

## PREFACE

My interest in the subject of American public housing began more than thirty years ago at Amherst College when I made it the subject of my senior honors thesis in American Studies. I called that thesis “Housing an Ideology: Public Housing and the Jeffersonian Tradition” because I was already convinced that understanding public housing invited a larger immersion in American cultural and intellectual history. As a native Chicagoan, I was deeply troubled by watching the downward spiral of the city’s Cabrini-Green development. It was located just a few blocks away from my family’s own high-rise apartment, but in an entirely different world. As an undergraduate, I had hoped that the world of architecture contained the solutions for public housing redevelopment and that it would be possible, in effect, to design our way out of such dysfunctional environments.

The more I learned about the subject, however, the more obvious it became that architecture, while undoubtedly important, was also embedded in a larger realm of politics, policy, social relations, and management. During graduate school in architecture, I abandoned my earlier dream of becoming a practicing architect and gradually discovered the fields of planning and urban design. I ended up receiving graduate degrees in both architecture and international relations, the latter focused on the comparative history of planning. In the mid-1980s, while still a graduate student, I returned to the subject of public housing redevelopment, excited by the dramatic transformations then underway in both Boston and Cambridge. As a junior faculty member at MIT in the early 1990s, however, I soon realized that I could not tell the stories of public housing redevelopment without asking more deeply rooted questions about the origins of that housing. Instead of one book about public housing, I ended up with two.

The first one, *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors*, traced 350 years of efforts by institutions in Boston to house the least economically viable residents and included a history of the Boston Housing Authority. The second volume—*Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods*—looked at the subject from a more bottom-up perspective, tracing the saga of development, decline, and redevelopment in three Boston public housing com-

munities. These stories had mixed outcomes, but one example stood out: Boston's Commonwealth Development. This place, once among the city's most physically and socially distressed projects, was transformed into an attractive and safe community, one that successfully mixed races and ethnicities but did not entail mixing incomes, even though the site could easily have attracted interest from market-rate renters or homebuyers. Today, more than twenty-five years after completion of its redevelopment, it still stands as a model of good practice and remains a high point in the careers of all those who participated in its revival.

Following the release of those books, I commenced work on two further books that bring the public housing story to a more national level. This book, which compares the slum-clearance and urban renewal era that created public housing with the HOPE VI era of public housing clearance, focuses on Atlanta and Chicago and extends arguments developed in *From the Puritans to the Projects*. The fourth and final volume, a follow-on to *Reclaiming Public Housing*, will center on the diverse variety of approaches to HOPE VI public housing redevelopment in several other American cities, revealing highly differentiated attitudes toward housing (or rehousing) the poorest Americans.

In entitling the present book *Purging the Poorest*, I am conscious that "purge" is a very strong term. Similarly, to focus on "the poorest" in a North American context is to invite a larger consideration of relative global poverty. This is not the place to engage the economic, social, political and cultural complexities of who counts as "the poorest" in an international or comparative sense since there are such deep disparities, but it is also important to note that every country faces its own struggle over low-income housing provision. To gain additional perspective, during the final writing of this volume, I traveled to India and Brazil. I went first to visit the Pyarabagan (Guava Orchard) slum in South Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Home to perhaps four thousand persons, it is located immediately adjacent to a luxury housing tower, an uneasy juxtaposition that has nonetheless been legalized by the municipal government. With evictions successfully thwarted and security of tenure long since granted, slum dwellers have benefited from two rounds of efforts to improve water and sanitation, and have been able to remain in what is now a coveted central location. Although their level of poverty is undeniably even deeper than Depression-era America, this is not a depressing place. Watching young children hone their cricket skills on a makeshift concrete pitch while mothers go about various daily chores, I could not help but think of stickball on a preclearance American urban street. Pyarabagan is not the

Little Hell slum that preceded Chicago's Cabrini-Green or the Tech Flats that preceded Atlanta's Techwood Homes, but is a reminder that all decisions about urban development entail political acts rendered through the mechanism of design.

Similarly, Brazil's *favelas* may accommodate greater overcrowding, more extreme deficits of water and sanitation infrastructure, and deeper poverty than any district remaining in the United States, but these places also engage familiar questions about where the state will permit its urban poor to reside, under what conditions, and for how long. São Paulo's Paraisópolis ("paradise city") houses at least eighty thousand people in an undulating favela with spectacularly disorienting views toward a cliff-scape of adjacent luxury condominiums in Morumbi. In the opposite direction, the view is almost equally jarring—an abrupt transition to brand-new six-story slabs of public housing under construction in the favela's flood-prone periphery, into which the government is seeking to relocate three thousand Paraisópolis dwellers. Although rents are set to be affordable to those earning only half of Brazil's minimum wage, even this may not suffice to make many of the displaced believe that the move to modernity is both possible and desirable.

Rio de Janeiro's favelas—at least the centrally located ones—have faced more than a half century of contestation, with the latest rounds prompted by the coming of the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the 2016 Olympic Games. Vila Autódromo, a favela peacefully housing about four thousand people, sits uneasily within the bounds of the racetrack zone being redeveloped by AECOM to house everything from Olympic gymnastics, swimming, cycling, and tennis to the hotel for the world's journalists and the international broadcast center. Precisely twenty years earlier in Atlanta, preparations for the 1996 Olympics triggered the redevelopment of the Techwood and Clark Howell public housing projects, also viewed as embarrassingly proximate to Olympic athletes and global media scrutiny. There are certainly profound differences between the struggles of Brazilian favela residents to stave off Olympic displacement and the struggles of their U.S. counterparts in public housing, but whenever a government threatens to purge its poorest citizens from suddenly desirable land, some things remain constant: agitated residents, well-meaning nongovernmental organizations, polarized journalists, and conflicted local politicians. Low-income people and high municipal aspirations remain in frequent conflict. Although the remainder of this book is focused on the United States, in charting the double redevelopment of communities in Atlanta and Chicago, I grapple with the larger, contested moral choices

over what housing scholar/activist Chester Hartman has usefully called “the right to stay put.”

Methodologically, this book relies on interviews with key participants in public housing redevelopment efforts in Atlanta and Chicago, as well as on archival and secondary accounts about the larger history of each housing project, its neighborhood and its city’s politics, and the redevelopment plans themselves. I make use of a broad range of sources, including oral histories, silent films, census analyses and mapping, historical maps and photographs, newspapers (both mainstream and alternative press, including online sites), YouTube videos, and blogs. I have paid particular attention to historical data about the period when the original public housing was built, to compare the pattern of displacement and rationales for construction from that earlier era of public housing to the current pattern of displacement and rationales for reconstruction that are now happening under the federal government’s HOPE VI program. As such, the focus remains on the development and the redevelopment of public housing, rather than on the period of decline that occurred between these phases. Ultimately, my interest is in measuring success rather than critiquing failure. Defining “success,” however, is a far more difficult and contested challenge.