

Purging the Poorest, Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities, edited by Lawrence J. Vale. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 428 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), \$27.50 (paper), \$7.00 to \$27.50 (e-book).

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In the last 20 years, public housing authorities, in concert with federal and city authorities, have engaged in a massive social experiment. Using unproven theoretical notions such as the concentration of poverty and the importance of role models in improving the behavior of the poor, programs such as HOPE VI have funded the demolition of thousands of units of public housing. Replacement housing in the form of mixed-income developments invariably result in the significant loss of low-income units, especially those most affordable for the lowest income brackets.

In his excellent new book, *Purging the Poorest*, Lawrence Vale provides a long-term, comparative framework for understanding what he terms *the design politics* of public housing. Vale traces the design politics of public housing since its inception in the late 1930s to the present-day era of demolition. Vale's framework is a valuable one, and his approach provides a nuanced, contextual picture of public housing.

Vale's focus on what he terms "design politics" is quite interesting. Throughout the book, he explores how political views about the poor are expressed via the physical design of public housing. However, according to Vale, it is not just the physical design of public housing that is important. The design of public housing also has very significant symbolic import and is reflective of social and political processes and values that are embedded and projected on the urban landscape. In fact, the redevelopment of public housing is frequently driven by the desire of urban growth coalitions to "reimage" the city. The desire to remake the urban image is especially strong in places such as Atlanta where redevelopment was spurred by the Olympics.

The book presents two case studies of public housing: Atlanta and Chicago. In both Atlanta and Chicago, there have been two eras of demolition and redevelopment. These "twice cleared" communities provide fascinating examples of the history of public housing and the linkages between public housing and broader processes of urban development.

In the case of Atlanta, during the 1930s, the city demolished a predominantly African American community and used the cleared land to construct (with federal funding) Techwood, the nation's first public housing project. Tenants applying to live in Techwood were carefully screened, and the

development was filled with white working poor families. At the same time, very low-income African Americans were kept out of the development. Techwood's first era demonstrates the policy of demolishing low-income African American communities and replacing them with developments that benefit whites. Thus, public housing was used to remake the demographic and social structure of the neighborhood. As Vale notes, "the new public housing replaced a . . . black community with a safe and desirable neighborhood occupied by whites" (p. 72).

By the late 1960s, the Techwood development had shifted to predominantly African American tenancy. In addition, the income structure of Techwood's tenants included many in the lowest income brackets. The push to demolish Techwood and "purge" the African American residents gained momentum when Atlanta won its bid to host the 1996 Olympics. Moreover, with the advent of the HOPE VI program, plans to demolish Techwood moved into high gear. During the planning process, resident input was strictly limited and former public housing residents faced draconian screening that simply eliminated the possibility of finding a home in the new developments.

The next three chapters trace the development and redevelopment of public housing in Chicago's Cabrini-Green. During the 1930s, this neighborhood was notorious for its crime and was known as "Little Hell." Little Hell was very close to affluent communities on the so-called "Gold Coast." Populated mainly by Sicilian and Italian immigrants, this neighborhood was completely razed in the late 1930s to make way for new public housing.

Chicago officials worked to find deserving tenants for the new development. Comprehensive screening was carried out to find those families deemed to be "most worthy" of the new housing. These screening procedures were essential to achieving the goal of creating a new community purged of criminal or otherwise unsuitable people. Housing officials passed sentence on the worthiness of applicants. This was a task that required passing moral judgment on the character of potential tenants.

In the post-World War II era, the Cabrini-Green projects transitioned from mainly a white population to a largely African American one. By the 1990s, the deep poverty of Carbrini-Green stood in stark contrast to the rising affluence of the nearby Gold Coast. Efforts to demolish and purge the area of its public housing residents were spurred by the shooting of seven-year-old Dantrell Davis in 1992.

As HOPE VI redevelopment plans were made, Cabrini-Green residents became frustrated with their lack of input into the design of the redevelopment plan. The tenants brought lawsuits against the Chicago Housing Authority. Despite the protracted nature of the lawsuits, the settlements

allowed Cabrini-Green residents some voice in the final design. The resulting mixed-income development featured no visible difference between units inhabited by public housing tenants and those purchased as market rate housing. However, the strict residency requirements meant that 80% of Cabrini-Green tenants did not qualify for the new housing. Not surprisingly, only a few former Cabrini-Green residents found new homes among the affluent market rate homeowners.

In the conclusion, Vale asks us to consider other ways to address the problems of public housing. He reminds us that there are alternatives to demolition and subsequent displacement of low-income families. For example, San Francisco's North Beach Place was planned to provide for an adequate supply of replacement housing explicitly intended for public housing residents displaced by redevelopment. It is indeed possible to redevelop public housing without causing widespread displacement.

In conclusion, this is a well-written, thought-provoking book. It adds an important historical and contextual analysis to the literature on public housing.