

The Illinois Geographical Society

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accomplished something else, something that FDR had in mind in that cheerless spring of 1933: that young Americans of different backgrounds and beliefs and locations would assemble to work with pride and care at a task that was larger than themselves and their own difficulties; that they would gather to build and establish something that improved not just themselves but their country as well. Kay Rippelmeyer has in *Giant City State Park and the Civilian Conservation Corps* provided a clear and detailed view of how this nationwide experiment worked with exceptional results in a rustic state park located in the rural setting of southern Illinois.

Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing.

D. Bradford Hunt. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. x and 380 pages, maps, photographs, notes, index. \$22.50 paper. (ISBN 9780226360850).

Reviewed by Thomas L. Bell, Western Kentucky University

This is the second book about Chicago public housing in which Dr. D. Bradford Hunt, Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Social Science at Roosevelt University in Chicago has had a role. *Blueprint for Disaster* is a follow-up to a 2005 volume with the much more upbeat title—*When Public Housing was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago*. In the first volume, Hunt assisted the primary author, former Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) research director J. S. Fuerst. The earlier volume was based on taped interviews with 130 residents of Chicago public housing in what would appear in retrospect to be its halcyon days (1947-53).

So if Chicago public housing was once the paragon of the progressive movement, why did it experience such a downward spiral? What happened to the programs of the agency that was once touted to be the most progressive and comprehensive program of public housing in the country? It is a complicated story according to Hunt. No one is above suspicion and all play at least a minor role in the demise of a utopian vision of public housing—land developers, realtors, elected officials, appointed members of the CHA, community activists and scholars and intellectuals. In his account, Hunt relies on every document at hand including minutes of CHA meetings, interviews with some of the principals involved and an extensive and exhaustive number of reference

sources and materials. I have no doubt that this is truly the definitive study of public housing in Chicago and it is filled with intrigue, political maneuverings and shenanigans worthy of a story of the Chicago underworld during the era of Prohibition. But make no mistake, as complicated as is the cast of characters in this story, the overriding leitmotif of the story is racial prejudice—pure and simple.

Hunt starts with the progressive vision of the modernist Catherine Bauer, a believer in the notion that better housing will make better people and in the Corbusian notion that a Radiant City will create civility by bringing its residents closer to nature in a shared community of trust and progress. While Bauer and other influential progressive thinkers on housing in the Roosevelt years such as Harold Ickes dominate Hunt's concern and are contemporary with the actual planning and construction of public housing units on the ground, Hunt might have been advised to go back at least one decade more in providing background to the story in order to examine what the Chicago sociologists (e.g., Park, Burgess, McKenzie, Zorbaugh) had to say about the evolving moral landscape of an increasingly segregated Chicago. Other than Louis Wirth, there is no mention of members of the Chicago school of human ecology as it is referred to in geography textbooks. Given Hunt's eye for detail and leaving no stone unturned from the late 1930s to the present, this oversight is one of the few flaws of an otherwise sweeping account bordering on the magisterial.

Younger readers might have difficulty comprehending the depth of racial prejudice present in Chicago in the late 1940s that eventually blunted the hard-fought and almost unprecedented control that the CHA had obtained to redevelop both public and private landholdings in the immediate post-war years. The impetus for the downfall of this progressive movement was not an attempt to redevelop a previously all-white working class area located in a large parcel of the nine square mile area designated in the Chicago Plan as a target for slum clearance and redevelopment. Rather the changes that diminished the authority of the CHA were any of several more modest attempts to locate public housing on the periphery of all-white areas of the city.

A good example of a seemingly innocuous project that caused a firestorm of protest and controversy was the felt necessity to provide temporary housing for returning WWII GIs and their families. One such project was the Fernwood Homes area where temporary housing units (e.g., inexpensive Quonset huts left over from the war effort) were located near the edge of a white working-class neighborhood. When the

first black veterans and their families attempted to occupy homes in this development, the situation turned explosive. Not only were there racially charged incidents of white violence against the few black families, indicating just how deeply divided the city's residents were along racial lines, but the situation forced the ouster of progressive mayor Edward Kelly, the diminution of the authority of the CHA, and required a major police action to squelch what might have become in 1949 an ugly racial confrontation that was reminiscent of the infamous Chicago race riots of 1919. And what happened at Fernwood is just one seemingly minor event. There were many other instances of burning to the ground housing units occupied by blacks who had the audacity to move into majority white projects. In the 1950s this naked racism was often clothed by McCarthy-style red baiting and inciting the fear of creeping socialism in the provision of public housing. But hardly anyone except black community leaders raised an eyebrow about slum clearance and redevelopment issues so long as the public housing was to replace slum housing only in the segregated black belt. Out of sight, out of mind.

By the time of open housing legislation and the end of *de jure* segregation in the mid 1960s, public housing in Chicago was almost entirely occupied by minority populations often (ware)housed in mammoth-scale projects such as the 4,400 unit Robert Taylor Homes, named in memory of a liberal African American member of the CHA during its progressive era, the sight of which would have undoubtedly appalled him had he lived long enough to see its completion. But despite the powerful force of the liberal/progressive movement and strong leaders in the CHA such as Robert Taylor and the outspokenly progressive Elizabeth Wood, the once-feisty and independent CHA had, by the mid 1950s and '60s, become just another bureaucratic agency of city government, often bowing to the will of local alderman who did not wish to upset the racial equilibrium in their little piece of the increasingly multicultural mosaic that the city of Chicago had become. Is it any wonder that within the past ten years Chicago was singled out as the most segregated city in the United States?

In his quest to elaborate on reasons for public housing's failure in Chicago beyond pure racial prejudice, Hunt devotes chapters to the architectural aspects of the large-scale projects themselves and finds the same culprit that Oscar Newman found in his 1970s classic *Defensible Space*—the inherent dangers built into the high-rise “warehousing” of people in the “vertical ghetto.” Hunt's argument is more complete and nuanced than the spate of studies that appeared shortly after the

demolition of another infamous public housing project—the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis. Hunt points out that high density is bad enough, but not the entire reason for high crime rates in these units. Reduced budgets that forced builders to cut corners, use inferior materials and questionable design standards to shoehorn project buildings into limited spaces surely exacerbated the problem of crime, especially in the public, albeit anonymous, spaces such as stairwells, elevators (when they worked at all), playgrounds and multiple entryways that defied the human scale for oversight. But Hunt points out that Chicago, unlike other cities with significant public housing, had the highest ratio of children-to-adults of any city. Without proper supervision and after-school activities, the children began to run amok. The reasons for these high ratios is also complicated, but has a lot to do with the disappearance of the working class in Chicago's public housing to be replaced by a welfare-dependent underclass of many children, unwed mothers and absentee fathers. Screening of tenants was almost nonexistent by the 1970s whereas there was a great deal of effort to assure leadership within the public housing communities in earlier decades in order to foster a conducive child-rearing environment replete with nuclear families and wholesome community activities and programs (i.e., *When Public Housing was Paradise*).

I would highly recommend this book for any urban geographer interested in an in-depth study of the unraveling of Chicago public housing. I do, however, have a few caveats and criticisms. The book assumes a great deal of familiarity with the city of Chicago on the part of the reader and while there is a location map at the front of the volume that one can keep referring to as place names are mentioned, there is less effort to tell the reader unfamiliar with Chicago what is the image, stereotype or cachet value of the various neighborhoods and projects that are mentioned throughout the volume. When Mayor Jane Byrne decided to try to live, albeit briefly, in the project located in the Cabrini Green neighborhood, what does that connote, for example, to a reader unfamiliar with Chicago?

I wish that geographers had played a bigger role in parade of academicians and urban scholars who were cited to support many of Hunt's arguments. Hunt's end notes and references take up fully 52 pages (one-sixth of the length of the book itself). There was, for example, only a single reference to the work of Brian J.L. Berry and in that reference he is identified as a “Harvard economist” (p. 206). Berry's entire earlier career with the Department of Geography and the Center

for Urban Studies at the University of Chicago appears to have been overlooked.

But these are minor quibbles. Overall, the volume is excellent and should be on the bookshelves of all serious urban scholars in general and those concerned with public housing in particular.

Chicago to Lake Geneva, A 100-Year Road Trip: Retracing the Route of a 1905 H. Sargent Michaels Guide for Motorists Compiled by the Chicago Map Society. Introduction by Robert W. Karrow and photographs by Wilbert Stroveve and James R. Akerman. Chicago, Illinois: The Chicago Map Society and The Newberry Library, 2008. 160 pages, illustrations, photographs, maps. \$17.95 paper (ISBN 9780911028829).

Reviewed by John A. Jakle, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

How to find one's way by automobile when roads were largely unmarked as to name and potential destination? That was the problem Homer Sargent Michaels assigned in publishing his 1905 guide for motorists traveling from Chicago to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Included for intersections where a motoring decision was required (as well as for major landmarks passed) was not only written description or instruction, but also –what makes his effort particularly valuable today– a photograph. Reproduced here is the guide inclusive of its verbal and visual information (along with advertising insertions). But, importantly, photographs have been replicated through contemporary photography – an exercise in re-photography. Scene by scene, the reader of today is enabled a kind of time travel –invitation to contemplate changes (minor as well as major) made to the built environment over intervening years. Offered, in consequence, is an extraordinary opportunity to assess changes wrought by automobility along the nation's roadsides, including the rise of commercial strips.

However, there is little if any interpretation in this book regarding what the paired photographs (displays of before and after) actually mean –what they show, in other words, of changing roadside landscape. The reader is left solely with his or her own explanations. Why is there drastic change evident here, but little if any change evident there? How does change relate geographically along the transect? Are there categories of landscape change evident? What are the implied processes

at work? One might wish that a future scholar would take the book and offer in-depth analysis along such lines of thought. Missing also is careful assessment of the re-photographing process. Just what are the most useful strategies for replicating photographic images? What was employed here?

Homer Sargent Michaels produced other illustrated route-guides, detailing, for example, travel between Chicago and Milwaukee, Chicago and Rockford, and between various other cities in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Perhaps, a future scholar might treat the entirety of his output thus to tackle a century and more of roadside change across a sweep of the Midwest?

Of course, such speculation goes well beyond publisher intentions. And The Chicago Map Society should not be faulted for not producing in-depth interpretation of changing landscape. Their goal was merely to call attention to a kind of historical resource (if not one rather unique) with clear scholarly potential for understanding not only landscape change, but change in America's motoring habits. This they have accomplished through a very attractive (and visually engaging) publication.