D. Bradford Hunt's book, 'Blueprint for Disaster,' tries to make sense of public housing

Where did the CHA go wrong?

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It is hard to imagine, but public housing was once created as a paradise, a temporary way station for those down on their luck. The first residents regarded the high-rises as a big step up from the overcrowded slums of wooden shanties and eagerly moved, over the murmurs that these new towers were really just filing cabinets for the poor. With time, the buildings showed signs of wear, and admission screening processes eased. As working-class families moved to their own homes, they were replaced by increasingly poorer residents, leading to a combustible combination of gangs, drugs and poverty.

The housing projects were so dangerous that ambulances refused calls. The police called for lockdowns. As a young reporter covering one of those frequent episodes -- this one at Stateway Gardens -- for Time magazine, I remember making my way up the dark stairs because neither lights nor elevators functioned. I was nauseated from the stench of urine, freezing cold and weighed down as much by the utter despair of the place as by the heavy bulletproof vest the police required me to wear.

Today, that building and many other iconic structures have been knocked down as part of Richard M. Daley's much-heralded Plan for Transformation, which hearkens to the days of urban renewal, when neighborhoods were erased, in what many of the displaced called "Negro Removal." Then, as now, residents were dispersed, with some returning to new buildings, others moving around, rootless, landing often in substandard housing.

To document the long history, the National Public Housing Museum in Chicago is in the works, much like the Tenement Museum on New York's Lower East Side. Historians and policymakers differ on their explanations of what happened to public housing, but they would be well-served to read the new book by D. Bradford Hunt, a professor at Roosevelt University, who has the pedigree to understand the problem. He
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helped James Fuerst, a former CHA employee and guardian of its history, whose own book "When Public Housing Was Paradise," was built on interviews with former staff and residents of public housing.

Rather than a deeply reported, emotionally engaging look at life in public housing, like Alex Kotlowitz's landmark "There Are No Children Here," Hunt's book is a careful examination of how local and federal government officials failed to foresee the problems of their own creation. With painstaking attention, Hunt reviewed the CHA's records, including legal proceedings, committee minutes and statistical reports. He makes excellent use of these documents and points out how routine decisions, such as on maintenance contracts, affected the public housing system. He makes a big deal out of the fact that the apartments were designed to accommodate families with many children and argues that "the decision to develop projects with high proportions of multi-bedroom apartments to accommodate large families was a fatal misjudgment" because it led to "devastating social disorder."

Quibble as one might about occasional interpretations here, such as the notion that too many children led to social disorder, this book is a necessary contribution to the consideration of public housing in Chicago. It adds a new dimension to the debate by pointing to missed opportunities for the CHA to heed warning signs and change course and that policy choices at the local and federal level led to the demise of public housing. In an attempt to break new ground with his interpretation, Hunt locates the problems less with a poisonous mixture of political and real estate interests, governmental neglect and racism than the fact that there was no realistic financial plan for public housing and that residents were not engaged in the process.

No emotional wallop in these pages, just the clear-headed attention to neglected details of a woefully misunderstood part of Chicago history.

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"Blueprint for Disaster"

By D. Bradford Hunt

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