

Jeff Kelly Lowenstein's Blog

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Brad Hunt's Take on CHA's Decline

July 2, 2009 · [Leave a Comment](#)



Brad Hunt's richly informative book adds to our understanding of Chicago public housing.

The [Chicago Housing Authority](#) has been a potent symbol of urban neglect and the source of significant books for decades.

My former teacher [Alex Kotlowitz](#) wrote movingly about life in the Henry Horner Homes in [There Are No Children Here](#), while [Sudhir Venkatesh](#) used his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago under [William Julius Wilson](#) to launch his meteoric rise in academia with [American Project](#), his book about the Robert Taylor Homes.

For many, the explanation for the squalid conditions has been a simple case of

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racist abuse starting with former [Mayor Richard J. Daley](#), under whose tenure much of the State Street corridor, including the Robert Taylor Homes, were opened and then largely abandoned. Some have even advanced a conspiratorial argument, saying that the whole goal of the high-rises was to warehouse poor black voters while providing them with few, if any, city services and surrounding infrastructure.

Others like [James Fuerst](#) have pointed to public housing's origins as a gateway, largely for veterans, to homeownership and entry in the middle class. His book *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, is an oral history that contains many fond reminiscences of an easier, brighter, more optimistic and communal time.

[Brad Hunt](#), an associate professor at Roosevelt University, worked with Fuerst on his book. His book, [Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing](#), seeks to complicate the picture further by extending the time frame he considers to the 1930s and by looking at the intersection of federal and local policies forged in part by progressives that helped create the sordid mess in which so many residents lived and forged community.

It is an intricate tale that begins with the [Housing Act of 1937](#).

This landmark piece of housing legislation was the product of a half-century of advocacy by progressive reformers and was predicated on what Hunt calls a "[market-failure](#)" ideology in which market supply does not match demand and thus requires federal intervention. The act also contained provisions about rent that later would prove significant as well.

Against this federal backdrop, Hunt explores the local policy of slum clearance that generated so much ire among the people displaced, but was, at base, he says, an approach also advocated by progressives. He spends extensive time talking about former CHA leaders [Elizabeth Wood](#) and [Robert Taylor](#) and their support, especially Wood, for these policies.

Hunt does not back away from talking about the racially-informed actions of the first Daley as well as his predecessors, and does within the context of design choices like the high-rises that have far-reaching and negative consequences.

Hunt also explores the impact of CHA leadership, from long-time head [Charles Swibel](#), who was able to withstand concerted tenant revolts, to the disastrous tenure under [Harold Washington](#) of [Renault Robinson](#), to the term of [Vince Lane](#), which started on a promising note, but ultimately turned sour.

Hunt also examines factors outside of the projects that informed residents' experience like the departure in large numbers from the city of middle class African Americans as well as the different vision of residential integration held by black and white residents (He writes that "progressive" whites were generally

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more supportive and desirous of integration than the black residents and their families.).

One of the book's most interesting sections in that regard is Hunt's look at the [Gautreaux](#) law suit and the role of the relentless [Alex Polikoff](#), who waged what is now a 40-year legal battle to fight the unfair conditions in which so many black residents lived. Yet at the same time Polikoff's solution, to eliminate the high-rises and have residents move to suburban or scattered site locations, generated little enthusiasm from black leaders who did not support the notion that the best way for residents to improve their situation was to leave black communities and enter white ones.

In a sense, the discussion of Polikoff encapsulates many of Blueprint's strengths: emphasis on a more complicated explanation than previously offered; the inclusion of progressives as part of the picture; and the different vision of community and solution between many black and white people. The book is meticulously researched, well-written and moves briskly along, even though the content is quite dense.

Hunt largely gives residents a pass for having any responsibility in the projects' conditions and what happened there, saying that they were not so much victims, but largely unable to convert the agency they had into meaningful change in the homes in which they lived. To me, this seemed a bit easy for such a thoughtful scholar, and detracted slightly from the work's quality.

Hunt also goes a bit easy on the [Plan for Transformation](#) forged by the second Mayor Daley, saying that it is too early to see its long-term outcome, even as he does write that the plan largely makes public housing residents invisible.

These problems aside, Blueprint for Disaster is a richly informative and welcome addition to the literature about public housing, an experiment that began with positive intentions but turned out far worse in many cities than originally hoped.

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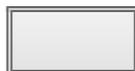
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