasize one- or two-bedroom apartments rather than four-bedroom units, since such decisions imply very different community visions and support vastly different constituencies. In New Orleans in the early 2000s, for instance, the for-profit developer of the mixed-income community of River Garden (built to replace the vast superblocks of the former St. Thomas project) explicitly decided not to include any apartments with large numbers of bedrooms.[38] Former public housing residents seeking to return wanted such apartments, but developer Pres Kabacoff clearly did not want those people. He did not need to say this publicly, though. Instead, the plans for the redevelopment simply off-loaded all four-bedroom units to future off-site locations – contingent on obtaining additional funding and on employing a different developer. Predictably, those apartments were never built.

When I asked Kabacoff directly about offing the large apartments, he was only too eager to decode the design-politics for me: "I didn't want those on site. I thought that would be too many people. This may sound callous, but the trick in this thing is to keep market-rate people."[39] The easy elision between talking about market-rate units and "market-rate people," especially in the context of income mixes that carry both class and racial distinctions, underscores the close but uneasy relationship of architectural and social structures.

Views and viewpoints: The racialized design-politics tradeoffs of curtailing vistas

In 2012, during the latter part of Michael Bloomberg's mayoral administration, New Yorkers acknowledged overwhelming unmet capital needs at New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing developments, totaling tens of billions of dollars. To address some of the shortfall, the mayor proposed in-filling a few superblock public housing projects located on high-value land. This would provide additional housing, much of it market-rate, and thereby raise substantial funds needed to renovate the old public housing – all to be accomplished without displacing existing residents. As deployed on 14 sites across eight different projects in Manhattan, the overall Land Lease Initiative could generate an estimated US$30–50 million per year in revenue – a steady stream that could, in turn, be used to leverage financing for the capital needs and maintenance costs of 10,500 public housing units, both fixing and preserving them. At the same time, the new development would create nearly 800 units of additional affordable housing (targeted to low-income households) and generate 3000 units of market-rate housing in desirable neighborhoods. Seemingly a 'win-win' solution, it nonetheless proved highly problematic to implement. A design-politics lens, focused on the example of the Governor Alfred E. Smith Houses in Lower Manhattan, demonstrates what went wrong.[40]

The Smith Houses, opened in 1953 near the East River, contain nearly 2000 apartments, distributed across a dozen 17-story towers on 22 acres (nearly nine hectares). Proponents of the Land Lease plan eagerly pointed to the 'underdeveloped' land between the buildings.[41] They salivated at the development opportunities available upon such seemingly wasted space in a neighborhood with extremely high land values. Much of NYCHA public housing fell well short of the maximum allowable building volume permitted under existing regulations, so the infill could occur on an *as-of-right* basis, with "no need for rezoning or waivers or special permits."[42] Seen as a zoning issue, city officials pounced. Yet this viewpoint entirely missed the perspective of public housing residents (and their immediate neighbors) who held such land in high value for very different reasons. At Smith Houses, for instance, one parcel proposed to be leased for construction housed an annual 'family day.' Similarly, various other parcels on the Manhattan sites proposed for Land Lease infill contained playgrounds, basketball courts, baseball fields and resident parking lots. In a classic disconnect between *use value* and *exchange value*, the local population viewed 'underdeveloped' land as having important uses in their daily lives. [43]

Seemingly oblivious to that sensitive context, NYCHA and its partners unfortunately presented the proposal in the most impolitic way imaginable. Or, in my terms, the diagrams shown as part of Zoning and Design Guidelines that were intended to help 'sell' the Land Lease idea could not have imbedded design into politics (and politics into design) more effectively – or more confrontationally. It is hard to say which version is worse – the one showing a pair of solidly rendered 500-foot towers, revealing what the block could look like if built out to the maximum allowable massing – or the more transparent version, reminding viewers that the dwarfed and trapped public housing tower labeled #3 would have its views entirely obstructed. The small notation attesting that these visions met the requirement to have a 60-foot setback from all other towers hardly seemed reassuring. Modernist site planning offered low-income families the promise of light, air and recreation as compensation for cramped apartments, a healthful update to a previous generation's dark tenements. Now, however, revised site plans proposed to put the poor out of sight, prompting renewed fears of gentrification and displacement. Clearly, there is both a design-politics of tower blocks and a design-politics of blocked towers.

At base, such design representations triggered a PR problem, for both the mayor and NYCHA, a problem inseparable from issues of both class and race. Taking outraged note of the plan to dwarf high-rise public housing with new skyscrapers, the *New York Daily News* headline described the juxtaposition: "High and Mighty NYCHA: Luxury Towers on Leased Land 'Look Down' on Projects."[44] Smith Houses tenant association president Aixa Torres complained about these "appalling" plans, asserting that residents "won't have any sun." She argued that "[t]hey're going to literally squeeze my residents like they're roaches," and continued by saying that "then they're going to build this huge, beautiful complex. You want to talk about the 'Tale of Two Cities'?"[45]

With the election of Bill de Blasio as New York City's mayor in late 2013, the Bloomberg-era Land Lease Initiative ended. That said, Bloomberg's successors allowed it to be rebooted and rebranded, launching a new variant that emphasized the addition of more 'affordable' housing rather than market rate. The more politically progressive de Blasio knew it would need to be marketed with a more sensitive design-politics. Even so, as recent work by urban planner Valerie E. Stahl shows, the redevelopment efforts continued to be contentious.[46] Eventually, a few initiatives moved forward, though the plan for Smith Houses did not. As such, it retains its views, its public housing residents – and still needs more repairs.

The racialized design-politics of incorporated exclusion

In *Integrating the Inner City*, social scientists Robert Chaskin and Mark Joseph weave together a series of closely observed accounts of life in several mixed-income housing developments built to replace public housing projects on the South and West sides of Chicago. As its conceptual core, the book contributes the novel idea of "incorporated exclusion" to explain the tense relations that result when public housing residents get treated as less-than-full participants in their own mixed-income community.[47] Their notion has a parallel in historian Keenanga-Yamahtta Taylor's concept of "predatory inclusion" used to describe ill-fated efforts to engage Blacks in homeownership initiatives.[48] Both of these signal racialized forms of ambiguous and destructive partial engagement. To Chaskin and Joseph, incorporated exclusion occurs when "physical integration reproduces marginality and leads to withdrawal and alienation rather than engagement and inclusion."[49] My own community-based interviewing in public housing redevelopments around the country very much resonates with this finding, so I deploy it as a framing device here. Close observation of the power dynamic in these communities reveals the limits of the mixing and demonstrates ways that low-income households of color face disempowering new forms of marginalization.

Chaskin and Joseph note Chicago's mixed-income replacements for public housing typically deploy New Urbanist planning and design principles, retrofitting vast superblocks with grid-oriented pedestrian-friendly streetscapes that purportedly encourage sociability. These new neighborhoods with their diverse communities do this quite selectively, however. The rhetoric is about mixing but the reality places "greater emphasis on design that contributes to 'defensible' space and less on creating public and civic space."[50] This design signaling, in turn, becomes an extension of the management ethos for such communities. Rule systems about use and gathering are overseen by new forms of privatization, including "the policing of formal management of common space to minimize spontaneous socializing that might lead to (real or perceived) problems."[51] At one mixed-income building containing both low-income renters and affluent condo owners, a few of the relocated public housing residents chose to socialize in some of the lobby seating, a shared amenity; when condo owners objected, the management responded by removing all the furniture. After protracted negotiation extracted the compromise of time limits on occupancy of the seats, the developer returned the furniture.[52] The design of the space welcomed interaction, but the complex class and racial politics of defining The Commons suggested otherwise.

In such mixed-income settings, Chaskin and Joseph observe, the alleged focus on *community* meant treating a community "as a target of intervention rather than a unit of action, emphasizing planning, design principles and the primacy of development professionals rather than mobilization of community-level actors, processes and resources."[53] By focusing on market-oriented exchange values, the approach deemphasizes the use value of these places in the daily lives of low-income residents. These regulatory regimes impose ideological strictures when they seek to keep their developments attractive to those paying market rents by enforcing middle-class norms.[54] In Chicago, as in Pres Kabacoff's New Orleans, the trick is to *keep market-rate people*. The design-politics of these moves is facilitated by the layout of the housing, which renders particular behaviors both visible and audible. It is not just incivilities that may generate widespread disdain – "noise late at night, littering, loud and obscene language, unruly youths (propping open doors, running through hallways, damaging property, leaving trash in their wake)."[55] It is also a more ideologically driven matter of regulating perfectly legal cultural practices and preferences that some find innocuous and others deem offensive – "storing personal items on balconies or hanging laundry in plain view, washing or repairing cars in the street, and barbecuing in public."[56] Or, as a public housing resident leader told Chaskin and Joseph, "[t]hey have a problem with us standing on the corner. We're colored. That's what we do. We gather in groups. We don't have to be [doing] no drug activity or nothing like that for us to gather around."[57] Another resident commented: "They want us to sit in the back because they thought it's unsightly to have us out here, but we don't see anybody in the back. In the front you can see people coming and going."[58] Management deploys surveillance technology to keep its own watch. At Oakwood Shores, they installed 150 cameras, trained on rental buildings and exempting those buildings housing those who own their units. Moreover, those cameras trigger responses to particular behaviors. If "groups of people [are] standing around for a certain time," this will generate "recorded messages warning them away."[59]

Fundamentally, Chaskin and Joseph found that mixed-income communities struggled to develop viable social practices in the aftermath of razed public housing. The core of the concern, they learned, "focuses on the very presence of people congregating openly for leisure or with no apparent purpose."[60] The management seeks to cater to those residents who are quick to discern 'disorder' and wish to carefully delimit what could be viewed more innocuously by others as "normative enjoyment of community space."[61]

Anthropologist Catherine Fennell's ethnography of Chicago's Westhaven redevelopment – which also happens to be one of the sites studied by Joseph and Chaskin – clarifies the racial dimensions even more pointedly. In *Last Project Standing*, she observes that even those who returned to live in this new development that replaced their piece of the Henry Horner Homes suffered from "an unusual kind of displacement."[62] As they uneasily navigated the transformation from Horner to Westhaven, they anxiously experienced fluctuating glimpses of once-familiar worlds.[63] Epitomized by what Fennell calls "project heat" – the amenity of abundant winter heat from central boilers that had become a bodily expectation for long-term residents, this was summarily and expensively lost following redevelopment once it became individually metered and no longer included in the rent. In some cases, Fennell found, public housing residents in arrears "came to owe more for utilities than they did for rent," causing credit problems and utility disconnections. Such "sensory politics that insists on intractable bodily habits, tastes, or dispositions," are linked to memories of the past warmth of a solidly built project, and continued to divide old residents from new neighbors.[64]

Moreover, during hot summer weather, many of the new residents who came from socio-spatial traditions of backyard socializing misunderstood and resented the way ex-Horner tenants socialized 'on front':

> Fronts became spaces in which to dry clothes, to cool down, and to talk with friends. Beyond that, though, frontward gazes, blaring car horns, raised voices, sweeping gestures, and flying rocks allowed them to amplify and expand their own and others' physical presences into space in ways that made being on front an important and pleasurable part of renewing existing social ties and extending new ones.[65]

To some, 'fronts' offered the perpetual possibility of social encounter; to others who had been raised differently, such actions just seemed confrontational. Management mandated that "transitioning Horner residents" must "retreat to the backyards if their units had them or to nearby city parks if they did not."[66]

Urban ethnographer Erin Graves found additional polarizing patterns of design-politics at work in her study of the mixed-income public housing redevelopment at Maverick Landing in Boston. She describes how management controls over public spaces endeavored to signal "a homogenous middle-class community" through a "marketable combination of aesthetics and tranquility."[67] By denying subsidized residents the opportunity to personalize their individual outdoor spaces (families could not leave toys, grills, lawn chairs, wading pools or flower pots on their cement patios – or even display Halloween jack-o-lanterns), and by limiting use of shared corridors (management prohibited conversations among older residents across the hall through open doors) and the common courtyard (children could not ride bikes or use skateboards and a 10 p.m. curfew was imposed on all residents), management "encouraged a culture of quietude rather than sociability."[68] The designers included de rigueur New Urbanist porches – but the management disallowed residents from outfitting them with even so much as a chair. Most problematically, many of the lower-income residents felt market-rate tenants "were not held equally accountable to the rules," or had different sets of rules entirely, intended to instantiate ideologically grounded norms.[69] The cultural contrast was magnified both because no market-rate-paying households had children, and because they were more racially diverse than the public housing households.[70]

Conclusion: Getting beyond the design-politics of race

Based on three decades of public housing redevelopment studies undertaken across the US, it seems clear the old dynamic of race and power surrounding public housing remains exceptionally salient in the 21st Century. Rather than a mere historical artifact – a lingering legacy from some period of explicit *de jure* (legal) segregation – the racial animus (and animosity) engulfing public housing redevelopment seems at least as persistent as it was during the decades when such housing was first built. As before, the racialized politics of public housing continues to be expressed in the built form that these new developments take as well as through the processes used to negotiate their production. Design standards and social standards recombine in decisions about how many of which size apartment should be built, and the additional choices made during mid-implementation constitute the revealed preferences of profit-seeking promoters. Similarly, once inhabited, the impacts of intertwined mixed-income living get mediated by systems of rules and regulations that seem catered to financially dominant groups, and which are sometimes enforced differentially – or at least perceived to be so. To inhabit can also be to inhibit. Moreover, because higher-income groups brought into formerly all-low-income communities tend to be more racially diverse than the previous tenancy, ideologically grounded cultural norms associated with white middle-class behaviors and preferences become uneasily overlaid on past social practices that once proceeded with little questioning or oversight during a pre-redevelopment era.

Given how many different scholars have consistently found tensions rather than rampant embrace of middle-class 'role models,' it seems evident that some assumptions behind mixed-income communities remain little more than unfulfilled aspirations. In most places, only a small percentage of past residents return and, to most developers, that is seen as a feature rather than a failure. Taken this way, the income-mixing model is more of a real estate development profit-seeking preference than it is a system for permitting larger numbers of very-low-income households to gain and retain a foothold in a safer, stable and attractive community.

Even so, it is unfair to deploy a uniformly broad-brush critique to such ventures. All too many redevelopment efforts use this process as a mechanism to purge the poorest and divert public subsidies to support the less needy, but in some cases concerted efforts have yielded more equitable outcomes. My own work has proactively sought out cases where redevelopment of public housing judged to have been "severely distressed"[71] has been successfully accomplished while still continuing to house large segments of extremely low-income households of color. In some instances, such as the Commonwealth Development in Boston (which was redeveloped in the 1980s), public housing households occupy all apartments. In this remarkable instance, residents and their allies negotiated an extensive community management agreement that, among other things, gives the tenant organization the right to fire the private-sector management company with 30 days' notice. Well over three decades later, that arrangement remains in place, and is periodically renewed.[72] In some other cities, housing authorities and their development partners have voluntarily committed to one-for-one replacement of public housing during redevelopment. This is a required feature of the Choice Neighborhoods program that succeeded HOPE VI. That program eliminated many of the shortcomings of HOPE VI and usefully expanded neighborhood partnerships; unfortunately, it was just as inadequately funded as its predecessor.

Ultimately, while the racialized design-politics of public housing redevelopment remains daunting and entrenched, some processes have been much more equitable than others. Often, these more encouraging outcomes have involved not-for-profit developers. At their most optimistic core, not-for-profit developers seek to serve neighborhoods and their residents, not to generate profits. Some for-profit developers are surely public-spirited, yet at some level community involvement is merely contingent, rather than intrinsic, to their mission. Similarly, site managers may operate differently when they feel a need to cater to (or appease) sizable constituencies paying market rates. Sometimes, doing so simply yields a commendable commitment to widely shared norms, but sometimes it tips over into insensitive policing of cultural differences.

In all instances I have personally documented or read about from others, redevelopment efforts have fared best when residents worked closely with advocacy organizations based outside their development. Once inhabited, some management organizations (whether private or public) are simply more respectful of residents than others. Some degree of 'incorporated exclusion' may well be present everywhere to some extent, but it does not seem to be uniform. Over time, trust between residents and management can build, especially in cases where there are fewer obvious instances of differential rule enforcement perceived to be linked to race, income level or type of subsidy. It should be clear that there is no single type of mix in a *mixed-income* community. Often the tensions seem worst in those places where differences across residents are greatest – poor renters thrown together with affluent homeowners– especially if this is accompanied by parallel racial divides. Narrower-mix communities may fare better if they yield fewer instances where cultural preferences, such as socializing on front stoops, become treated as rule violations.

In the end, we can understand these redeveloped public housing communities fully only when we view their full complexity as designed places of habitation. Real estate development and property management entail manipulation of buildings, but they are also negotiations of power relationships. We too often forget that these two practices are conjoined. Seemingly distinct choices about small things like stoops, tot lots, benches and apartment sizes – once these are coupled with ostensibly innocuous rules about barbecues, socializing and personalization of spaces – yield a matrix of micro-practices that wordlessly signals either welcome or rebuff. The silences of design-politics resonate loudly in the lives of the least advantaged.

Notes

1 Akira Drake Rodriguez, *Diverging Space for Deviants* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021), 41–42.

2 Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Adrienne Brown, *The Black Skyscraper* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson, eds., *Race and Modern Architecture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020). See, especially, introduction and Chapters 7, 11, 12, 16 and 18.

3 Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

4 Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 277.

5 Lawrence J. Vale, *From the Puritans to the Projects* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 182, 286; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 12.

6 Lawrence J. Vale, *After the Projects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 70–74; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 44–54.

7 Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

8 Amy L. Howard, *More Than Shelter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Vale, *After the Projects*; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*; Vale, *Puritans to Projects*).

9 Karen A. Franck and Michael Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Streets," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 12, no. 3 (1995), 186–220.

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13 Lawrence J. Vale, "The Future of Planned Poverty," *Netherlands Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 14, no. 1 (1999): 13, 27n.

14 Vale, *After the Projects*, 16; Gary Bridge, Tim Butler, and Loretta Lees. eds., *Mixed Communities* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012).

15 Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 335.

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17 There is a vast literature on the subject of *community*, used here to assess the social relations within a public housing development, often in relationship to neighbors in immediately adjacent territories; Robert J. Chaskin, "Perspectives on Neighborhood and Community," *Social Service Review* 4 (1997), 521–547; Erin M. Graves. "The Structuring of Urban Life in a Mixed-Income Housing 'Community,'" *City and Community* 9, no. 2 (March 2010): 109–131.

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19 Marc A. Weiss, "CNU and HUD," in *Charter of the New Urbanism, Second Edition*, ed. Emily Talen (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 132–133; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Principles of Inner-City Neighborhood Design* (Washington, D.C.: HUD, 2000), accessed November 11, 2021. www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/principles.pdf.

20 Henry Cisneros and Lora Engdahl, eds., *From Despair to Hope: HOPE VI and the New Promise of Public Housing in America's Cities* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 46, note 20.

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22 Geoffrey Makstutis, *Design Process in Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2018). An increasingly extensive literature on design processes now includes more discussion of "community design" or "public interest" architecture; see, for example, Lisa Abendroth and Bryan Bell, eds., *Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
23 Vale, *After the Projects*, 343–344.
24 Discussed in depth in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 193–229.
25 Discussed in depth in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 254–313.
26 All interviews in this chapter have been conducted following standard Institutional Review Board practices and approvals.
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32 Summers, *Black in Place*, 167.
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36 Londoño, *Abstract Barrios*, 107.
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49 Chaskin and Joseph, 21.
50 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 227.
51 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 228.
52 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 145, 289–290, note 59.
53 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 218.
54 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 166.
55 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 168.
56 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 168.
57 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 171.
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59 Chaskin and Joseph, *Integrating the Inner City*, 175.
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62 Catherine Fennell, *Last Project Standing* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015), 59.
63 Fennel, *Last Project Standing*, 59, 61.
64 Fennel, *Last Project Standing*, 102–103, 109–113, 120.
65 Fennel, *Last Project Standing*, 144.
66 Fennel, *Last Project Standing*, 142–143.
67 Graves, "Structuring of Urban Life," 128.

68 Graves, "Structuring of Urban Life," 128.
69 Graves, "Structuring of Urban Life," 124.
70 Graves, "Structuring of Urban Life," 117, 124, 128.
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