

Federal Housing Policy & Programs

PAST AND PRESENT



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The Origins and Legacy of Urban Renewal

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“I just hope that we’ll be very careful that you don’t use the words ‘urban renewal’ too often. That has a bad connotation.” This was Senator Hubert Humphrey’s response in the summer of 1977, to a suggestion that the federal urban renewal program, which had terminated at the end of 1974, should be revived.¹ A decade of riots and protest in ghetto communities, much of it aimed at the unpopular “Negro removal” program, had the former vice-president and his colleagues on the defensive. And with good reason. Urban renewal agencies in many cities demolished whole communities inhabited by low income people in order to provide land for the private development of office buildings, sports arenas, hotels, trade centers, and high income luxury dwellings.

The National Commission on Urban Problems, appointed by President Johnson in response to urban disorder and headed by former Senator Paul Douglas, documented the negative impacts of urban renewal on low income neighborhoods. As of June 30, 1967, approximately 400,000 residential units had been

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demolished in urban renewal areas, while only 10,760 low-rent public housing units had been built on these sites.²

The Douglas Commission argued, however, that the unhappy consequences of urban renewal for low and moderate income city residents were not what Congress had in mind when it created the federal program in 1949. Since the policy goal of the 1949 Housing Act was "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family," the Douglas Commission concluded that the urban renewal program was a "failure" because "too many local and Federal officials in it and too many of their allies and supporters either did not understand its major purposes or did not take them seriously."³

Given that the 1949 Housing Act was the product of a Democratic president and a Democratic Congress, it is not surprising that the Democratic oriented Douglas Commission should wish to shift the blame elsewhere. During the past 30 years many people have propounded or accepted the view that urban renewal was "a slum clearance program with the avowed purpose of improving living conditions for slum residents," and thus that the program had failed.⁴ Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that if one traces the history of Title I of the 1949 Housing Act back to its origins in the early 1930s there is a remarkable continuity between the vision of the program's original proponents and the ultimate results.

Urban renewal owes its origins to the downtown merchants, banks, large corporations, newspaper publishers, realtors, and other institutions with substantial business and property interests in the central part of the city. Through the Central Business District Council of the Urban Land Institute and local chambers of commerce, these influential groups and individuals refined, packaged, and sold their proposal. The state and local laws passed in the 1940s and 50s and the federal law passed in 1949 fulfilled the goal that this powerful coalition had set for itself. Most of the actual renewal projects were based directly on plans and priorities that had been thought out many years earlier.

From the beginning city planners were urban renewal allies with downtown businessmen. While their aims for the city were somewhat different, they discovered that their relationship was mutually beneficial and it prospered accordingly. Urban renewal has been an important reason for the growth of the city planning profession, so it is only fitting that city planners today are confronting the many problems left in its wake.

Public housers are a different story altogether. Initially they were on opposite sides of the barricades from the central business district boosters. The key backers of replanning and redevelopment were the staunchest foes of public housing. The housers resented the persistent attacks they received from what they called "the reactionary lobby," but by the mid-1940s the public housers began to view urban renewal as the silver lining to their political cloud. Slums could not be cleared without adequate relocation housing, they reasoned, and in a time of severe shortages public housing would be needed for lower income people. For-

tified by this logic, they energetically supported urban renewal and helped lobby it through Congress and state and local legislative bodies. But when it came time for the public housers to claim their reward for "good behavior," the central district businessmen were still firmly in command. The more progressive minded housers were completely shut out of the shaping and operation of urban renewal. They were condemned to watch from the sidelines, their active role confined to writing critical reports.

Poor people and minorities learned that they could not count on the paternalism of the public housers to save them from the bulldozers. Eventually they rioted, organized, and won some rights and benefits that contributed to urban renewal's formal demise in the mid-1970s (only to be reincarnated as Community Development Block Grants and Urban Development Action Grants).

It is hoped that planner/houser-activists of the current generation have learned a lesson from this modern tragedy: if a program has serious conceptual problems, it may be better to oppose it altogether instead of reluctantly supporting it and hoping it will magically transform itself "sometime in the future." At the very least, adopting this opposition strategy gives one the satisfaction of being able to say "I told you so," when failure results. At most, it helps lay the essential ground work for building powerful coalitions and mass movements that can achieve long-term progressive structural change.

MYTH #1. URBAN RENEWAL WAS DESIGNED TO HELP SLUM RESIDENTS

The Genesis of "District Replanning"

Urban renewal was discussed seriously as a public issue in the early 1930s after the collapse of the urban real estate boom of the 1920s and the onset of the Great Depression. At that time urban renewal, then termed "district replanning," was heralded as the solution to the problem of "blight." A blighted area was not necessarily the same thing as a slum. A "slum" was a social concept: low income people living in generally crowded, unsanitary, and crime-ridden conditions.

Blight, on the other hand, was an economic concept. Basically it meant declining property values. In the 1920s and 30s, the market for developed land in the inner city was shrinking due to the movement of middle income people and industry to peripheral areas.⁵ Downtown property owners, including major financial institutions such as banks and insurance companies, industrial corporations with downtown office headquarters, commercial land developers, hotel owners, department store and retail store owners, newspaper publishers, major realtors and realty management companies, and trustees of private hospitals and universities feared that property values would plummet and their businesses would suffer.

This coalition of powerful interests turned to the government for assistance. They wanted to initiate large-scale efforts to replan and rebuild the blighted areas bordering the central business district for profitable commercial use and high-income residential developments surrounded by parks, good transportation access, and attractive public facilities.

District replanning was first spelled out in detail at President Hoover's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership in 1932. Interestingly enough, the coalition behind district replanning did not include the construction industry.

The Committee on Blighted Areas and Slums defined a blighted area as an "economic liability to the community" and a slum as a "social liability."⁶ It also noted that due to extremely high densities slums are often economically profitable and therefore not technically blighted, but argued that slums should be cleared anyway because "they are not infrequently found to exist on highly accessible, and thus potentially very valuable, urban land."⁷ Since, in the midst of the Depression, committee members assumed that business could not extend across all blighted areas, they argued that slum clearance "contemplates the use of former slum sites for the housing of higher income groups."⁸ This would be accomplished principally through wholesale demolition of the existing structures, followed by large-scale rebuilding operations.

To accomplish such rebuilding, sizable tracts of land had to be assembled within a reasonable amount of time and at a price that would make the subsequent development profitable. Here there were a number of obstacles. Most developers simply did not have the capital necessary for such large-scale operations. The major banks and insurance companies had the capital, but the land developers they financed found it extremely difficult to assemble complete land parcels that would span an area large enough to cordon off the new development from undesirable slum dwellers and from noisy and unsightly commercial and industrial land uses. Two principal problems faced the would-be large-scale operator: 1) the asking price for the land was often more than they wished to pay; 2) they occasionally faced "holdouts," where, for one reason or another, they could not obtain a particular parcel at all. Their solution was for local governments to use eminent domain powers to acquire land and then resell it to private corporations at a discounted price, with accompanying tax abatements.

The first part of this solution, the use of eminent domain, had already been tried in New York City. In the late 1920s a group of area banks promoted a district replanning scheme for Manhattan's Lower East Side.⁹ The city used a provision of the state constitution permitting it to take land for public works projects and sell or lease the excess to private developers.¹⁰ The land was taken, the tenants evicted, and the buildings razed. But the effort collapsed because the city was forced by the court condemnation proceedings to pay such high prices for the slum property that "the private builders who had previously expressed interest now expressed only dismay."¹¹ The area was later turned into a park. From this experience downtown corporate institutions resolved to fight not only for the

public sector to use its legal powers to help replan the district, but to use its taxing powers to pay for a substantial portion of the costs.

As to the legality of the district replanning approach, the Committee on Blighted Areas and Slums took the position that "the elimination of slums is a public purpose."¹² It conceded that local governments could also eliminate slums by strictly enforcing housing codes and demolishing slum dwellings as fire or health hazards, but committee members disliked this method because "the land remains in the hands of the original owners."¹³ They preferred district replanning, since government would transfer land ownership to new large-scale developers.

While elimination of slums was the public purpose of district replanning, the committee members did not seem concerned that once slum dwellers were cleared from the "potentially very valuable land" they would continue to live in slum housing somewhere else. The President's Conference final report emphatically opposed providing any public assistance or requiring rebuilders to provide private assistance to slum dwellers displaced by district replanning:

We do not concur in the argument that the slum must be allowed to exist because there are persons dwelling in them who could not afford to dwell in better surroundings. It is our view that the slums must, nevertheless, be removed for the benefit of the community. We are confident that a large portion of the group displaced by slum clearance will be able to find suitable accommodations elsewhere.¹⁴

Another vital element in the district replanning scheme, was that private enterprise must be provided with "the benefits of up-to-date city planning."¹⁵ In other words, in order for the property values and development opportunities to be upgraded, the local government was expected to pay for the supporting infrastructure that would accompany private rebuilding. This would include new street systems and transportation facilities, schools, parks, playgrounds, public buildings, and utilities such as water and sewer lines. Equally important, the downtown landowners insisted that the local government use its regulatory powers and city planning apparatus to guarantee that undesirable land uses be kept out of the district through zoning ordinances, density and lot coverage restrictions, and building and housing codes, all tied together by a master plan for the area. Thus the public sector was being called upon to protect and enhance the value of the current and future investments of the large-scale rebuilders and their downtown allies. This use of government to rationalize and stabilize corporate expansion, generally on behalf of the larger economic interests at the expense of smaller ones, was already well established by the Progressive Era, of which "up-to-date city planning" was a part.¹⁶

By 1932 the basic plan for what was later called urban renewal was already clearly spelled out. Very little changed over the years except that the federal government ended up playing a much larger role than anticipated in the early 1930s. In fact, the federal government eventually picked up the tab for two-thirds,

three-fourths, or more of the costs to local government of land acquisition, clearance, site preparation, improvements, and city planning. The heavy federal subsidies solved the problem of high land costs by allowing the local government to resell the land to private developers at a considerable discount. This enabled local governments to resuscitate the moribund urban land market by moving in and purchasing large chunks of land for renewal purposes, without passing on the considerable costs to the large-scale rebuilders. The downtown property lobby did not propose this federal solution in 1932 because they did not think that such massive federal expenditures were feasible. The New Deal, of course, changed their perceptions of the political potential of the U.S. Treasury.

The Selling of District Replanning

Planners' efforts to popularize the concept and refine the principles of district replanning in the 1930s, were backed up by the more powerful lobbying efforts of the big urban realtors. This effort was led by the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB).¹⁷ In 1935 NAREB's executive secretary, Herbert U. Nelson, unveiled a plan for neighborhood protection and improvement districts that would enable 75 percent of the property owners in a district to form a public corporation which, if approved by the city council, could condemn land and levy taxes within its district in order to facilitate "improvement."¹⁸ Such an arrangement certainly accorded with Mr. Nelson's own philosophy, as outlined in the letter to the president of NAREB in 1949:

I do not believe in democracy. I think it stinks. I believe in a republic operated by elected representatives who are permitted to do the job, as the board of directors should. I don't think anybody but direct taxpayers should be allowed to vote. I don't believe women should be allowed to vote at all. Ever since they started our public affairs have been in a worse mess than ever.¹⁹

The Neighborhood Improvement plan made limited headway in a few state legislatures, and the following year Nelson began to expand NAREB's efforts by setting up the Urban Land Institute (ULI) as a research arm of NAREB. During the next few years NAREB, their colleagues in the United States Savings and Loan League (USSLL), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and other builder and business groups, along with their allies in the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), were preoccupied with the battle against public housing. Only after they had successfully blocked any further public housing appropriations in Congress in 1939 did they turn their attention back to district replanning.

In 1940 the Urban Land Institute, reconstituted as "an independent agency for research and education in the field of real estate" and an "advisory service to aid cities in replanning and rebuilding,"²⁰ and with a Board of Trustees including Herbert U. Nelson and leaders of a number of large corporations, undertook as its first major project a nation-wide study of the problem of decentralization.²¹

During the next two years the ULI published studies on Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit, Louisville, Milwaukee, New York City, and Philadelphia, each one recommending some plan whereby the city could condemn land in the blighted areas near the central business district and then sell or lease the land to private developers for replanning and rebuilding.²² In a major ULI board meeting in January of 1942 the ULI adopted a postwar replanning program.²³ The plan, not too different from what was adopted by Congress seven years later, called for local redevelopment commissions (created under state enabling legislation) to use federal funds to acquire land in blighted areas and then sell or lease the land to private businesses for redevelopment. It also recommended that the federal government provide grants to local planning agencies "for the purpose of preparing master plans for metropolitan areas and replanning blighted areas," a proposal not enacted until 1954. Having promulgated the plan, the ULI, NAREB, and allied parties began a concerted effort to win passage of the program at the federal, state, and local levels.²⁴

ULI's model for the proposed federal urban land agency was the FHA. NAREB had been one of the FHA's biggest boosters since its inception in 1934.²⁵ Its members appreciated the close and mutually supportive relationship between FHA officials and private realtors, lenders, and builders. The FHA field directors, in particular, were extremely close to private sector groups. FHA personnel came mostly from building, lending, and realty businesses.²⁶ Thus it is not surprising that the FHA produced its own report in 1941, *A Handbook on Urban Redevelopment for Cities in the United States*,²⁷ or that three years later Seward Mott who, as Director of the FHA Land Planning Division, had been involved in the preparation of the 1941 *Handbook*, became the Director of the ULI.

By 1943 the ULI had prepared federal legislation for a neighborhood development act sponsored by Senator Robert Wagner of New York. The planners prepared their own bill, the Federal Urban Redevelopment Act, which was introduced by Senator Elbert Thomas of Utah. This bill was the communal brainchild of Alvin Hansen, a New Deal economist then working for the Federal Reserve Board, Alfred Bettman, one of the leading planning and zoning attorneys in the U.S., and Guy Greer, an editor of *Fortune* magazine. The Hansen-Bettman-Greer proposal grew out of discussions within the National Resources Planning Board, the American Institute of Planners and The National Planning Association.²⁸ The planners, as Catherine Bauer later recalled, "saw redevelopment as the means toward more rational and efficient organization of central areas, by removing wasteful or inappropriate land uses and facilitating new development in conformance with some kind of plan for the area."²⁹

Planners' enthusiasm for large-scale redevelopment envisioned greater public sector powers over future land use. This was the principal difference between the two bills. Under the Thomas bill the local redevelopment agency could only lease the land to private developers, retaining title and therefore control in the agency's hands. Also, the federal subsidy would be in the form of long-term, low-interest

loans and annual contributions to help amortize the redevelopment agency debt (similar to the federal public housing program). The annual contributions would give the federal government some continuing control over the redevelopment process. The ULI opposed the leasing only provision and the annual contributions. They wanted the local government to be able to sell the land to private developers. They also wanted the federal government to make large one-time capital grants to the local redevelopment agency and then keep its nose out of the whole business. In Title 1 of the 1949 Housing Act, ULI beat the planners on both points.

Winning at the State and Local Level

The Wagner and Thomas bills were essentially shelved by Congress until after World War II. ULI, impatient to get on with the job of urban redevelopment, began to focus more of its efforts on state government. Corporate leaders in the various downtowns across the country started hiring planners to draw up plans for postwar redevelopment. Fearful that federal redevelopment efforts might be linked to a revived public housing program after the war, ULI and its lobbying partners decided to exert more leverage on state and local governments as a way of bypassing federal control. They reasoned that if their own program was already firmly in place at the state and local level, it would be easier to exert pressure on Congress, the president, and the federal bureaucracy for ULI-preferred solutions.

When Seward Mott became director of ULI in 1944 he immediately began lobbying aggressively in state legislatures for the ULI redevelopment program. (In 1946 ULI created a special Central Business District Council to work with local business groups promoting urban redevelopment legislation.)³⁰ This program was spelled out in a document entitled "Principles to be Incorporated in State Redevelopment Enabling Acts,"³¹ which grouped the various state laws and bills into three categories: Type 1, which ten states had already passed, Type 2, which had been passed by the Arkansas and Tennessee legislatures, and Type 3, favored by the ULI. Under Type 1, either the private corporation or the municipality assembles the land under eminent domain powers and then the corporation clears the site and redevelops it. ULI disliked these laws because they generally did not allow for reuses other than for housing, and they were not sufficiently comprehensive in their approach to large-scale planning and coordination of transportation and public facilities with the redevelopment project. What ULI liked was the fact that a Type 1 redevelopment corporation law "provides an excellent channel for the investment in housing of the huge sums in the coffers of the insurance companies and similar large financial institutions."³² The Principles concluded that "This legislation has been fairly easy to pass and is considered by many an opening wedge toward the further consideration of the whole problem."³³

Type 2 included laws that “make the public housing authority the redevelopment agency. They usually require the rehousing of displaced tenants, and greatly broaden the power of the public housing authority.” ULI was unalterably opposed to this approach because: 1) the emphasis was on housing for low-income tenants rather than “for the benefit of the city as a whole”; 2) placing redevelopment in the hands of the public housing authority “would tend to discourage the participation of private enterprise”; 3) a greater role should be given to the local planning commission; and 4) redevelopment “should not be under the control of any special interest” such as public housing officials—rather it should be in the hands of civic leaders and private enterprise redevelopers.³⁴

ULI’s preferred redevelopment legislation (Type 3) was eventually adopted by the majority of the states, many of them before 1949. Type 3 laws authorized the creation of a local urban redevelopment agency, “a department of the local government composed of representative citizens,”³⁵ completely separate from the public housing authority, and under local, not federal control. The reuse of the cleared land in the blighted area could be for any purpose “in accordance with a comprehensive plan and with the objective of securing the highest and best use of the area.”³⁶ This meant profitable development of any variety, not necessarily residential.

Two principles that ULI held dear were that “there should be no restrictions on the profits or dividends derived from private redevelopment projects,” and “the redevelopment agency should not be required to provide for the rehousing of displaced tenants.”³⁷ The first of these was generally accepted by state legislatures and the federal government. The second principle was violated by the federal statute, which placed a moral if not a financial responsibility on the local redevelopment agency for relocation. As the subsequent history of the program demonstrated, however, federal, state, and local officials honored this requirement more in the breach than in the observance.³⁸

That ULI should have typified Type 1 as a law benefiting large insurance companies grew directly out of an experience in New York. The state of New York had passed an Urban Redevelopment Corporation Law in 1941, but no redevelopment took place until 1943, when the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company forced the legislature to change the law by removing restrictions on profits and dividends as well as removing any responsibility on the part of the redeveloper for relocating displaced tenants. In addition, Metropolitan Life was granted a 25-year property tax abatement. This tax abatement ultimately proved so costly to New York City that it would have saved \$11 million by simply giving the land to Metropolitan.³⁹ The net result of this 1943 New York law was Metropolitan Life’s Stuyvesant Town, where 10,000 low income people were driven from their homes in an 18-block area of Manhattan to make way for an expensive apartment complex for 24,000 people. Stuyvesant Town was restricted to whites only and, of the 10,000 people displaced by the project, only 300 could afford to live in the new complex.⁴⁰

ULI objected to the New York law because housing was the only permitted reuse, and because there was no provision for comprehensive planning for streets, parks, schools, and other amenities that would enhance the property values in the surrounding area. ULI wanted open ended reuse combined with significant planning, infrastructure, and financial support from the public sector. Their model was Pennsylvania's Type 3 law and its application in Pittsburgh.

Pennsylvania passed a redevelopment enabling law in 1945 at the urging of Richard King Mellon, head of a corporate empire that included Gulf Oil and Alcoa. Mellon had hired Robert Moses and a number of other planners and lawyers to come up with a comprehensive plan to boost property values in the central business district—the Golden Triangle. With the cooperation of Pittsburgh's Democratic Mayor, David Lawrence, Mellon enlisted the other major corporate leaders behind his strategy. The strategy involved creation of an independent redevelopment agency based on the ULI Principles, the recruiting of Equitable Life Insurance to construct an office complex (the first *commercial* redevelopment project), the construction of two new parkways, a state park, a convention center, a sports stadium and arena, luxury apartments, and more high-rise office buildings.⁴¹

The Pittsburgh plan, hailed by the media as a "Renaissance," set the tone for central city redevelopment across the country and became the model for downtown business interests and planners before the 1949 Housing Act ever reached President Truman's desk. This ULI model was the one that prevailed: a federal FHA-type agency to financially assist locally controlled Pittsburgh-style urban renewal in every city in the United States.⁴²

Winning at the Federal Level

The story of the passage of the 1949 Housing Act has been recounted in detail elsewhere.⁴³ Essentially, the Act was a triumph for the ULI. Its one minor setback was an inconvenient but relatively painless provision that required land use in the project area to be "predominantly residential" either before or after redevelopment. The "before" allowed housing to be torn down and replaced by commercial or industrial facilities. Despite this rather large loophole, defenders of Myth #1 insist that the predominantly residential requirement proves that the consensus of Congressional opinion was that urban renewal's primary purpose was to provide more low-income housing. This is simply untrue.

The predominantly residential requirement was included in the 1949 Act mainly at the insistence of conservative Ohio Senator Robert Taft. Taft was the key Republican backer of the Housing Act and it could not have passed without his support. Taft was basically opposed to the ULI-FHA-Pittsburgh model of publicly-funded urban redevelopment, and argued that the only type of redevelopment program that the federal government should pay for was construction of

low income housing. Here are his statements during 1945 hearings on housing and redevelopment:

But why we should undertake to relieve cities just because they don't look nice and because they don't have the real-estate values that somebody once thought they had, I don't understand that. Some people made plenty of money out of that real estate at one time. What is the justification for our going into that thing beyond the housing question? As long as it is just housing I can understand it.

I like the idea, myself, of tying it up to housing, as compared to the more ambitious plans that are being presented both by the Bettman-Hansen group and the real-estate boards . . .

I think a limited redevelopment in the hands of public housing authorities is a more defensible program than one of having the Federal Government interest itself in rebuilding the whole city.⁴⁴

What is important about Senator Taft's position is that not one single witness supported it, not even the various representatives from the public housing lobby, because of a previous compromise they had made to back the realtor's program in exchange for new public housing authorization. Taft's efforts to block ULI redevelopment failed, and all that survived was the toothless "predominantly residential" language, which did not require construction after clearance to be either residential or for low and moderate income people, nor did it require that low income housing be built elsewhere for displaced slum dwellers.

MYTH #2. URBAN RENEWAL WAS AN OFFSHOOT OF THE PUBLIC HOUSING MOVEMENT

Urban scholars and planning professionals often portray urban renewal as simply an extension of the goals and methods of the public housing movement.⁴⁵ However, public housing activists and urban renewal lobbyists were bitter foes in the 1930s, each representing a different constituency and pursuing different interests. Proponents of urban renewal such as ULI and NAREB led the fight against the public housing program. Conversely, public housing advocates such as Catherine Bauer and Nathan Straus strongly opposed ULI's redevelopment proposals.

Public housing's primary supporter was organized labor. During the Depression the building trades' unions were desperate for public works projects. With so many people unemployed and overcrowded into poor housing, construction and industrial unions put their political strength behind the public housing program. Labor, in particular, the building trades, showed great enthusiasm, for obvious reasons. Senator Wagner read into the Congressional Record a resolution of the American Federation of Hosiery Workers that pointedly mentioned labor's "double interest in the construction of low-rent dwellings." Labor was "representative both of the unemployed building and material workers and of low-in-

come families in need of better housing." In the climate of the New Deal, a program aimed at rehousing the "submerged middle class" was seen as politically acceptable.⁴⁶

Downtown property interests, while strongly opposing the federally financed public housing program, fought to assure that, in carrying out the program, local public housing authorities purchased inner-city, blighted land to bail property owners out of the moribund market. "The importance of the public housing program of the 1930s in bolstering blighted area land prices is often overlooked or brushed aside by housing enthusiasts."⁴⁷ The prospect of the federal government as a major central-city land purchaser helped whet the appetite of certain business interests for a large-scale redevelopment program. Construction of public housing on cheap vacant land on the periphery of the city was anathema to realtors, home builders, financial institutions, and their chief government ally—the FHA.⁴⁸

Ironically, while most public housers considered themselves distinct rivals of the NAREB and its supporters, the creation of the United States Housing Authority in 1937 ultimately played a vital role in paving the way for the federal urban renewal program by clearing away the legal, political, and institutional roadblocks. By the end of the 1930s nearly every state had passed enabling legislation that was upheld in state courts verifying the constitutionality of the use of eminent domain to clear slums and blighted areas. It is extremely important to note that the public purpose of the rehousing program was considered to be slum clearance; in other words, the legal justification for the public housing program was to alleviate the threat to the community's health, safety, morals, aesthetic sensibility, and general welfare caused by the existence of slum housing. The valid public purpose was to *eliminate* bad housing, not to build good housing or to subsidize disadvantaged people's incomes. How the land was reused and what became of the former residents was incidental to the main goal.

Public housing also created the political infrastructure that made urban renewal possible. Not only was its legality generally established by the late 1930s, but in most large and many smaller cities housing authorities had demonstrated the viability of using federal monies to execute a locally controlled urban development program. Public housing had created employment for contractors, construction suppliers, building trades workers, architects, landscapers, planners, engineers, social welfare workers, and public officials. (This latter group had its own professional organization, the National Association of Housing Officials, later renamed the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, which demonstrates the relationship.) When appropriations for construction of new public housing were voted down by Congress in 1939,⁴⁹ this disparate group focused on redevelopment for a major federally funded urban public works program. The realtors and financial institutions who had fought against public housing began to push for urban redevelopment much more vigorously after 1939, as soon as the threat of an expanded low-rent housing program had been squelched.

Public housing and urban renewal are completely different programs. The former is redistributive to low income people whereas the latter is redistributive to upper income people. The base of support for the two programs in the 1930s and early 40s was extremely different. At the same time, however, public housing blazed the trail for redevelopment in three ways: 1) politically, by popularizing the idea of intergovernmental public action to clear slums; 2) legally, by establishing the public purpose of clearing slums and blighted areas in state legislatures and the courts; and 3) organizationally, by creating a federal-local infrastructure of interest groups and professionals ready and willing to embrace the new program.

MYTH #3. ALL THE PROBLEMS OF URBAN RENEWAL CAN BE BLAMED ON THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Publication of the Douglas Commission Report in the late 1960s offered Democratic politicians and urban planners a safe haven from the heavy criticism they received about urban renewal. It did this by blaming the evils of urban renewal on the 1954 Housing Act, passed by a Republican Congress under a Republican President, rather than on the original 1949 Act, passed by a Democratic Congress under a Democratic president⁵⁰ (the 1954 Act changed "urban redevelopment" to "urban renewal," but this was very little more than a cosmetic name change; for background, see Colean (1953) and President's Advisory Committee, 1953). There is absolutely no basis for this particular brand of partisan, political buckpassing.

The Douglas Commission attacked the Republicans for doing two things: emasculating the public housing program and eroding the predominantly residential requirement. A careful look at the record demonstrates that neither of these charges is true. The emasculation of public housing and the trivialization of the "predominantly residential" rule had taken place in the Truman Administration, much earlier than 1954.

Richard Davies has pointed out about President Truman that "he gave every appearance of staunch liberalism in his housing policies, but in the day-to-day conduct of his housing agency he closely adhered to the real estate lobby's position."⁵¹ The real estate, builder, and financial lobby made a concerted effort throughout the struggle over the 1949 Housing Act to defeat the public housing program and to insure that urban redevelopment would be separated from public housing agency control both nationally and locally. The ULI and colleagues pressed for the new urban redevelopment program to be operated by the FHA, because of FHA's close ties to and supportive relationship with realtors, builders, and lenders. At one point early in 1949, after Truman's come-from-behind reelection and the Democratic Congressional victory, NAREB and other lobbyists supported an abortive effort to separate urban redevelopment from the Housing Act altogether.⁵² Such a separation would have made clear the true nature of urban renewal according to the ULI-Pittsburgh model.

Once the Housing Act passed, however, ULI lobbyists were not disappointed by the results. Urban redevelopment was kept entirely separate from the Public Housing Administration and was lodged directly in the Office of the Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA), Raymond Foley. Foley, who had served for two years as head of FHA and 11 years as FHA Field Director in Michigan, was well favored by NAREB and friends.⁵³ Foley's choice to head the new Division of Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment (DSCUR), Nathaniel Keith, staffed the division with professionals from FHA and other business-oriented agencies.⁵⁴

No sooner did the DSCUR program get started than Keith, under prompting from Truman and Foley, began issuing regulations and making statements that discouraged redevelopment agencies from using projects for low-rent housing and encouraged redevelopment for high-rent residential, commercial, or industrial purposes.⁵⁵ Truman slashed public housing drastically as soon as the Korean War broke out in June 1950.⁵⁶ Within less than a year after the passage of the 1949 Act, "the language of the housing reformers" within HHFA was replaced by "the vocabulary of the real estate and mortgage finance industries."⁵⁷

Given that public housing was "emasculated" both at the federal level and in local communities in 1950, the Douglas Commission's complaint against President Eisenhower is relatively groundless. As to their discussion of the "predominantly residential" rule, I have already demonstrated that its origins can be traced to Senator Taft and not to liberal Democrats or housing activists. Furthermore, the rule, aside from helping to give redevelopment some legal and moral legitimacy by linking it to the issue of slum housing, has always been relatively meaningless because it still allowed redevelopers to tear down low-rent dwellings and replace them with high-rise office buildings. The Douglas Commission conceded that this was "technically true" (National Commission, 1969, p. 157), but they claimed that Congress envisioned redevelopment primarily as a low-rent housing program, based on some ambiguous wording in a Senate committee report but *not* in the 1949 Housing Act. Had the Congress been serious about such matters they would have included strict and enforceable legal safeguards in the legislation itself. According to the Douglas Commission, such an approach was rejected by Congressional urban renewal advocates because "clamping down conditions and requirements . . . would have amounted to a strait jacket on local action or would have killed the program."⁵⁸ On this point the Douglas Commission was in complete agreement with the realtor-developer-financier lobby, which had argued from the very beginning for maximum flexibility in the urban renewal program.

Despite this rather large gap between legislative language and political rhetoric, the Douglas Commission still insisted that the so-called "skid-row amendment" to the 1954 Housing Act somehow perverted the original spirit and intent of the 1949 redevelopment program. This amendment exempted 10% of urban renewal funds from the "predominantly residential" requirement and was

passed with bipartisan support (Senator Taft had died the year before). The rationale behind the amendment was that there were nonresidential areas around central business districts, universities, hospitals, and other institutional settings that certain city interests wished to clear and redevelop for nonresidential purposes. In 1959, under a Democratic Congress, the exemption was extended to 20 percent plus colleges and universities, and in the New Frontier-Great Society years it was further extended to 35%, plus hospitals, medical schools, nursing schools, and several other special exemptions.

Long before this wave of exemptions advocated principally by liberal Democrats, the Democratic officials who ran HHFA and DSCUR from 1949 to 1953 paid only lip service to their "predominantly residential" requirements. The classic case of abuse was the Columbus Circle Slum Clearance Project in New York City, crafted by Robert Moses and approved by DSCUR during the Truman Administration. Columbus Circle at 57th and Broadway was a valuable commercial site in the early 1950s when Moses induced the New York City Planning Commission and DSCUR to approve it as a Slum Clearance Project. This designation was based on the argument that a small number of aging tenements at the far end of the project's carefully drawn boundaries, constituting less than 1 percent of the total property value of the project area, were "substandard" and "insanitary."⁵⁹

The redevelopment plan for the two-block area called for the construction of a commercial exhibition hall (the New York Coliseum) occupying 53 percent of the site and a luxury high-rise housing development occupying the other 47 percent. Since the "predominantly residential" rule was defined by DSCUR as being at least 50 percent of the total square footage of the project area, Moses needed to tip the balance by 3 percent. He announced that the tenants of the new apartment building could park their cars in the Coliseum's underground garage if their own parking lot was full. The New York City Planning Commission and DSCUR then designated 18,000 square feet of the Coliseum's underground garage as "residential," which made the entire Project "predominantly residential" in its reuse.⁶⁰

The Columbus Circle charade prompted Congressman John Phillips of California, a Republican, to introduce an amendment to the 1954 Housing Act limiting redevelopment funds solely to residential reuse. Big city Democrats generally denounced the measure as limiting the flexibility of the urban renewal program. Business interests such as the owners of the *New York Times* lobbied heavily against the measure and defeated it in the Senate.

The New York courts had already ruled that under the 1949 Housing Act federal and local government agencies could define "substandard" dwellings and "predominantly residential" any way they wished. One judge's dissenting opinion, however, pointed out that the New York City Planning Commission and HHFA had completely ignored the physical condition of the numerous commercial structures in their determination of the area as blighted and suggested that the

sole reason for including the few tenements in the project area may have been "merely to lend color to the acquisition of land for a coliseum under the guise of a slum clearance project."⁶¹

Such was the record of the early implementation of urban development under the Democratic Administration. And yet when Charles Abrams criticized HHFA Administrator Foley's handling of the new program, Foley was vigorously defended by none other than Senator Paul Douglas himself. In 1952 Douglas told the National Housing Conference that Foley was "acting in complete accordance with the intent of Congress." So pleased was Douglas with Foley's behavior, in fact, that the Senator proclaimed: "I feel like conferring upon him the Congressional Medal of Honor."⁶²

The Role of City Planners in Urban Renewal

Since urban renewal was so clearly harmful to low and moderate income people even in its earlier incarnations as urban redevelopment and district replanning, why did so many planners enthusiastically support and participate in creating, selling, and implementing this program? The obvious answer is that in many ways city planning had its principal base of support among the various business groups that were most actively involved in pushing for urban renewal.

The growth of the city planning profession is inextricably linked to urban renewal. "Up-to-date city planning" was an integral part of the renewal package from the very beginning. The Urban Land Institute and the downtown lobby fought for comprehensive planning as an important element in their efforts to bolster central business district property values. Planners worked hard at ironing out the details of urban redevelopment legislation and at making the program academically, professionally, and politically respectable. It is hardly coincidental that the original name for the program was "district replanning."

Planners participated in these efforts because they saw urban renewal as their best chance to redesign and rebuild the city according to a more rational land use pattern.⁶³ Many planners, such as Seward Mott or Alfred Bettman, worked closely with the downtown corporate coalition because they shared the same values about what was best for the city. Others worked with the downtown business leaders simply because they were a politically powerful group that supported city planning. Alan Altshuler has documented how in Minneapolis the "planning activity was sustained mainly by the support of the Downtown Council."⁶⁴ Leaders of several large corporations wanted urban renewal, and the Minneapolis city planning department expanded to accommodate them. Studies of Pittsburgh⁶⁵ and New Haven⁶⁶ also detail the role of planners in designing urban renewal strategies at the behest of powerful downtown businessmen. The alliance that city planners made with local business leaders, whether out of shared values or political realism, has been a continuing part of the urban renewal saga. In 1942, for example, the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) decided to promote

a scheme they called "progressive planning." The head of its urban section decided to initiate several demonstration projects, during which an NRPB planner would move into a medium-sized community and, backed by technical assistance from the NRPB and other federal agencies, involve local residents in preparing a comprehensive physical, social, and economic plan. The NRPB wanted to use these demonstration projects to test their model for federal urban redevelopment.⁶⁷

NRPB's approach in Corpus Christi, Texas was to turn to the most powerful elements of the community for support:

... the mayor, the president of the largest bank, the head of Southern Alkali Corporation, representatives of the extractive industries (oil, gas, and fishing), and real estate board, and the Junior Assistance Club, who were interested in redeveloping the central part of the city and preserving land values, each pledged the support of his particular constituency. The NRPB's agents, in turn, were sensitive to the interests of those whom it relied upon for assistance.⁶⁸

Apparently the NRPB's definition of progressive planning did not include participation by other groups in Corpus Christi. Funigiello points out that "the needs of other segments of the community (Chicanos, blacks, the unorganized and inarticulate) seem to have been ignored with impunity," leading to "the now familiar practice of demolishing inner-city ghettos, uprooting ethnic minorities, and replacing them with high-rent commercial and residential dwellings occupied by well-to-do-whites."⁶⁹

Many city planners' jobs have directly depended on urban renewal activities. When Congress passed the 1949 Housing Act there were only 600 planners in the country.⁷⁰ By the 1960s there were thousands of city planners, thanks largely to the federal government's 701 Planning Grants to local government, initiated in 1954 to facilitate workable urban renewal programs. For example, the Douglas Commission notes that "some smaller cities and urban counties have been stimulated by the availability of urban renewal funds to develop a capability for comprehensive urban planning which they previously lacked" (*National Commission*, 1969, p. 163). This is equally true for larger cities, particularly during the 1950s. While the new generation of planners was being trained to implement renewal techniques, the old-timers, such as Harland Bartholomew and Ladislas Segoe, had more business than they could handle traveling from city to city in the 1940s and 50s consulting on downtown renewal plans.

The planners' only other option for survival would have been to build an alternative coalition for city planning based on different values and different people's needs. The best example of this type of effort was the public housing movement in the mid-1930s.⁷¹ Labor unions and unemployed workers' groups constituted an important part of the coalition supporting this program. A number of planners worked on various aspects of public housing. Had they been able to sustain this alliance, their livelihoods would have been dependent on a different set of inter-

ests than those of the large corporations and central city bankers and realtors. But NAREB, ULI, and other corporate lobbyists succeeded in defeating the public housing movement in 1939 and again in 1950, after which the movements dissipated and the program dwindled. Most planners interested in city rebuilding chose to work for corporate expansion—many of them willingly, others more reluctantly. Dissenters turned to community organizing or teaching.

The Role of Public Housers in Urban Renewal

When the ULI, NAREB, and their allies began pushing for urban redevelopment as a better slum clearance program than public housing, many public housing supporters were distinctly hostile to what they saw as an attack on their program.⁷² Catherine Bauer, whose *Modern Housing*⁷³ had been a manifesto for the public housing movement in the 1930s, denounced the ULI approach in characteristically strong language:

In the sacred name of "master plans," "bold reconstruction," "saving cities," and whatnot, it is proposed to bail out with Federal subsidy the owners of slum and blighted property—not in order to rehouse their present tenants properly, but to stimulate another wave of speculative overbuilding for the well-to-do and thus, it is naively hoped, to turn the tide of decentralization and preserve downtown property values based on high densities and even higher hopes.⁷⁴

Yet in 1946 Catherine Bauer wrote that she "had no objection to bailing the boys out" provided "we get more workable cities" in return.⁷⁵ Bauer remained skeptical of urban renewal because she did not feel that urban decentralization could or should be reversed. But most of the others in the public housing lobby became strong supporters of redevelopment legislation. After 1939, they hoped to strike a deal with the realtors in order to save public housing. "The realtors could have their 'urban land Triple-A' (a reference to Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was interpreted here to be a "bail-out" for farmers) if the low-income segment of the population received public housing."⁷⁶

At the end of World War II the prospects of high unemployment and a severe housing shortage began to worry many Americans. Public housing activists felt that such a situation would force Congress to revive the public housing program. In order to achieve the broadest possible base of political support for their program, it was included in the massive Wagner-Ellender-Taft Housing Bill. Public housers lobbied vigorously for passage of the entire bill. The legislation contained many provisions that were strongly backed by the builder-realtor-financier-FHA lobby and that helped underwrite the great postwar suburban expansion. The bill also included the urban redevelopment title. Public housing activists reasoned that, given the housing shortage, slums and blighted areas could not possibly be rebuilt without new public housing for the residents who would be displaced. Supporting redevelopment, they thought, was one way of getting more support for their own program.⁷⁷

But there were also other reasons that public housers lobbied for urban redevelopment, in addition to the political bargain that was struck over the inclusion of public housing in the overall Wagner-Ellender-Taft Bill. Many hoped that local redevelopment agencies would sell or lease cleared land at cut-rate prices to local housing authorities. They hoped in vain, however, because the HHFA and the local agencies wanted redevelopment for private enterprise, and had no interest in using cleared land for public housing.⁷⁸ Had subsidized land costs been the sole aim of the public housers, however, they could just as easily have fought for this subsidy as a direct part of the public housing program rather than pinning their hopes on an entirely separate redevelopment program. Senator Taft suggested such an approach during the 1945 Senate hearings, but the public housers were already committed to their compromise strategy.⁷⁹

Public housers also supported redevelopment because many of them believed in comprehensive city planning and wanted to see public housing interspersed with middle income housing, parks, recreation areas, schools, and retail stores, instead of being isolated in large projects.⁸⁰ City planners, however, were more interested in ULI-type concerns than in public housing.⁸¹

Finally, most housing reformers were middle class people who placed a high value on the elimination of slums as an end in itself. Their concern with tearing down unsightly buildings often took precedence over their concern for the welfare of the people who lived in them.⁸² This attitude on the part of many constituent groups in the public housing movement made it possible for them to be pleased with a program that would clear slums, regardless of the ultimate fate of the anonymous slum dwellers.

The paternalistic attitude held by housing reformers led to a serious conflict of interest between the leaders of the public housing movement and the people for whom they were allegedly speaking. Public officials, writers, lawyers, and union leaders were not the ones who would be displaced by the federal bulldozer. While they may have been disturbed by the "relocation problem," many argued in 1949 and even later that urban renewal's contributions to civic welfare outweighed its deficiencies.⁸³

As the price for its support of urban redevelopment, the public housing lobby successfully included in the 1949 act a requirement that those displaced by slum clearance be relocated in "decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings" at affordable rents and in convenient locations. The price, however, was never paid, for the provision was ever enforced by the HHFA, and local redevelopment agencies simply ignored it.⁸⁴ Public housers gave their vital support to urban renewal, and without them the legislation might never have passed.⁸⁵ Yet they simply did not have the power to force the federal, state, or local governments to meet their terms. NAREB, ULI, and their allies exerted enough power to block public housing after the passage of the 1949 act.⁸⁶ The large downtown corporations also exerted a vast amount of power, ensuring that the urban renewal program they had been fighting for since the early 1930s was implemented to their satisfaction.

Thus the public housers were placed in the position of having helped to pass a program that failed miserably for them. Urban renewal did not build low-rent housing—it destroyed it.⁸⁷ It is a sad commentary that public housers and planners, by their support of urban renewal, lent public legitimacy to this destruction. It was clear too, that the downtown corporate coalition understood the value of this added legitimacy. For example, Richard King Mellon's lawyer asked Pittsburgh's Democratic Mayor to head the new redevelopment agency because "If we condemned people's properties, it was better for the Mayor with his popular following to be responsible, rather than someone with the Mellon or U.S. Steel nameplate."⁸⁸

Even if more relocation housing had been available, however, this still might not have mitigated the effects of urban renewal's destructiveness on people's lives.⁸⁹ In most cases the residents of blighted areas wanted to stay where they were. To be rehoused in a public housing project provided little consolation. Besides, politicians and businessmen often deliberately used relocation housing to increase racial segregation.⁹⁰

Since the days of "district replanning" in the 1930s, when the committee on Blighted Areas and Slums recommended that slum dwellers be removed from "potentially very valuable urban land"⁹¹ many public housing advocates have all too willingly agreed with the ULI position that "Slum sites are most often desirable for private housing for higher income families."⁹²

LESSON #1: POOR PEOPLE MUST SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

The lesson of urban renewal is that poor people must be politically well-organized and must speak for themselves. They cannot rely on middle class organizations and individuals who represent different interests to speak for them. Had the slum dwellers been highly organized in the 1940s, they would surely have fought against urban renewal. Such opposition might have forced other elements of the public housing coalition to shift their position. This shift might possibly have defeated urban renewal or brought about some useful reforms. It took another twenty years before the urban riots of the 1960s forced Congress to pass legislation providing modest financial assistance to people who would be displaced by future urban renewal projects. Congress also amended the renewal laws to provide for some degree of citizen participation by community organizations fighting redevelopment. Both of these reforms were hard-earned victories of a mass political movement.

In the case of welfare reform in the late 1960s and early 70s, poor people did defend their own interests rather than relying on other voices to speak for them, with surprisingly good results. President Nixon's proposed Family Assistance Plan (FAP) was supported by many liberal politicians and social work professionals as a "foot-in-the-door." Liberal professionals and the organizations they represented argued that despite its drawbacks, FAP was a positive measure that

should be passed and then improved at a later date. This was precisely the position that the public housers took during the urban redevelopment debate in the late 1940s.

However, an organization of welfare recipients—the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO)—strongly opposed FAP because it would take away many of their hard-won rights and benefits. The NWRO did not agree with the liberal foot-in-the-door theory. They saw it more as a “foot-in-the-rear.” Welfare rights members preferred no reform to the Nixon reform. Many leaders of the social welfare lobby labeled NWRO’s position unreasonable and extremist. But the ghetto riots had given poor people some political leverage. NWRO convinced a few key Senate liberals to withdraw support for the FAP, contributing to its defeat.⁹³

In San Francisco a plan was prepared in the mid-1940s to redevelop a large area near the downtown. This area—termed the Western Addition—had experienced a rapid influx of blacks during World War II. It was a low-rent district that also contained a large number of Japanese-Americans who had resettled there after their release from the U.S. internment camps. San Francisco’s civic leaders wanted to clear the area and rebuild it with middle and upper income housing that would be attractive to suburban commuters.⁹⁴ Local residents turned out at a public hearing in 1948 to oppose the designation of their neighborhood as a redevelopment district,⁹⁵ but this protest went unheeded and, over the next 25 years, thousands of Western Addition residents were displaced.⁹⁶ By the 1960s the community was considerably angrier and better organized—enough to initiate a lawsuit temporarily halting the displacement process. By this action the community gained a substantial amount of publicly assisted housing within the project area.⁹⁷

The experience of massive displacement in the Western Addition, combined with the potential effectiveness of community protest, prompted a group of tenants and property owners in San Francisco’s South of Market redevelopment area to launch their own movement against the bulldozers. Retired merchant seamen and longshoremen living in the project area, with their trade union backgrounds to guide them, built a protest organization called Tenants and Owners Opposed to Redevelopment (TOOR) in the late 1960s. TOOR used a lawsuit to block the proposed Yerba Buena project for several years and eventually won their demand for publicly assisted relocation housing located in the South of Market area, with TOOR as the developer.⁹⁸

LESSON #2: A BAD BARGAIN IS WORSE THAN NO BARGAIN

In neither the Western Addition nor the South of Market case, however, were the protesters able to stop the redevelopment agency from taking away their community. This confirms the wisdom of the NWRO strategy to stop potentially regressive measures *before* they turn into repressive public agencies with large

budgets. Whether urban renewal actually could have been stopped is questionable, given its powerful base of support. But at the very least, if the organized poor and housing reformers had banded together and pursued an opposition strategy, the mythological excuses enunciated by the Douglas Commission and its supporters would not have held up for so long. Such opposition would have made clear who was for redevelopment and who was against it.

The emerging progressive coalitions of the 1980s must be based solidly within community and labor organizations. Planners, housers, and other professionals will then be in a better position to choose sides and avoid the compromises of the 1949 Housing Act that (according to Professor Donald Foley) Catherine Bauer later characterized as "a sellout." We would all do well to heed the advice offered by a black community spokesman at the 1948 San Francisco redevelopment hearings:

You will recall that during the fight in the State Legislature this association, with these other organizations, asked that certain definite guarantees be written into the law to protect the rights of minority citizens, and to guarantee that public housing would be available so that persons of low income groups could enjoy the privileges enjoyed by others. We lost at this period of the game. Everyone said, "This is not the time to talk about such projects."

We came to the San Francisco City Planning Commission, presented our problems, and once again were told "This is not the time."

Now, the association, as it looks upon the law as written, and as it is to be implemented, feels that the difference between the proponents and the opponents is this: Some people say, "Let's go into this thing and revise it after we take this step." Experience has taught minority peoples that if we don't start out right we might not end up right.⁹⁹

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