Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing

Lincoln Quillian

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What is This?
In *The Making of Americans*, Hirsch has done us a considerable service by providing a strong rationale for establishing a content-rich curriculum in our schools and by making explicit the link between such a curriculum and the development of well-informed future citizens. His controversial ideas bring us face-to-face with important educational questions that merit our attention and demand answers.


Lincoln Quillian
Northwestern University
l-quillian@northwestern.edu

Blueprint for Disaster tells the tale of the rise and fall of public housing in Chicago, from its hopeful beginning, to its steep decline, and ultimately its painful rebirth through the demolition of most of its high-rise buildings. There is more than the hint of Greek tragedy to this story. D. Bradford Hunt’s institutional history is grounded in new primary sources: he gained unique access to Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) records and archives, conducted interviews with former residents and administrators, and reviewed the extensive secondary literature. The result is an important case study which is both a significant work of history and an incisive social analysis.

Implemented initially as part of the New Deal, Chicago public housing started off fairly well. For early social reformers, a major goal of public housing was to replace crowded slums, which were thought to be the cause of significant social problems, with better quality housing. The early projects largely succeeded at this goal: public housing apartments were a great improvement over the slum units they replaced. Units included amenities like private bathrooms and refrigerators, and Hunt quotes former residents who describe the early projects as “paradise.”

Paradise did not last. By the mid-1970s Chicago public housing was plagued by the problems for which it would become infamous, including high crime, deteriorated buildings, and jobless residents. Blueprint for Disaster focuses on explaining how a relatively successful social program of the mid-1950s became a serious failure by 1980. Hunt points toward many interlocking factors, but especially emphasizes poor design, bad management, changes in tenant admission policies, and skewed youth-to-adult ratios.

The design problems that contributed to public housing’s problems were the result of well-intentioned but ultimately wrong-headed decisions. To meet HUD cost-per-unit guidelines intended to maximize the number of units constructed, most of the units constructed in the later 1950s and 1960s were in large high-rise towers. Many units had three or more bedrooms to accommodate large families. High-rise physical space was difficult to police and the predominance of large families weakened adult social control (more on this below). In addition to being concentrated vertically, projects were also concentrated horizontally in a few neighborhoods, most notably on the near South Side. In the early period, projects were racially segregated, and concentration resulted because projects were built over a few slum areas. For later projects, racism was a primary factor concentrating public housing: there were riots when black families were introduced into white projects, and white politicians blocked any new project outside the black ghetto.

Poor management also contributed greatly to public housing decline. The initial leader of the housing authority, CHA executive secretary Elizabeth Wood, was an idealistic social reformer and she put in place a strong management team. Her idealism, however, included using public housing to further racial integration, which put her at odds with local politicians determined to limit ghetto expansion. City politicians were gradually able to assert control over the housing authority; they succeeded in firing Wood in 1954. The management following Wood gradually declined from serviceable to inefficient to grossly incompetent and at times corrupt. Basic financial controls were almost entirely lacking. Work rules instituted by politically powerful unions resulted in operating costs far above other housing authorities. CHA resources that were sorely needed for repairs or extra security disappeared.
In the early years of public housing, most residents’ primary source of income was employment. Part of the reason for this was that the CHA enforced rules that favored working families in unit assignment. These preferences were ended in the 1960s and rent rules were instituted that were less appealing to working-class families. In the decade following this change, the working class disappeared from the projects. By 1975, less than 15 percent of the income of public housing residents was from employment.

Hunt places particular emphasis on the high ratios of youth to adults. The high-rise projects built in the 1950s and 1960s were constructed with many four- and five-bedroom units to accommodate large families. Hunt argues the resulting concentration of youth reduced the ability of adults to control public housing, predisposing the larger projects to high rates of vandalism and crime. The emphasis on the importance of youth social control is a perspective that has much in common with sociological accounts of adult social control in neighborhood crime, although these accounts do not usually put as much emphasis on the age ratio alone.

While Hunt is mostly comprehensive, at some points his institutional focus and reliance on the CHA archives is limiting. Tenant activism and the tenant councils are the subjects of an interesting chapter, but the street gangs that held powerful influence in many projects are the subject of only passing references. One wonders if squatters (who are not included in his calculations of youth-to-adult ratios) might not have played a significant role in the crime problems of the projects. Likewise, deindustrialization of urban cores was in full swing as public housing approached its nadir, and systems of welfare went through major changes, but Hunt provides little discussion of how these broader changes might have contributed to the problems of public housing.

Hunt’s account of the 1980s and 1990s is more dependent on secondary sources and less richly detailed than his account of the earlier periods. He provides a balanced retelling of the arguments of advocates and critics of the CHA’s plan to demolish large projects (the Plan for Transformation), although he makes it clear he believes demolition of many projects was necessary in light of the extent of deferred maintenance and basic design deficiencies of the high-rise projects. *Blueprint for Disaster* is a meticulous history of Chicago Public Housing and a provocative, often convincing analysis of what went wrong. It is essential reading for anyone interested in public housing, Chicago, or urban social problems.


Ana Maria Goldani
Princeton University
agoldani@princeton.edu

Feminist Agendas and Democracy in Latin America brings together an interdisciplinary group of researchers and activists who examine new directions of feminist activism in Latin America and their implications for democracy and gender justice. The diversity and effectiveness of feminists and women’s groups in pursuing their agendas is documented for Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, the Mexico-U.S. border as well as in their participation in international forums. The book is organized into three parts: Feminism and the State, Legal Strategies and Democratic Institutions, and International and Cross-border Activism. Each part has three chapters from highly qualified authors and some of them are active participants in feminist movements. Jane Jaquette, as the editor, does a fine job in her introductory and concluding chapters by offering a big picture analysis that integrates the various chapters.

The book is written in a regional context marked by increasing differentiation among the countries, decentralization, growing political power of poor and indigenous groups, and continuing activism by human rights, environmental and women’s groups. The internal dynamics that contribute to a more pluralist democracy are also oriented by the region’s insertion in the new global model of governance and economic policy.

The women’s experiences and limits to implementing feminist agendas described