

Excluding the Poor:

First Houses, pictured here in 1939, replaced poorly constructed tenement housing on the Lower East Side with modernized apartments for low-income families. Almost 4,000 families competed for only 122 apartments when First Houses opened, in 1935. Photo courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.



by Ethan G. Sribnick

Public Housing in New York City

In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, federal, state, and local officials developed their most radical response to the problem of inadequate shelter for the poor and working class: publicly built and subsidized housing. In the years after World War II, stark high-rise towers became a common feature in the landscape of America's cities. There was never, however, a clear consensus over the purpose of public housing. Some believed public housing should provide shelter for the poorest and most unstable families. Others hoped to create thriving, financially stable working-class communities by restricting residency to working families who could demonstrate their potential as upstanding tenants. In New York, unlike in most American cities, the more restrictive view of public housing often won out; never have welfare recipients formed the majority of public-housing tenants in this city. Today, as activists and policy makers in New York clamor to make more public-housing units available to homeless families, it is helpful to understand this history of disagreement over public housing and how these competing views continue to inform debate over poverty and homelessness.

Public housing in New York emerged from decades of struggle to improve the housing and communities of the poor and working class. In 1934, when the reformist mayor Fiorello La Guardia took office, thousands of families still lived in substandard buildings. Housing reforms passed in 1901 required some basic standards of ventilation, safety, and hygiene, but more than 350,000 tenements built before these reforms were still standing. Thirteen hundred of these buildings still relied on outhouses in the yards, another 23,000 provided toilets only in the halls, and 30,000 had no bathing facilities. From 1918 to 1929 there were four times as many fires and eight times as many deaths in pre-1901 tenements as there were in structures built after the passage of the 1901 law.

La Guardia's first step was to push through a new housing code requiring landlords to retrofit their buildings to meet new

standards for safety and sanitation or to board them up. Many buildings were so old as to make the required improvements impossible. "The only ultimate cure for them," opined Tenement Commissioner Langdon Post, "is dynamite."

In February 1934 the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the city's new public-housing agency, began its state-mandated mission to provide for "the clearance, replanning, and reconstruction" of the slum districts of New York. Over the next four years, NYCHA demolished 1,100 tenement buildings, removing 10,000 rental units. Property owners abandoned an additional 40,000 apartments. The result of all this slum clearance was a shortage of low-rent housing for the poor and working class.

NYCHA's next step was to provide new housing with support from the state and federal governments through the development of a number of public-housing projects. NYCHA's initial housing project, the appropriately named First Houses, opened on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on January 15, 1935. The original plan had been to renovate existing tenements, tearing down every third building to provide more light and air, but the tenement houses were in such bad condition that all but three on the block had to be demolished. Even with the additional construction costs, NYCHA was able to offer apartments for the reasonable rent of \$6 a room per month. The complex included central heat—a rarity in tenements, which usually relied on coal stoves for warmth—and gardens and playgrounds integrated into the project grounds. NYCHA received 3,800 applications for the 122 units in the development. The high demand for public housing continued as NYCHA expanded into larger complexes. Harlem River Houses, in Upper Manhattan, received 14,000 applications for 574 units, and Williamsburg Houses, in Brooklyn, received 20,000 applications for 1,622 units. Based on this demand, public housing in New York appeared to be a resounding success.

The Historical Perspective

The high demand for inexpensive housing allowed NYCHA to be selective in choosing residents. The families that moved into Williamsburg and Harlem River Houses in 1937 first passed through a lengthy screening process. The first cut of selectivity was by race—the projects were strictly segregated, with Williamsburg open only to whites and Harlem River only to blacks. Next, NYCHA evaluated applicants by both “need and merit.” However, NYCHA had no interest in providing housing for the poorest New Yorkers; only those families headed by breadwinners with stable jobs were eligible for these projects. In addition, potential residents also had to prove to NYCHA administrators that they had insurance policies, bank accounts, and proper housekeeping skills.

The population that first entered public housing in New York were, as a result of these policies, rarely those most in need of it. Every family selected for Harlem River Houses, for instance, had at least one wage earner, and one-fourth of the families had two people working. Considering that unemployment in Harlem was at least 40 percent, families entering the project were well-off compared with the population of the surrounding neighborhood.

Part of the reason for this selectivity was the belief of NYCHA's leaders that they were building not just housing, but fully functioning communities. On-site day-care centers, nursery schools, and after-school programs offered care for residents' children. Outdoor spaces included tennis and handball courts. Meeting rooms facilitated the development of clubs and organizations such as tenant associations, community newspapers, and Boy Scout troops.

At times the involvement of NYCHA staff in tenants' lives bordered on paternalistic. Miriam Burns, who grew up in the Harlem River Houses, distinctly remembers “a white woman, I guess she was the manager,” coming to her family's apartment to collect the rent. “She was not averse,” Burns recalled, “to looking in the refrigerator.” The NYCHA agents were instructed to chat with the families to determine if they needed help and to make sure they were properly caring for the apartments. Burns reflected that today such invasions into people's homes would seem “unbelievable,” but as she remembers it, her mother seemed happy to show off her housekeeping skills. NYCHA would eventually phase out rent-collection visits, but the sense of staff involvement in tenants' lives would continue.

Over this early period, NYCHA was under increasing federal pressure to provide more housing for the very poor. The United States Housing Authority (USHA), a precursor to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, believed that public housing should provide low-cost apartments for the lowest-income population. NYCHA administrators resisted that view, fearing that



Residential programming was one way that NYCHA attempted to build a sense of community within its projects. Here, children gather for “Story Telling Hour” at Williamsburg Houses in 1945. Photo courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.

extremely poor families, especially those receiving public assistance, would not be able to care for their housing properly. They also believed that the characteristics and behavior of poor families would undermine the communities NYCHA hoped to create within the projects. In 1953 NYCHA established an additional 21 categories of non-desirability in evaluating applicants. These included narcotic addiction, single parenthood, out-of-wedlock children, teen parenthood, “highly irregular work history,” “lack of parental control,” mental illness, poor housekeeping, and “lack of furniture.” While having only one of these characteristics would not automatically exclude an applicant from admission into NYCHA housing, it would lead to extra scrutiny and make placement more difficult. These factors kept many families in need of shelter out of public housing. While the number of families on public assistance in NYCHA rose over the 1940s and 1950s, the authority placed families so that no individual project had more than 20 to 30 percent of its families on welfare.

NYCHA also remained extremely vigilant with regard to the racial composition of its projects. While the policy of racial segregation established in its first projects was quickly abandoned, NYCHA paid close attention to race in evaluating and placing applicants. The agency operated under the belief that whites would abandon public housing if it became predominantly black. The “overwhelming population in New York City is white,” explained settlement-house leader Mary Simkhovitch, a member of NYCHA's board. “We don't want to act in such a way and do this thing in such a way that it will deter white people from going

into projects.” In following this directive, NYCHA created some projects that were majority-white and others in which a majority of families were black or Puerto Rican. In order to maintain a “racial balance” across the NYCHA projects, administrators discriminated against blacks and Puerto Ricans, the groups that had the most difficulty in finding decent affordable housing in the private market. Yet, even with these restrictions, by 1959 NYCHA housing had become mainly black and Puerto Rican, with most whites concentrated in projects in the outer boroughs.

In the mid-1960s, the debate over the purpose of public housing resurfaced. Officials within city government began pressuring the housing authority to accept more poor families in desperate need of housing. “Problem families must have new housing before they can be helped,” declared Welfare Commissioner James Dumpson in 1965. He estimated that 300,000 of the people “forced to live

in this city’s slums and rat-infested tenements” had been found ineligible for NYCHA housing. NYCHA chairman William Reid responded that the problems these families faced were not ones that public housing was equipped to confront. “It’s a welfare and social problem,” he explained. These families “have to learn to live in public housing before they move into the projects.”

In 1968 NYCHA, acquiescing to some of its critics’ demands, announced that it would no longer “deal with the morals of applicants. Thus, for example, no family may be declared ineligible solely because the applicant had an out-of-wedlock child.” In that same year, the number of families in NYCHA housing who received welfare reached a new high of 15.4 percent. NYCHA also lost much of its autonomy in evicting residents, as a Supreme Court decision required new procedural protections for tenants. In 1973 the total welfare population of NYCHA reached 34 percent. While this was higher than NYCHA officials desired, it was still low compared with other cities. In that same year in Chicago, for instance, 49 percent of public-housing residents received welfare.

NYCHA bought and destroyed existing housing to make room for its developments. This image from 1936 shows twelve blocks cleared prior to the construction of Williamsburg Houses. 78 percent of the demolished apartments had no central heating and 67 percent had no private toilets. Photo courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.



The Historical Perspective



Brownsville, Brooklyn, is dominated by public-housing developments. This image shows Brownsville Houses—27 six- and seven-story buildings built in 1948—in the foreground, as well as numerous housing projects that went up around it afterward, including Van Dyke I (1955) and II (1964), Howard (1955), Tilden (1961), Low (1967), Hughes and Glenmore Plaza (both 1968), and Woodson (1970). Photo courtesy of the New York City Housing Authority.

Also in 1973 President Richard Nixon announced a moratorium on the construction of new public housing. The radical experiment in publicly built and managed housing that began in the 1930s was over. In its place would come the Section 8 program, which provided federal vouchers in order to subsidize rent for housing procured in the private market. NYCHA projects would continue to provide housing, and the authority would come to oversee the Section 8 program, but there would be no further expansion of public housing in New York. Even as support for public housing diminished and pressure to take in more poor families increased, NYCHA persevered in its efforts to maintain mixed-income housing by assigning applicants to different tiers based on income and mixing tiers within projects.

This effort would be challenged, beginning in the 1980s, by the rise in family homelessness, which placed a new burden on NYCHA to provide housing for the extremely poor. By the mid-1980s Mayor Ed Koch had realized that the sharp rise in homeless families was not an anomaly but, rather, the start of a new trend. The temporary solutions the city had developed, such as placing families in hotels (soon dubbed “welfare hotels”) or in barracks-like congregate shelters, were not going to provide adequate shelter for the thousands of families in need of it. Koch turned to public housing to provide shelter for some of these families. Although NYCHA administrators protested that “the homeless need a whole range of social and medical services that the public housing program is simply not prepared to provide,” the Koch administration insisted that they offer around 2,000 apart-

ments, about a third of their vacancies, to homeless families every year. This priority for homeless families would continue in various forms in the administrations of mayors David Dinkins, Rudolph Giuliani, and, at first, Michael Bloomberg.

In 2005, as part of his new homelessness policy, Bloomberg discontinued the practice of giving homeless families a priority for public housing. The Bloomberg administration feared that this policy was encouraging poor families to “become homeless” and enter shelter in order to get to the front of the NYCHA waiting list. As Linda Gibbs, then the head of the Department of Homeless Services, explained, “We wanted to free up the Section 8 and Housing Authority units in order to reward and encourage people to solve their housing problems without moving through the shelter system.”

Public housing, the administration believed, should reward those families who were working to improve their economic well-being—not the homeless.

Since the 1990s, NYCHA has largely reasserted its long-term efforts to limit the number of extremely poor families in public housing. As federal financial support for public housing has continued to decrease, NYCHA has attempted to recoup its losses by bringing in higher-earning tenants who can pay higher rents. In 1996, for instance, NYCHA gave top priority to working families with household incomes between \$24,000 and \$49,000 a year. The effort to attract working families, combined with the effects of the 1996 welfare reform—which pushed heads of families from welfare to work—has led to a significant decrease in the number of families in NYCHA housing receiving welfare. As of January 1, 2012, 47.2 percent of NYCHA families were working families and only 11.4 percent received public assistance. As of February 1, 2012, 163,995 families were on the waiting list for conventional public housing. NYCHA has largely returned to the policy of housing for the working poor envisioned by those who planned the first projects in the 1930s.

Today, New York’s politicians and advocates for the homeless are calling on the city to once again give homeless families priority for public housing. They hope that such housing will help stem the massive increase in the number of homeless families that the city has seen in the last few years. This debate will bring to the fore the question of what purpose public housing should serve. Should it truly be housing for the poorest New Yorkers, or should it remain more exclusive, primarily housing for the working class? As the city looks to various institutions to confront the growth in family poverty and homelessness, it remains to be seen if public housing will be part of the solution. ■