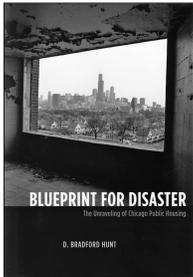


Housing and Real Estate



Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing

D. Bradford Hunt. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009. 392 pages. \$35, \$5–\$35 (e-book).

Alas, Chicago public housing is not one of the great understudied issues of urban planning. Perhaps you share my sense that texts on this topic occupy what marketers might call a saturated market: 13 separate books on the same program in the same city, 10 of which have publication dates of 2000 or later. Together, they total almost 4,000 pages (by my calculation, more than 10 pounds if piled one on top of another), to which Hunt has taken the bold step of adding 392 pages (or roughly one pound) more. It is a confident scholar who wades into this ocean of work and says, “I’ve got something to add!”

Well, it turns out that he does. The story of Chicago public housing is surely familiar by now: a slowly unfolding train wreck of a disaster visited upon residents and neighbors alike by poor policy design, sterile and dysfunctional architecture, chronic underfunding, postwar racial politics, and the sheer incompetency of those given the responsibility of running it. Hunt manages, however, to chart new territory in *Blueprint for Disaster*, both through his source material and through his interpretation of events. In terms of sources, he relies heavily on archived material from the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). Through this, he provides insider perspectives on the operation of CHA housing over the years, revealing at times a surprising prescience among CHA officials about the mistakes they were making, such as the headlong march toward high-rise development in the 1950s and 1960s. In other cases, Hunt reveals significant backroom conflicts, as in the internal fights that took place over integration within CHA housing.

The drawback of relying heavily on CHA material is that at times he produces a somewhat CHA-centric history. Much is revealed, for example, about the malfeasance of federal officials who impose draconian cost-cutting measures on CHA because, presumably, this is what CHA officials were writing about in the internal documents used by Hunt. Less is revealed, however, about the staggering mismanagement of CHA officials, how it emerged, why it was tolerated, and why it persisted.

Hunt’s interpretive contribution in this book is his argument that CHA public housing, and public housing in other cities, failed in large part because of the emphasis on housing large families. “CHA planners produced communities with youth-adult ratios several magnitudes greater than any previously seen in the urban experience” (p. 147). Such high ratios undermined the collective efficacy of CHA residents and produced widespread social disorder, which Hunt notes emerged “before poverty became entrenched, before jobs disappeared in black ghettos, before the CHA’s finances

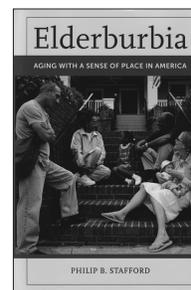
collapsed, before deferred maintenance meant physical disorder, and before the drug scourge ravaged tenants” (p. 146).

The book is wonderfully detailed, providing several vivid moments of storytelling. My personal favorite is about Vincent Lane, the energetic and big-talking director of the CHA from 1988 to 1995. In a 1995 meeting with HUD officials, and after seven years of trying to get a handle on CHA’s toughest challenges and seeing all of his best efforts at reform falling apart, he is told that HUD’s assessment of CHA is that it has failed across the board in its basic management tasks. “Lane, laying bare his own frustration with the CHA, threw his large set of keys across the table at HUD assistant secretary Joseph Shuldiner, and told him the federal government could have Chicago’s projects if it wanted them” (p. 277). Months later, Lane was out, and HUD did, in fact, take over.

Our preoccupation with Chicago public housing is certainly not due to the fact that it is representative of all public housing in the United States, because Chicago public housing is not typical. Instead, we stare at Chicago public housing in the same way we gape at automobile accidents or gawk slack-jawed at footage of natural and manmade disasters. It’s a horrible sight, but somehow we just can’t tear ourselves away. Hunt has given us the opportunity to indulge this impulse one more time. I recommend doing so.

Edward G. Goetz

Goetz is the director of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and a professor for the Humphrey Institute, specializing in housing and local community development planning and policy, at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on issues of race and poverty and how they affect housing policy planning and development.



Elderburbia: Aging With a Sense of Place in America

Philip B. Stafford. Praeger, Santa Barbara, CA, 2009. 208 pages. \$44.95.

Stafford is an anthropologist and social gerontologist who has collected profiles of community development initiatives and design guidelines for elder-friendly communities. His *Elderburbia* couldn’t be a timelier book, as planning departments across the country are in the process of evaluating the demographics and health and housing needs of their age 65 and older population. Planners are often doing this in unison with public health districts, area agencies on aging, community-based social service agencies, and retirement and assisted-living housing providers because 2010 marks the 65th year since the birth of the first post-World War II babies, better known as the baby boomers, and this cohort will be growing for the next 25 years.

Elderburbia addresses the development priorities and strategies for designing new neighborhoods and revamping existing neighborhoods