They Didn't Think of the Children

D. Bradford Hunt's new book on the Chicago Housing Authority attributes the failure of high-rise housing projects to a "concentration of people under 21 years old [that] was unprecedented in the urban experience."

By Deanna Isaacs

In the 1980s, D. Bradford Hunt was a Hinsdale high schooler tasting the freedom of a driver's license by tooling around Chicago in the family car. Nothing he saw on his excursions struck him as more interesting than the clusters
of towers that made up public housing projects like Cabrini–Green, Stateway Gardens, and the Robert Taylor Homes. "I didn't even know what their names were at the time," he says. But "you couldn't help but go, 'Whoa!'"

Crowds of people apparently just hanging out on the street, police out in force at the crowd's edges, boarded up windows and evidence of fires. "It was an encounter with what anthropologists call the Other," he says now. "So different from anything I knew, I could only wonder, 'What happened here?'"

That question still dogged him in 1998, when he was back home looking for a dissertation subject after having completed his course work for a PhD in history at Berkeley. Thinking the answer might be found in the records of the Chicago Housing Authority, he started showing up at their offices, asking to go through their files. He says they resisted at first, but when he proposed writing a report for them on the historical value of their archival material, they relented.

Hunt spent six months mucking around in a warehouse at 115th and Halsted, identifying everything that was stashed there—including at least 250 linear feet of files important enough for preservation—and produced a 65-page report for which the CHA paid him $2,350. That became the starting point for his dissertation, "What Went Wrong With Public Housing in Chicago?," which morphed into a book called Blueprint for Disaster, published last month by the University of Chicago Press.

Chicago's public housing system is rooted in social and health concerns raised in the early 20th century, when many tenements lacked heat and running water and the city was dotted with pit latrines. A consensus for government intervention developed during the New Deal, but concrete action was stalled by World War II. When efforts resumed in earnest in the late 40s, there was a struggle between old guard reformers who wanted to clear the slums and a younger group of planners who wanted to put new public housing on larger sites at the city's fringes. The latter idea was squelched by the City Council, Hunt says: the aldermen didn't want blacks moving out of their historical ghettos. More than 90 percent of postwar public housing went into densely populated, tightly constrained neighborhoods that were already solidly black.

Still, in the 1940s and '50s, the Chicago Housing Authority considered itself a progressive force, supplanting slums with new housing for families. Influenced by European modernists like Le Corbusier, and following the example set by New York, the CHA used federal money to build towers. The first were Dearborn Homes at 29th and State, planned in 1945 and finished in 1949. By 1959, the CHA had opened 9,500 new units, most of them with three to five bedrooms. The Robert Taylor Homes alone comprised 4,400 of them, in 28 buildings, each 16 stories high (and equipped with only two small elevators). When they were occupied, the ratio of children to adults was nearly three to one, higher than other public housing projects and kid-heavy suburbs like Levittown.

It didn't take more than a few years of experience with those vertical beehives for officials to see that they were a bad idea for kids, who needed convenient access to supervised outdoor play areas. From 1955 to 1959, Hunt says, Chicagoans—including Mayor Richard J. Daley—traveled to Washington to beseech Congress to allow a little more money per unit so the CHA could construct less dense, low-rise buildings. But the feds stuck to their maximum of $17,000 per unit, and in Chicago, where land and construction costs were high, that meant more towers. Between 1960 and 1963 there was a binge of development: the CHA opened 9,500 new units, most of them with three to five bedrooms. The Robert Taylor Homes alone comprised 4,400 of them, in 28 buildings, each 16 stories high (and equipped with only two small elevators). When they were occupied, the ratio of children to adults was nearly three to one, higher than other public housing projects and kid-heavy suburbs like Levittown.

As working-class families fled the projects, the rents—based on income and earmarked to cover maintenance—fell short. CHA leaders were grossly ineffective at best (Hunt says he found no evidence of scandal). Repairs were deferred, the towers deteriorated, and by the 1980s the CHA was a notorious slumlord. When the crack epidemic of the 1990s hit, many of its buildings fell openly under the control of gangs. Finally, in 1995, the federal government took the bankrupt agency over and cleaned it up, handing it back to the city in 1999. The current Mayor Daley privatized management and began demolishing the towers. His plan calls for replacing them with mixed-income housing that, more often than not, looks a lot like the 19th-century structures that were removed 50 years ago to make way for the high-rises.

So what does Hunt make of all this?

Amid all the unemployment, poverty, and broken families, the institutional racism, political corruption, and bureaucratic incompetence, Hunt believes he's found a relatively simple answer to the question of what went wrong with public housing in Chicago: too many kids. Taking into account all the other influences, he says, that was the single most important factor. The decisions that put multibedroom apartments filled with youngsters into hard-to-access towers were the CHA's blueprint for disaster.

Hunt wants to make it clear that he doesn't blame "families for having lots of kids, or single mothers. The tenants are the victims here," he says. "They wanted what everyone wants: building maintenance, security, and decent schools for their kids—and they fought to make the buildings work." The devil is in "the policy choices." The projects became ungovernable because there weren't enough adults, he says. "This concentration of people under 21 years old was unprecedented in the urban experience."

But what does a white kid from Hinsdale looking at the incomplete records of a lame bureaucracy know? Hunt, now a professor of social science at Roosevelt University, doesn't pretend to have the sort of knowledge that comes with growing up in public housing. He admits he "had a hard time assessing the impact of psychological damage. All that oppression—perhaps people do take it out on their buildings. I get that. But I didn't delve heavily into it. Mine is a policy history. I've studied the policy, and I

think that's where I've made a contribution. Do I claim that I have the last story on public housing? No."

Hunt still believes there's a role for government in housing. He says the lesson of Chicago's projects is that "for very poor families, developments of no more than 50 to 100 units run in partnership with social service agencies" are best. And these days, he notes, public housing here seeks to be invisible. Unlike the towers that made such a bold impression on him in the 1980s, "you can't tell now, in a mixed-income development, where the public housing is."

Tags: D. Bradford Hunt, Chicago Housing Authority, Blueprint for Disaster, CHA, Cabrini–Green, Stateway Gardens, Robert Taylor Homes, Dearborn Homes, public housing, Roosevelt University