

Public ownership and private profit in housing

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The 1937 Housing Act granted local governments the rights to build and operate public housing. And, while this was a significant win for housing advocates, subsequent public housing policies throughout the 20th century ultimately recreated slum-like conditions leading to another round of demolition and redevelopment. Our paper examines this history in order to make sense of current policy initiatives that, in the name of helping the poor, have sought to reclaim these areas for potential private-sector investment and, simultaneously, re-regulate the poor by attaching the provision of housing to the reproduction of labour.

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Instead of disposing of its stock of public housing, the federal government should attempt to preserve its investment by preventing its further decay and by taking steps to ensure sound management.

—Schill (1990), *Cornell Law Review*, 75, 948.

Introduction

New Jack City, a 1991 film about a drug lord ruling over a public housing project, represented the simultaneous processes of private capital investment for the sole purpose of profits (that is, the drug trade) and purposeful government divestment in an already poor, vulnerable community. “*Yeah,*

yeah, rock-a bye ...,” a memorable line in the film, referred to yet another murder in a place all but forgotten by the outside world. So it is not without irony that almost a decade later the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) proposed a plan to save public housing. Testifying before the US Housing Financial Services Committee on 25 May 2010, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan unveiled the Obama Administration’s plan to preserve what little of the country’s dwindling public housing stock was left. The proposed Preservation, Enhancement and Transition of Rental Assistance Act (PETRA) is clear and simple: since the federal government has failed to provide adequate funding to public housing authorities (PHAs) for decades,

allow private capital investment—in other words, privatize it. Leveraging public housing property assets, Donovan argued, could make up the billions of dollars needed to preserve this New Deal programme that began over 70 years ago and continues to provide much-needed housing to some of America's poorest citizens, many of whom would be on the street without it (Donovan, 2010).

PETRA was met with opposition from a number of policy and academic arenas, as well as with concern among many local housing authority leaders. Some members of Congress stated that PETRA was 'too much, too soon' (Gutzmann, 2010a). This led to the unveiling of PETRA II in St Paul, Minnesota during November 2010 under the sponsorship of Senator Keith Ellison. The revised bill proposal included 'anti-privatization' language but was essentially unchanged (Gutzmann, 2010b). To date, the PETRA II proposal has not made any congressional headway; however, with the Obama Administration's cuts to local housing authority maintenance budgets, it is possible that PETRA, in some form, could be revived in the near future. According to an 12 April 2011, *Washington Post* article by Edward O'Keefe, the public housing capital fund that housing authorities depend on for maintenance and repair will suffer a \$456 million cut. This cut comes after decades of under funding for needed repairs. In fact, New York State needs \$7.5 billion for public housing repairs, but only has \$1.5 billion in its current maintenance budget (Sugg, 2011). In his testimony before Congress on 25 May 2010, New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Chairman, John Rhea stated that the only way NYCHA would be able to complete the back log of repairs to its public housing stock was to open it up to private capital investment (Rhea, 2010).

PETRA comes on the heels of the now almost two-decade old Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) programme that has sought to redevelop project-based public housing into mixed-income communities through public-private partnerships. Taken together, policy efforts that appear to gesture towards the privatization of public housing have also led to a series of responses from housing rights advocates. For example, in May 2010,

the Right to the City Alliance reported extensive findings from around the country documenting the severe lack of housing for people in poverty, and among their recommendations asserted that "the federal government must ensure that housing is a right rather than a privilege" (24). Diverse coalitions of actors have emerged to respond to this call through different forms of community development and organizing initiatives. Yet, a right to housing seems distant. Sam Bass Warner (1995) points toward the paradox of vast amounts of wealth located in the USA and the lack of political will to provide housing for those experiencing poverty. He contends that, "all of our social programs that touch urban life have been tentative, held to experimental levels for long periods, and when finally adopted as permanent national programs they have been underfunded and extended only to a small fraction of the population they ought to serve" (231).

The emergence and current trajectory of public housing is emblematic of Warner's sentiment. At the same time, there are identifiable patterns of support for public housing in the USA and the criteria by which individuals and families can claim the rights to live in these developments. But these patterns are constrained and in many cases at odds by private capital interests. The fact that the "real estate lobby" has always played an integral role in shaping the fate of housing in the USA, and the history of public housing in particular, illustrates the power that these interests have wielded (Fox-Gotham, 2002). In this sense, the current historical moment is but a specific manifestation of capitalism's continual drive and innovation to privatize public housing, and by doing so, it shapes the conditions with which those in poverty are able to lay claim to citizenship rights. Housing, under the logic of privatization, is afforded to those low-income individuals who, through their own enterprise, demonstrate a willingness to enter into the workforce under conditions not of their own making. In other words, a right to housing, like citizenship, becomes conditional on social and economic 'conduct' (Rose, 2001).

That said, the hegemony of capital has never been complete, as political-economic projects operate in

actual places marked by unique circumstances and opportunities for different agendas to be taken up and materialized. Certainly, the differential achievements of local housing authorities—both progressive and punitive—can only be understood in relation to the contexts in which they exist *and the contexts they produce*. These cannot be fully understood without an examination of prior eras of public housing policy. To be sure, Hartman (2006) in referring to the provision of housing to all Americans states that, “[W]e certainly will not move toward this goal in the current political era, turning our back on past approaches” (180).

This paper provides a recounting of the emergence and subsequent moments in public housing history, one that the reader may find familiar. However, our purpose extends beyond prior accounts of public housing history by clarifying the inextricable link between access to public housing, the push towards moving ‘public neighbors’ into the private sector, and how these phenomena are connected to issues of labour. Situating public housing in this framework reveals how HOPE VI and PETRA are not only in alignment with the original goals of the public housing programme to provide temporary assistance to those who are ‘under-employed’ but also represent the intensified efforts of capital to regulate labour conditions in the USA through housing policies as well.

We review public housing policy by tracing its development from the perspectives of labour, capital and place. We focus on both the creation of these federal policy initiatives, as well as examples of how localities have responded to, and informed them. Throughout the paper, we highlight what this has meant for low-income populations in terms of access to affordable housing. We analyse the enactment of public housing policy within three distinct periods: (i) the 1930s and 1940s, when public housing was officially implemented and targeted to low-wage workers who could not find safe, healthy, affordable housing due the market failures of the Depression and mass migrations associated with economic change; (ii) the 1950s through the 1970s when public housing was seen as a means to train citizens to become private homeowners, eventually

leaving behind a group of residual, very poor people for the State to house, who in many ways represented redundant labour; and (iii) the 1980s to the present, where investment in HOPE VI has been an effort to move this pool of redundant labourers into the private market, which, in turn, has given the real-estate industry access to profit from public housing, often at the expense of the most vulnerable members of society.

The origin of public housing

Proposals for the provision of government-sponsored low-income housing in the USA date back to the housing reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries that focused on combating inner city slum conditions by establishing building codes and sanitary regulations (von Hoffman, 2000). Yet such conditions persisted, and by 1930, the country had fallen into the worst economic depression in its history. In 1933, New Deal legislation created the Public Works Administration (PWA), which was the first federal entity to fund and build public housing. According to Aiken and Alford (1970), PWA constructed 21,000 units in 37 cities. The first federally funded public housing community to open was Techwood Homes in Atlanta, GA, which began housing low-income families in 1936 (Keating, 2000).

Under the Housing Act of 1937, local PHAs were established to build, own and operate housing for low- and moderate-income households (Schill, 1990a). While the Act officially established a public housing programme, it was narrow in scope—targeting only inner-city slum dwellers and requiring that one slum unit be demolished for every public housing unit built (von Hoffman, 2000). The Housing Act emerged, in part, out of a conjuncture of unemployment, labour organizing, homelessness, the harsh conditions of tenement housing that advocates, known at the time as Progressives, rallied against (albeit problematically), and compromises made with the building, real-estate and banking industries. While the Progressives got better living conditions for very poor people, the private real-estate industries resisted an increase in supply of

this housing by requiring one-for-one replacement. The shifting alliances between these groups and the emergence of federal public housing legislation surfaced out of the material conditions of the Great Depression and the rise of a “politically powerful and well-organized lobby capable of exercising considerable influence over land-use regulation and residential development at the state and local levels,” the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) (Fox-Gotham, 2002, 49).

Between 1926 and 1933, the real-estate industry suffered significant declines as evidenced by staggering decreases in residential building permits, dramatic increases in foreclosed housing and significant savings and loans failures (Fox-Gotham, 2002). The political-economic goals of the NAREB and its broad coalition of partners were to push federal government intervention into housing production by providing a range of policy tools that would create the enabling conditions for private-sector solutions to housing shortages and job growth. A central component of this campaign had begun prior to the 1937 Housing Act, as NAREB promoted homeownership over public housing through discourses of post-World War I American ‘exceptionalism’. NAREB skillfully linked homeownership to nation building and anti-Europeanism (Fox-Gotham, 2002). In a remarkable series of initiatives, NAREB not only articulated public housing as “a dangerous socialist experiment which threatened free enterprise and the traditional American values of government” (Parson, 2005, 17) but did so by laying claim to planning expertise. This ‘expertise’ was identifiably masculine and white.

Urging Congress not to send a commission abroad to study the European system of housing, [they] evoked the ‘genius’ of such home-grown planners as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, noting that Americans had long since broken away from the European idea and would not ‘degenerate’ to the European level of dependence ... They dismissed the ‘feminine’ proponents of the modern housing movement that mirrored the European model and labeled supporters of public housing socialists (Argersinger, 2010, 795).

The private sector¹ was integral to the construction of the 1937 Housing Act as its representatives served on the committees that crafted the legislation (Freedman, 1969). During this period, real-estate interests lobbied the federal government to support market-based solutions for the housing needs of Americans and garnered the legal and economic tools to engage in urban and suburban place making.

Foreshadowing the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts, NAREB’s efforts were very effective in obtaining financial tools as well as the ability to access ‘eminent domain’ for slum clearance by working through state and municipal entities (Argersinger, 2010). However, there was one caveat. While NAREB and the rest of the ‘housing lobby’ strongly preferred a market-based solution to housing low-income populations by creating government-subsidized, private rental markets—similar to the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programme that exists today—they did signed off in support of a devolved, project-based public housing development programme that the federal government would have authority to oversee.

That said, NAREB officials called upon their consortium of stakeholders to continue a relentless campaign against government-owned public housing, reiterating to people in cities around the country that homeownership was the hallmark of American individualism (Williams, 2010). Even though 38 states passed legislation enabling them to participate in the programme, and 266 local housing authorities had been established (Argersinger, 2010, 800), NAREB and the rest of the ‘housing lobby’ were successful in stalling the enactment of any actual building of public housing until after World War II (Argersinger, 2010; Fox-Gotham, 2002; von Hoffman, 2000).

Many scholars believe that the 1937 Act was as much about economic development and job creation in the context of the Depression as it was about housing the poor. But there was compromise to the coalitions of progressive ‘housers’ who said that it was immoral for people to have to live in run down tenements and slums (Crawford, 1995; Leavitt, 1995). This message was heard by industrialists of the time, who not only agreed that better

environments would produce better citizens and workers but also had been experimenting with building a range of company towns. In fact it was the lessons learned from the Pullman company town and the Strike of 1894 that most clearly wedded progressives and industrialists (Crawford, 2000). Both groups wanted to stave off working class radicalism, although the progressives were somewhat critical of the paternalism and social control industrial company towns fostered.

Yet, company towns did not last long. According to Crawford (2000), by the mid-1930s, many employers no longer operated them due to increases in owner-occupied housing, political incorporation and labour struggles that had the net effect of reducing the employers' degree of control, and as a result, their interest in maintaining their towns. So the progressives turned their attention toward government-sponsored public housing, and the planners, designers and architects all recognized the potential value in designing these 'public' towns as an effort to increase their outward legitimacy as experts (Crawford, 2000). Mitchell's (1993) study on the shift from company towns to public housing identified a parallel transfer of paternalist ideology. Early public housing residents—'submerged middle class'—not only acquired housing but also found themselves enrolled by housing authorities in a national initiative to build good citizens through well-designed and well-implemented public housing (Argersinger, 2010; Parson, 2005). By articulating public housing, advocates of government-sponsored housing were attempting to reframe the debate to emphasize public housing as a social good.

Thus, early public housing was, in some sense, an extension of the company town, relocated from manufacturing ghettos and rural resource extraction settlements to large metropolitan areas where multiple industries could benefit from the government's investment. It is no mere coincidence that the first public housing complex in Nashville, Tennessee, for example, was located across the street from Werthan Mills, a textile firm. This mill and other industries were perfectly situated next to public housing where a large, dependable labour source was almost guaranteed to keep the factories run-

ning. Unhealthy tenements, frequent moves to find better quarters or cheaper rent and evictions all caused labour to be unreliable; public housing provided some stability for workers and thus for the industries who relied on them² (Crawford, 2000; Mitchell, 1993). This orientation towards housing the deserving worker becomes even clearer after the USA joined World War II, when war housing was built to accommodate workers in industries important to the war effort.

While the government took upon itself the responsibility to provide decent housing to workers who could not otherwise procure it on their own, this can only be understood in contrast to what it did not do, and subsequently, how this shaped the future of public housing provision. Rather than develop a more aggressive right-to-housing approach in which the government ensures that all people have access to housing that meets their basic human needs and allows them the financial conditions to pursue an upward mobility strategy, the public housing policy of the 1930s provided adequate housing³ for workers that kept them alive and available to work. People who did not or could not work were excluded. Conversely, rather than establishing a living wage, which would allowed workers to procure their own housing on the private market, the government chose to enable the continuation of low-wage jobs that would mitigate the significant increases in labour cost to private and public employers. Additionally, by relieving workers of their privations in a basic way, they deprived those workers of a set of issues around which to organize. This represents an implicit acknowledgement that the capitalist economy requires low-wage positions that do not pay workers enough to adequately survive but finds something of a facile solution to this problem while continuing to facilitate the process of capital accumulation by the upper classes (Harvey, 2001, 2006).

In part, the 1937 Act did represent an initial attempt to develop a sizeable portfolio of state-owned public housing, though it incorporated the interests of both industry and workers. Built to serve those who were experiencing temporary misfortune, and in some cases persistent poverty, this effort was

shaped by the contexts in which it operated. First, support for public housing by both progressives and some industrialists stemmed from a belief that their goals could be realized through changing the environmental conditions that the working class experienced. Second, the Great Depression created a crisis for capital and an inability for the private market to respond adequately to massive population shifts resulting from the widespread decline of rural economies and urban industrialization, a process that had begun well before the Depression but which was accelerated substantially by it. Despite the failure of the private housing market, representatives of the real-estate industry positioned themselves through NAREB to limit government involvement in the housing sector and, where possible, to benefit from it. By 1948, only 168,000 units of public housing had been built under the Act; the low numbers were primarily associated with a context they could not hope to battle, as well as the outbreak of World War II (Aiken and Alford, 1970; Schill, 1990a).

The rise and fall of public housing

The Housing Act of 1949 revived the public housing programme, authorizing the construction of an additional 810,000 units (Schill, 1990a). The Act is perhaps best remembered for its declaration that every American has the right to “a decent home and a suitable living environment” (Lang and Sohmer, 2000). Although the Housing Act of 1937 had created the public housing programme, it was the 1949 Act that ushered in an era of direct federal involvement on the local level (Goetz, 2003). In addition, it linked the health of the nation to its housing quality stating:

The general welfare and security of the Nation and the health and living standards of its people requires housing production and related community development sufficient to remedy the serious housing shortage, [and] the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas ... (cf. Lang and Sohmer, 2000, 293).

Most relevant to urban areas were Titles I, II and III of the Act. Title I financed slum clearance under

urban renewal programmes, Title II expanded the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage insurance programme and Title III committed the federal government to building 810,000 new public housing units (Bratt, 2004; Lang and Sohmer, 2000).

Although Titles I through III appeared to address different aspects of housing policy, implementing them in tandem resulted in contradictory effects. White flight from the cities, fuelled in part by the FHA’s expanded mortgage insurance programme, resulted in rapid suburbanization and further market divestment in the urban core. Likewise, discriminatory mortgage practices meant that the opportunity to move to the suburbs was typically not extended to black and other minority households (Massey and Denton, 1993). At the same time, urban renewal initiatives razed entire inner city neighbourhoods, displacing minority families and shrinking the supply of affordable housing in cities across the country (Teaford, 2000). While the state spent a great deal of money to tear down slums and engage in processes of urban revitalization (through public housing and other projects), it was not the residents of these slums and the eventual residents of inner city public housing who benefited from this process. Instead, it was the developers, construction and engineering firms and landlords⁴ who profited the most through state redistribution, demonstrating a classic case of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003).

One of the results of this was that in many cities public housing became the only option for the urban poor (Freeman, 2004). But discriminatory siting practices led to concentrated development on land cleared through urban renewal efforts in or near poor neighbourhoods that were often only a few blocks from where the displacement families originally had lived (Bickford and Massey, 1991). For example, during the 1960s, the Chicago City Council made the decision to build public housing on slum sites even before the slums were torn down to avoid having to relocate black tenants to other neighbourhoods (Goetz, 2003). In fact, Hirsch (1983) argues that the rapid growth of concentrated black areas during these years confirmed the existence of the city’s ‘second ghetto’—areas that housed nearly eight blacks for every one that lived in the

general vicinity during the 1920s (253). Massey and Kanaiaupuni (1993) concluded that the concentration of urban poverty and the placement of public housing are interdependent, with such housing consistently being located in poor black neighbourhoods.

There have been many accounts of how public housing was proscribed by federal policies, but these national narratives were not only context setting, but affected and informed by the struggles that played out in localities across the country. In many cities, local courts ruled that federal-level policies were unconstitutional. For example, the Gwinn Amendment, which barred public housing residence for any member of what the federal government considered a subversive group, was contested and reversed, in part, due to a ruling in the court of Los Angeles, California (Parson, 2005).

In seemingly contradiction to this ruling, other localities implemented the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts based on the real-estate lobby's framing of state-owned housing as un-American (von Hoffman, 2000). This 'red-baiting' at the local level was effective in staving off the 1949 Housing Act's goal of producing 810,000 new public housing units (Parson, 2005). The 1954 Act decreased federal funding for public housing, which resulted in years of urban renewal without meeting the housing needs of the poor (Hunt, 2005). Individual homeownership continued to be promulgated as the country's best defence against socialism and communism. However, racial minorities were systematically excluded from participation in this movement toward suburbanization by de facto enforcement of racial covenants (Argersinger, 2010).

The 810,000 units of housing that were authorized by the 1949 Act were not realized until 1972 (Biles, 1990; Parson, 2005).

Public housing during 1950s and 1960s also moved away from the workforce framework of the 1930s and 1940s towards becoming something of a training ground for new 'citizens' and, importantly for the private housing market, homeowners. NAREB and other lobbyists pressed for policy changes such that only the lowest paid workers, and those who were not working, were allowed to occupy public housing. For these marginal citizens,

the interests of PHAs and the private sector, which was always seeking to expand the market for capital, aligned; they both favoured moving people towards homeownership in the private market, especially as carriers of significant mortgage debt from which the private sector could benefit. Occupancy requirements frequently included regular home visits and instructions on maintaining a house and a family; PHAs' explicit mission included making people fit and ready for homeownership. This policy orientation, coupled with the wider urban policies that promoted suburbanization, resulted in public housing complexes catering to a poorer and less mobile demographic. Whereas in the 1930s public housing catered to working, two parent family households, by the 1970s public housing catered to an almost exclusively single parent, non-working or otherwise very poor population. The private housing industry, after filling the needs of the rich and middle classes, effectively used the public housing system to identify and train the most desirable members of the working and poorer classes who could afford private housing. They then skimmed off the more desirable members of the working class into the private market, leaving those people least able⁵ to obtain housing in a private market to be cared for by the State. This pool of redundant labour needed by the private sector to work in low-paying, low-skill, highly irregular positions—Marx's reserve army of labour—could not afford to own their homes even with government subsidies, so the government became saddled with the cost of providing housing.

Related to this was the placement of new public housing construction. Most specifically, despite the Act's overall aim of "providing decent housing in a suitable living environment", it is well documented that between the 1950s and the late 1970s, the lion's share of public housing ended up concentrated in very poor, highly segregated black neighbourhoods (Freeman, 2004; Goering et al., 1997; Newman and Schnare, 1997). In other words, the production of racially segregated, high-poverty, neighbourhoods that would be defined in the 1980s and 1990s as targets for mixed-income housing initiatives were the result of localized clashes between coalitions of pro-growth, anti-black redevelopment interests and

the less powerful—and often fragmented—housing rights advocates. In addition, exclusion of African Americans from participating in the ‘suburbanization project’ was so strong that cities spent extraordinary amounts of time and financial resources to enact urban renewal and simultaneously maintain the colour line. For example, in her book *Model City Blues*, Jackson (2008) documents the complex orchestrations of New Haven’s city officials to redevelop inner-city neighbourhoods, and the devastating effects that urban development policies and white racism had on disenfranchised black communities.

The Housing Act of 1968 offered a brief period of federal support for public housing by reaffirming the goals of the 1949 Act (Orlebeke, 2000). For the next 5 years, advocates for public housing effectively lobbied for increased production of units in order to mitigate the massive displacement of people associated with urban renewal. This pro-housing coalition was, arguably, a secondary concern for real-estate interests as the increasing organization and protests of African-Americans was beginning to effectively delay urban renewal efforts (Hunt, 2005). Yet, the persistence of discriminatory siting practices meant that new public housing was routinely located in very poor African-American communities (Goetz, 2003).

In 1973, during a context of urban deindustrialization and an oil crisis, Nixon announced a moratorium on public housing production and implemented a shift toward the policy solution that NAREB had lobbied for back in the 1930s (Orlebeke, 2000). This shift was the beginning of the neoliberal housing policy era that continues today. Instead of investing the resources needed to maintain public housing developments, the federal government chose to provide rental subsidies to low-income people for private-sector rental market units (Bratt, 1989; Hartman, 1975). The Brook Amendments of the late 1960s, which stated that public housing should be provided first and foremost to the poorest populations, effectively dismantled the somewhat ‘mixed-income’ public housing policies that characterized the 1930s through the 1950s (Hartman, 1975). While intentioned to ensure that the most vulnerable people had access to

housing, the Brook Amendments also meant that less money was available to PHAs for maintenance and other necessary expenses. In addition, a concentration of very poor people meant that PHAs collected much less rent because rent payments by tenants—once a significant source of revenue—were based on income.

Greater reliance on the private real-estate sector also resulted from the Brooke Amendments. These amendments marked a shift away from federally sponsored, low-income housing construction to rent supplements and capital cost subsidies to private market landlords. Ultimately these amendments led to the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. The Act included funding for a new programme entitled Section 8. Section 8 provided subsidies to private market initiatives to rehabilitate housing, as well as some limited privately sponsored new construction (Freeman, 2004). The move towards housing voucher subsidies to private landlords under the Section 8 programme (now the HCV programme) also effectively cycled capital, in the name of the poor, between the government and the private sector. This allowed for a host of industries associated with real estate to benefit, not from production, but through the trade of commodities (amongst which must be counted previously constructed housing) and charges on a number of services (Fox-Gotham, 2006; Harvey, 1978; Lefebvre, 1970).

This coupled with the demographic changes in public housing developments left local housing authorities in a position whereby the rents collected could not subsidize the operating and maintenance costs of a housing stock that was increasingly becoming dilapidated (Hunt, 2009). Taken together these shifts foreshadowed the negative public perspective necessary to begin the physical dismantling of a programme that never achieved its goals in the first place (DeFilippis and Fraser, 2010). The disinvestment in these inner city neighbourhoods effectively created a large rent gap between the rent realized by both PHAs and the private landlords, who also owned property in the neighbourhood with the highest-and-best-use of these neighbourhoods because of their proximity to the central business district. These conditions, coupled with concerted

efforts by both housing producers and consumers at redeveloping these neighbourhoods—and eventually, the advent of the back-to-the-city movement—provided the stage for the subsequent destructive patterns of speculative investment known as *gentrification* (Lees et al., 2008; Smith, 1996; Weber, 2002).

Revisiting current policies: the public-private *public* housing

Public housing as a social good was never completely accepted in the USA for a variety of reasons that we have documented. The conflicting and compromising nature of its provision are apparent in both the 1937 and 1949 Housing Acts, as well as the subsequent ‘one step forward, two steps back’ implementation. While the 1949 Housing Act set out lofty goals for the provision of decent and affordable housing for all Americans, in reality it produced a paradoxical legacy (von Hoffman, 2000). According to von Hoffman, while the act was intended to address the shortage of affordable housing, its urban redevelopment component had the incongruent outcome of more such housing being raised rather than built. And subsequent legislation had the net effect of not only delegitimizing public housing but incrementally placing the provision of affordable housing more squarely in the private sector through rental subsidies.

By the early 1980s, all construction of federally subsidized low-income housing had ceased and the Section 8 programme was recast as a demand-side subsidy for existing private market housing in the form of rental subsidies (vouchers) to qualified tenants (Burchell and Listokin, 1995). Although existing public housing continued to be a widely used source for low-income housing, federal devolution and subsequent funding cuts resulted in a rapidly deteriorating public housing stock. Most specifically, funding cuts meant that PHAs had much smaller budgets for building maintenance and tenant screening (Stone, 1993).

Proposed legislation to privatize public housing emerged in 1984 and in 1986, allowing public housing tenants the option of purchasing their unit

(Schill, 1990). Although this bill did not pass the Senate, Congress later enacted statutes making the sale of public housing units to tenants possible. Soon after, the President’s Commission on Privatization (1988) recommended the privatization of public housing through sale to tenants at discounted prices. This would subsequently become one of the failed initiatives of Secretary Jack Kemp’s tenure at HUD.

Around the same time that these privatization initiatives got underway, the HUD Reform Act of 1989 called for the creation of the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing. The Commission was charged with identifying severely distressed public housing developments nationwide, assessing strategies for addressing the problems of these developments, and formulating a plan of action (National Housing Law Project, 2002).⁶ The Commission issued its final report in 1992, estimating that of the approximately 1.3 million public housing units in the country 86,000 were severely distressed (National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, 1992). In response to the Commission’s findings, the HOPE VI programme was initiated in 1993.

The HOPE VI programme did not begin as a mechanism for neighbourhood transformation but rather as an initiative targeting the most severely distressed public housing developments in the country (Turbov and Piper, 2005). The programme had five key objectives: (i) changing the physical shape of public housing by replacing the worst developments with apartments or townhouses, (ii) reducing concentrations of poverty by encouraging a greater income mix among public housing residents, (iii) establishing support services to help public housing residents get and keep jobs, (iv) establishing and enforcing high standards of personal and community responsibility and (v) forging broad-based partnerships in planning and implementing improvements in public housing (Pitcoff, 1999). However, for its first 6 years, HOPE VI operated under a number of evolving laws, regulations and HUD legal opinions that increasingly gave local housing authorities more latitude (Salama, 1999, 96).

According to Salama (1999), such measures included: (i) elimination of federal preferences emphasizing the lowest income household for admissions to public housing, (ii) the elimination of the one-for-one replacement requirement for demolished public housing units and (iii) authorization allowing housing authorities to utilize housing development funds and operating subsidies for projects owned by private housing organizations. One of the outcomes was a shift in focus away from the ‘most’ severely distressed public housing sites, towards sites with the greatest potential to attract private investment for HOPE VI (National Housing Law Project, 2002).

Such changes were codified in 1998 under the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act. In addition, this legislature included amendments to the Housing Act of 1937, which authorized further deregulation of local housing authorities in an effort to deconcentrate poverty and develop mixed-income communities (Hunt et al., 1998). Thus, the programme was recast as a poverty dispersal initiative that replaces poverty-concentrated public housing developments with new mixed-income housing (Goetz, 2000; Smith, 2002). This policy shift was firmly grounded in the theory that former public housing neighbourhoods would attract economic investment and that former public housing residents would benefit from greater exposure to higher income residents (Joseph, 2006; Vale, 2000).

These legislative changes meant that nearly any public housing site could now qualify for HOPE VI funds regardless of the condition of the housing stock (National Housing Law Project, 2002). Despite concerns about the loss of low-income units and displacement, HOPE VI has since expanded into a \$6.3 billion effort involving 190 local housing authorities throughout the country (Castells, 2010). Although touted as one of the most important and innovative inner city revitalization programme, critics assert that a major flaw continually overlooked in policy circles is HOPE VI’s inability to accommodate public housing residents who are displaced, as well as those at the lowest end of the income scale (Buron et al., 2007). Ironically, concerns about displacement in particular are reminiscent of the slum

clearance efforts authorized by the 1949 Housing Act (Hirsch, 1983).

We see HOPE VI as having at least four somewhat contradictory sets of goals. The first is a mechanism to improve housing conditions by providing for reinvestment in the public housing stock. In order to maintain this objective, PHAs have to be vigorous in protecting their units from unruly, damaging tenants—in other words, tenants who are not perceived as being good citizens. The second is to provide safe, decent housing for people who cannot provide for themselves, which necessitates meeting the needs of a diverse and vulnerable population. The third is to move people away from dependence and towards independence through facilitating entry into private job and housing markets. To meet this goal, PHAs must carefully choose tenants who seem amenable to a self-improvement project. They also must provide a range of resources and incentives for people to succeed, carefully monitor their progress through the programme, reward success and punish failure. The fourth and final goal fueling HOPE VI is to stabilize and improve the neighbourhoods in which the complexes exist in a way that demonstrates a secure investment. Ultimately, this goal seeks to encourage private real-estate developers to rediscover neighbourhoods that they had previously abandoned by withdrawing their invested capital. Consequently, HOPE VI serves as a vehicle for a second circuit of capital, where economic activity is focused, not just on production through labour but on the cycling of capital through trade. It represents an effort to make visible those neighbourhoods not yet touched by general processes of gentrification (Hackworth and Smith, 2001; Smith, 2002). It is a remaking of place, by moving the ‘problem’ of low-income housing from something dangerous and indicative of government failure to something safe and representative of the promise of private investment and public-private partnerships (Engels, 1948; Kipfer and Petrunia, 2009; Lefebvre, 1978).

In addition, the elimination of one-for-one replacement has meant further reliance on the private rental market. Depending on the location, between 20 and 40% of the redeveloped units are set aside at the

income levels of former public housing residents, meaning that the majority do not have the opportunity to return to their neighbourhoods (Goetz, 2010). Qualified public housing residents are relocated with the help of the HCV subsidy to private rental market housing (Oakley and Burchfield, 2009). While research indicates that many former public housing residents end up in somewhat of a less poor neighbourhoods than public housing, tight rental markets, as well as racial and economic segregation have left almost 40% living in other highly distressed neighbourhoods (Popkin et al., 2004b). Likewise, family situations, health issues and place-dependent considerations, such as proximity to kin and public transportation, shaped relocation preferences, possibly resulting in varying quality of destination neighbourhoods (Buron, 2004; Goetz, 2003; Harris and Kaye, 2004; Howell et al., 2005; Kleit and Manzo, 2006; Popkin et al., 2004a, 2004b; Smith, 2002).

The actual HOPE VI redevelopment has also depended heavily on partnering with private developers. The 190 local authorities utilizing HOPE VI funds have implemented such partnerships with varying balances between the public and private spheres, and virtually all have a privatized component, which is designed to attract private investment (Castells, 2010). Public-private partnerships have been essential to the successful implementation and sustainability of HOPE VI developments. For example, since the early 1990s, the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA, 2011) has entered into a number of long-term, renewable partnerships with private developers, repositioning itself as a “diversified real-estate company with a public mission” (Sugg, 2011, 91). By leveraging federal funds to attract private investment, these partnerships have yielded steady revenue streams, while at the same time providing an affordable housing component. According to Sugg (2011), over the last 15 years, the AHA has leveraged about \$300 million in HUD funding to attract more than \$3 billion in private investment. While a number of cities including Memphis, New Orleans and Philadelphia have plans to replicate the ‘Atlanta Model,’ many cities have maintained some of their traditional public housing in tandem

with mix-income redevelopment (Oakley et al., 2010). At the other side of the spectrum is NYCHA, the largest housing authority in the country, which has maintained almost all of its traditional public housing (Rhea, 2010).

Many in academic and policy circles consider HOPE VI a success: public-private partnerships have been forged, blighted housing has been replaced with attractive mixed-income developments and poverty has been reduced at the redeveloped sites (Cisneros et al., 2009). Yet, the proverbial elephant in the room is the fact that because there is no one-for-one replacement requirement, there has not only been a net loss of housing units affordable to very low-income households, but congressional allocations of voucher subsidies have not increased at a level to meet the gap caused by this loss as well (Fraser et al., 2011; Goetz, 2010). To situate this crisis in the broader perspective of unmet need, in 1970, there were 130 affordable units for every 100 low-income households in the country, whereas today there are only 38 (Urban Academic Scholars in Opposition to PETRA, 2010). Likewise, according to the written Congressional testimony submitted by the Urban Academic Scholars in Opposition to PETRA, the reduction in public housing stock is paralleled by the loss of 360,000 mostly project-based Section 8 units as private owners have opted-out when their 20-year contracts came to an end, and another 335,000 are coming up for renewal in the next few years (2010). These reductions are compounded by the fact that the majority of former public housing residents have never benefited from the HOPE VI redevelopments (Oakley and Burchfield, 2009). The evidence is also unclear concerning how these redevelopments influence the spatial distribution of poverty throughout the urban core and whether former public housing residents relocated with vouchers end up in substantively better neighbourhoods (Goetz, 2010).

Private-sector involvement in HOPE VI takes multiple forms. Some of the financing used to redevelop the complexes comes from the private sector. Private developers are invariably responsible for the design and construction of work, and frequently PHAs contract the day-to-day management of the

complexes to for-profit property management companies, many of whom have little experience providing services for poor residents. Beyond the building and management of the physical units, the mixed-income framework of HOPE VI allows for a portion of the redeveloped units to be rented at market rate, meaning that these units are not affordable to low-income households. Most HOPE VI complexes also include a homeownership component (often geared towards lower income housing), removing more units from the reach of those who cannot afford homeownership. Finally, because HOPE VI redevelopment is done at much lower densities than the complexes they replaced, there are a significant number of displaced public housing residents who are forced to rent in the private market with HVCs, further cementing the relationship between real-estate industry and public housing. For these reasons, we contend that HOPE VI represents a substantial move towards the privatization of public housing, setting the precedent for the State becoming an agent of the market (Smith, 2002).

Despite these deep concerns and a growing unmet need of affordable housing for low-income households, on 17 March 2010, HUD Secretary Shawn Donovan testified before the US House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services concerning the Obama Administration's proposed Choice Neighbourhoods Initiative. Choice Neighbourhoods would build upon the successes of HOPE VI, but it would be more inclusive of the neighbourhoods in terms of revitalization (Fraser, 2009; Oakley et al., 2010b). Mixed-income redevelopment of public housing is only one component of Choice Neighbourhoods. In fact unlike HOPE VI, HUD envisions the Choice Neighbourhoods initiative as a 'hub' around which various local government entities, non-profits, businesses and other private stakeholders can coordinate in order to transform highly distressed neighbourhoods into sustainable, healthy ones with a diverse income mix (CSSP, 2010).

Yet, the only real innovation addressing the shortcomings of HOPE VI is that Choice Neighbourhoods requires one-for-one replacement. How-

ever, only one third of the original units need to be replaced on site, while the other two thirds can be sited up to 25 miles away (Oakley et al., 2010b). This raises a number of important questions, particularly concerning the fact that many public housing residents are dependent on public transportation.

About 2 months after Donovan testified about Choice Neighbourhoods, he did the same for PETRA. Donovan argued that leveraging \$7 billion by mortgaging about 25% of the remaining public housing units, the unmet maintenance and repair needs could be met resulting in public housing preservation (Donovan, 2010). His testimony was met with tough questions from Representatives Barney Frank and Maxine Waters, prompting Waters to introduce the petitions in opposition to PETRA into the Congressional Record (US Housing of Representatives, Committee on Financial Services, 2010). In addition, other opponents argued that PETRA was simply a 're-branding' of the Public Housing Investment Initiative that was introduced under the Bush Administration's HUD in 2003 and 2004 (Urban Academic Scholars in Opposition to PETRA, 2010). Both times Congress rejected this policy.

While PETRA has been stalled indefinitely, Congress approved the smaller scale Choice Neighbourhoods Initiative. After the FY 2011 Congressional budget cuts to public housing were signed into law, housing authorities around the country grappled with how to maintain their existing public housing stock. That being said, the controversy over privatizing public housing under PETRA has overshadowed two important realities of local housing authorities: (i) many have already transformed into public-private entities, and (ii) under Section 18 of the 1937 Housing Act, housing authorities can submit dispossession and demolition applications to HUD for properties they deem too expensive to repair (Castells, 2010; Oakley et al., 2008). With such drastic cuts to the Public Housing Capital Fund, the need for partnerships between housing authorities and real-estate developers has increased, further depleting an already compromised public housing stock.

Conclusion: does public housing have a future in the public sphere?

Drawing on a wide range of existing literature, the purpose of this paper has been to expand upon previous reviews concerning the relationship between public housing and private capital. By concretely linking three distinct time periods in public housing policy to issues of labour, capital and place, we have demonstrated how public housing has always been 'on the road to market'. We have argued that by examining this history, current policy initiatives (for example, HOPE VI and PETRA) are given needed context. Specifically, in the name of helping the poor, such programmes have sought to reclaim divested public housing for potential private-sector investment and, simultaneously, re-regulate the poor by attaching the provision of housing to the reproduction of labour. At the same time, our examination further clarifies how the most recent housing policy initiatives are in alignment with the original goals of the public housing programme, goals that were reached by compromising with the private sector.

Public housing has always been an area of contestation between private and public spheres, with housing policies associated with the New Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s creating the enabling conditions for localities to produce public housing, and subsequent government disinvestment and public-private reinvestment incrementally compromising its provision. Yet the most recent policy shift has resulted in a greater reliance on private capital to provide what was originally intended to be a social good. The contention that public housing can never 'go back,' therefore, is sustained. In other words, because provisions now depend more directly on the private housing market, outsourcing management and increased private capital investment, the originally stated goals of housing policy cannot be met. Additionally, because both government entities and private developers benefit from this arrangement, in practicality, these policy goals remain impossible to achieve.

What does this imply for the future of public housing? Policy trends over the last two decades

have moved a significant portion of the provision of public housing into the private sector. This has created a new brand of government-assisted low-income housing in the form of 'public-private public housing' while at the same time helping to deplete the traditional public housing stock. Among low-income housing advocates, there was a surge of optimism when President Obama was elected. That optimism quickly dulled as it became clear that no new policies directly addressing the unmet low-income housing need and depletion of public housing would emerge. Instead, Obama's Administration has kept on the same trajectory that many Presidents before him had done. Thus, the most likely scenario will be the continued slow, but constantly contested *rock-a-bye* of public housing, and perhaps its elimination in the near future.

Endnotes

¹ NAREB, National Home Builders Association, lenders, developers, community builders and other stakeholders) are referred to here as 'the housing lobby'. Their efforts were largely headed by NAREB.

² That spatially concentrating workers together in stable housing also provides a potential venue for labour organizing was not lost on opponents of public housing. Attempts to label public housing as socialist or Communist and to work to limit or shut down organizing efforts or to exclude or evict 'subversive' tenants were common during this period (Parson, 2005). Policies, which segregated white and African-American tenants, can also be read as attempts to keep these two groups apart (and potentially hostile towards each other) and prevent them from joining together in solidarity.

³ While pre-HOPE VI public housing is often criticized in the present for its poor condition, high density and very low levels of amenities, by the standards of the shanties, which characterized the poorer areas of many American cities around 1930, it is comparably comfortable. However, when compared to middle-class housing of the period, it is still substandard.

⁴ However dilapidated, at least some of the homes of people who lived in the 'slums' were owner occupied. That they were given access to public rental housing as compensation for giving up their claim to the slum is a classic case of the accumulation (by the rich) by dispossession (of the poor).

⁵ Private housing for low-income populations is also among the least profitable for private developers. On the homeownership side, affordability constraints on the part of potential buyers mean that margins are very tight for those who build and sell such homes. On the rental side, margins are similarly tight, exacerbated high turnover as tenants either frequently move to seek more desirable housing because landlords chose not to invest in maintenance to increase their profits or are evicted because their precarious employment situations means they cannot regularly pay the rent.

⁶ Severely distressed refers to dilapidated, often largely vacant buildings that show the effects of poor construction, managerial neglect, inadequate maintenance and rampant vandalism (Turner et al. 2005). According to Turner et al. (2005), these developments typically have huge backlogs of repairs, including non-working elevators, leaky pipes, old electric wiring, unstable walls and pest infestations that create a poor and often unsafe living environment for residents. However, it is important to note that the HOPE VI legislation did not codify this definition as a programme requirement (National Housing Law Project, 2002).

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