Public housing revisited
Early CHA officials and residents offer a view of a system that worked

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When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago
By James S. Fuerst
Greenwood, 264 pages, $67.95

The muffled implosions currently knocking the legs out from under what remains of the nation's high-rise, low-rent, public-housing projects are a clear admission of failure. Conceived ostensibly to provide a "decent, safe, and sanitary dwelling" for every American family that needed one, the massive push to build public housing from 1950 to 1970 produced results that mocked the good intentions of housing reformers and public officials.

Not only did cities like Chicago destroy still-useful older housing to make room for the projects, thus intensifying an existing shortage of affordable units, but the "communities" so constructed devolved into the now-familiar vertical warehouses for the poor. Academic observers later characterized such highly segregated, densely packed, dangerous neighborhoods as hidden war zones. The decision to demolish these developments seemed to repudiate the very idea that public housing could ever serve as a vehicle for social reform.

The story, however, is more complicated. Recent scholarship, particularly Sudhir Venkatesh's "American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto," has questioned conventional judgments regarding the viability of such neighborhoods. With those doubts raised about public housing's outcomes, we now find James S. Fuerst making the case that things did not start out so badly either. Not only can public housing be saved, Fuerst claims that it worked in the first place.

"When Public Housing Was Paradise" consists of seven chapters and a conclusion, with each of the former containing the reminiscences of perhaps 10 to 12 Chicago Housing Authority staff members and project residents who were part of the first generation to operate and occupy public housing. Fuerst, who was director of
research and statistics for the CHA from 1946 to 1953, conducted most of the interviews. D. Bradford Hunt, who recently completed a dissertation on public housing in Chicago (at the University of California at Berkeley), helped organize the data and handled much of the editing.

The heart of the book is in the first-hand accounts of the program's early operations, particularly the administration of the CHA's first executive secretary, Elizabeth Wood (1937-1954). Critics might carp at the lack of scientific rigor in the selection of witnesses, but all of the agency employees hold intrinsic importance, and the surviving residents, if skewed toward the successful, have hardly been overrepresented in the literature. They need to have their say.

The recollections of Wood's staff make a signal contribution. Beyond Fuerst himself, the commentaries of policy-level operatives such as John Ducey (director of planning from 1941 to 1948), Ed Holmgren (director of tenant selection from 1947 to 1954) and Ruth Sable (secretary to Milton Shufro, CHA public relations director and later deputy executive director) are complemented by field narratives provided by project managers Oscar Brown Jr. and Winston Kennedy.

Only a sampling of what is offered, these individuals open a window on a cohort of dedicated public servants that emerged from the New Deal with a vision and determination to pursue social justice. Willing to experiment with integration and non-discrimination (as in the implementation of the veterans' temporary housing program), they also continued to believe that public housing could serve as a vehicle to carry the working poor into the middle class.

The vignettes of the earliest projects, according to Fuerst, recapture "the almost bucolic world of public housing in the 1940s and 1950s." To those who insist that the projects inevitably worked to the detriment of black interests, Fuerst replies that African-Americans "cherished" the early developments and counters that they provided new, and relatively high quality, shelter compared to what was otherwise available. And the tenants' testimony on the quality of life--a large proportion of the examples are drawn from the Ida B. Wells Homes and Altgeld Gardens--emphasizes family and community. Two-parent households that valued work and assumed communal responsibility for the behavior of children appeared the norm, and if a trace of nostalgia occasionally creeps into such observations, they nonetheless contain a good dose of reality. Additional amenities included well-manicured lawns, parks, clinics, recreational centers and ubiquitous flower gardens; the creation of sports teams and the staging of parades and special events contributed further to local pride.

Even more important, the first generation of public-housing tenants found that the early projects did, indeed, serve as social launching pads for upwardly mobile strivers. As evidenced by the status and occupations held by Fuerst's witnesses, the early developments, moreover, churned out not a handful of exceptional individuals, but the bone and sinew of professional and working-class black Chicago. They seemed to function, it appears, much as the program's supporters intended. Given the present inclination to demolish these developments, readers may well ask: What happened?

The simplest explanation is that somewhere in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, public housing was hijacked. The 1953 inauguration of the Republican Eisenhower administration, the passage of urban-renewal legislation just weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its spring 1954 verdict in Brown vs. Board of Education, and the defeat of internal, bureaucratic opposition within the government (which meant the purge of New Deal holdovers) combined to redefine public housing's raison d'etre.

More importantly, the second Great Migration from the South dramatically increased the city's black population even as the beginning of a civil rights revolution demanded more attention for minority problems. Given deep-seated white resistance to neighborhood change, the city had to find some way to redraw its racial borders to accommodate the new demographic realities and facilitate urban renewal without offending white sensibilities.

Integration, in this context, offered no relief and referred only to a temporary condition that occurred during the interval in which contested neighborhoods made the transition from white to black. Subsequent urban-renewal legislation linked black displacement to priority assignment in all new public housing. For its part, the CHA implemented site- and tenant-selection policies that belied any social purpose beyond clearing land for
redevelopment and finding enough relocation housing within existing (or soon-to-become) black neighborhoods to satisfy the African-American need for more and better shelter and white demands for continued residential exclusivity.

A radical change in the nature of the CHA's client base--and one frequently confirmed by Fuerst's interviewees--came swiftly in the latter half of the 1950s and the 1960s. At the program's inception, Franklin Roosevelt spoke of the bottom "one-third" of the nation being "ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-nourished." As late as World War II, whites constituted some 70 percent of public housing's tenants, and racial policy was rooted in the concept of equity (i.e., equal facilities within segregated housing developments). The federal Racial Relations Service, a division within national housing agencies, had a mandate to protect black interests. All of this would now change.

By the 1960s, CHA inner-city high-rise construction of public housing had a largely African-American tenantry, and the amenities that accompanied the equity policy disappeared. The linkage to renewal also meant that there were new controlling imperatives and, as frequently reported by Fuerst's subjects, project managers lost the ability to screen prospective tenants, and displaced problem families could not be turned away from the increasingly monoracial and segregated program.

The transformation of what had been a social experiment into a utilitarian adjunct of segregation and economic development drew fire from Elizabeth Wood. At odds with her board and the City Council, she was fired within weeks of the Brown decision. More than a local idiosyncrasy, Wood's forced departure presaged national developments. The subsequent dismantling of the Housing and Home Finance Agency's Racial Relations Service in Washington, D.C., effectively ended the internal resistance to the program's adoption of its new economic and racial rationale.

Fuerst's witnesses demonstrate the possibilities of success under earlier policies, but we cannot simply turn back the clock. We may know what works, but there are still difficulties to overcome. Neither tenants nor so-called experts, for example, have reached consensus on policy; dispersal and concentration each has strong constituencies.

Having jettisoned its social mission, public housing stands today as a bulwark for segregation and the shelter of last resort for impoverished minorities. If that accounts for why the projects are coming down, Fuerst can still, at the least, help us catch a glimpse of why they went up.

Caption:
PHOTO (color): (Book cover.)
PHOTO (color): Author James S. Fuerst outside the Ida B. Wells housing complex today. Photo for the Tribune by Yvette Marie Dostatni.
PHOTO (color): Part of the Altgeld Gardens housing project in 1956. Tribune file photo.
PHOTO: The Ida B. Wells Homes in 1941. In "When Public Housing Was Paradise," author James S. Fuerst makes the case that, early on, public housing in Chicago was a successful social experiment. Tribune file photo.
PHOTOS 4

Memo:
NONFICTION.

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