

PUBLIC HOUSING: TENANTS AND TROUBLES

Mike Miller and Carl Werthman

By June 30, 1960, the New York City Housing Authority had become the country's largest landlord, housing some 567,000 lower-class tenants in 109 projects. Anyone who has visited some of these projects, however, knows that the problem of slums in New York City has not yet been overcome. Even though the new apartment units are freshly painted and spacious, often with enviable views of the city, the curses of children are still etched into the sidewalks surrounding each building, a leitmotif which continues up the asphalt walkways, into elevators, on corridor walls, ending in front of each apartment door. One middle-aged Jewish tenant put the paradox, "Urination in elevators, light bulbs taken out, dirty remarks on the stairs. But let me ask you? Compared to the Puerto Ricans and Negroes, did we ever get such good places to live when we first came to New York?"

As it becomes increasingly clear that public housing has failed to make its tenants middle class, a host of critics have appeared who seem almost to defend the slum. The problem, they claim is the dislocation of tenants from the social structures and cultures in which they felt at home, cultures which did more to enrich city life than to destroy it.

The human map of the slum has traditionally been a patchwork of ethnic territorial claims, each informal island held together by bonds of family, friendship and culture. These territories even produce their own "militias," the ethnic gangs, whose function it is to fight for or defend a share of New York real estate. By eating away the traditional battlefield, public housing plots partially destroy this hundred-year-old pattern. Instead of living in island villages transplanted on city blocks, Puerto Rican families find themselves randomly shuffled among Negroes, Italians, and Jews, all of whom share a dislike for Puerto Ricans. Having left an ethnic community with its churches, storekeepers, men's clubs, teenage cliques, and well-established networks of female gossip, the ethnic tenant finds himself in what is defined by the gang world as "neutral territory," an integrated housing project. Without the social support that the ethnic neighborhood and its institutions provide, it is increasingly difficult for the individual tenant to face the work-a-day world.

This critique of public housing, however, misses essential aspects of the problem. First, public housing projects are not devoid of ethnic social structures. Anyone who is skeptical about this need only spend some

time sitting on the benches in front of project buildings. On one side of the asphalt play area is the Puerto Rican bench where women gossip in Spanish about the Negroes, the Whites, and the Management. Facing them is the white bench and on a third side sit the Negroes. The careful observer will notice that the ethnic lines are rarely crossed in this small world of bench culture. Each of the ethnic groups has a social structure and a life of its own, just as each of them has a different conception of the management. Responses to managerial rule are conditioned by shared cultural experience.

In Puerto Rico, the transition from Spanish colonial rule to American welfare statism was accomplished with no revolt against traditional forms of political authority. The generation of Puerto Ricans that has found its way to this country is accustomed to regarding the state as the source of aid and sustenance. It is not unusual for the Governor of Puerto Rico to receive hundreds of personally addressed letters each week from villagers all over the island asking for anything from pencils and shoes to new jobs. The current government has responded, with the help of federal money and the return of the excise tax on rum, by launching an enormous program of welfare reconstruction called "Operation Bootstrap." High on the list of priorities is public housing which, as any visitor to San Juan can see, is fast becoming typical for the urban Puerto Rican. Many of the islanders who now live in New York are no strangers to housing projects.

Yet public housing in Puerto Rico is different from its New York equivalent, particularly in the way it is managed. A worker in the commonwealth of Puerto Rico's Urban Renewal and Housing Administration in Rio Piedras put the difference this way: "Our public housing manager is far less prone to be assertive, nosy, paternalistic. In part this is because the management corps is just a small notch educationally and economically above the tenants; and in part it is because there is a tradition here of letting people and families alone personally—no going into apartments, individual fines, or treating the tenants like dirt." In short, project managers in Puerto Rico are less "professionalized" than their continental counterparts and depend, in large measure, on help from the tenants in keeping the projects neat and clean. There are no large staffs to keep up the projects, and everyone, including the children, is expected to help maintain the cooperatives.

THERE IS A FURTHER and perhaps more important difference in the conception of the state and its public housing. Puerto Rico has no tradition of protestant capitalism with its corresponding ambivalence about the morality and dignity of accepting public aid. The Puerto Rican has grown up with the philosophy of social welfare; this results in an initial and instinctive trust of public management wherever it may be found. A Puerto Rican who moves into a housing project in New York expects the manager to be his friend. If he is not a native urbanite but has come to this country straight from a village, the public housing manager becomes in expectation a substitute for the local mayor—a man who

can help out with a job and whose good word can forestall an eviction.

Instead of being taken care of by a friendly manager, however, the Puerto Rican immigrant seeking, for example, a rental postponement is referred first to one specialized staff person and then perhaps to another. This referral may well be the beginning of a journey through the labyrinth of welfare agencies in New York—a journey which more often than not gets him nowhere. Then the Puerto Rican wakes one morning to find a “three-day notice” pinned to his door. In the coldest of legal jargon he is informed that he will be served a “Dispossess Notice” if he does not pay his rent in three days. “Why couldn’t the manager come to my door and ask me what the problem was,” said a shy Puerto Rican wife in the project. “I am not going to cheat him the money.” This is the beginning of fear. Afterwards talk is often about the omniscient and naked power holders in the management office.

The New York Negro knows his way around. When he cannot pay his rent, the last place to which he goes is the management office. He just lets the Dispossess Notices pile up on the kitchen table while going about the task of finding or borrowing the money. He knows that “all this legal stuff is so much jazz” and that evictions are rare. He knows how to fight: with angry letters to the central housing office, the Mayor, and his State Assemblyman, or a visit to the local Democratic Club. The Negro’s style is thus a pattern of evasion and judicious attack. He knows how to put the manager off on the rent and disguise the fact that his sister has come to live with him for a month or two. He rarely complains about the manager; he mentions him only with contempt, a contempt he demonstrates as often as he can by evading the project rules successfully.

For the Jewish and Italian tenants, older veterans of ethnic warfare, the manager is an ally in the fight for middle-class respectability. As many commentators on Jewish culture have pointed out, even in the worst days of the Jewish Lower East Side, the Jews were never really lower class. To the current Jewish tenant of public housing, the management is defined as the last legal outpost against filth and noise, the Puerto Rican and the Negro. “The manager has to be tough,” said an elderly bearded Jew, “or else they’ll run the place over. I’m not prejudiced, but these people just don’t know how to keep a place clean.” The remaining Orthodox Jews and resident Italians do not like the invasion into their old neighborhood, the Lower East Side. They realize they are powerless to stop it but would like certain of its excesses curtailed. They are aware that many of the rules fall equally hard on them but appear willing to pay the price. “It’s not the way we’d like to live,” said a father of three, “but if there weren’t the rules there’d be a jungle.”

II

The initial difference between the old slums and the new is the pressure of the Housing Authority, with offices on the project premises. The Housing Authority codifies the body of middle-class norms and values by making the project rules. Regardless of how idealistic a particular housing manager may be, the tone of a tenant’s life is set by his

reaction to these rules—rules which tenants obey upon threat of fine or eviction and which managers necessarily enforce.

A tenant must report any increase in salary so that the Housing Authority may raise his rent correspondingly or, at a certain maximum point, evict him. He may not paint his apartment; he may not have guests stay for any longer than three months; he may not walk on the project grass or ride bicycles on the project walks. He may not have pets, install air conditioners, or shake a mop out the window. (This last is to protect the “beauty” of the buildings.) While some of these rules are listed in the *Tenants’ Handbook*, others are the property, as it were, of the landlord, unavailable in printed form to the tenant. These public and private rules contain a final insult: the manager and his personnel may enter apartments at will. The Housing Inspector, “to catch a guest,” may suddenly appear in the apartment. Sometimes the irate tenants tell “the authority” to get out, but they do so in fear.

The important thing about these regulations is that they make explicit what is ordinarily implicit in routine middle-class life. There is presumably no need to tell a middle-class housewife not to shake her mop out the window or to “keep radios or television sets turned low after 10 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays.” Middle-class behavior is not something you can teach a Puerto Rican by imposing fines; fear of eviction does not take the place of socialization. Moreover, many of the American Negroes, ambitious and sensitive, deeply resent being dealt with as lower-class stereotypes. And those tenants who do not notice the middle-class assumptions of the rules, also do not understand them.

III

Members of different ethnic groups have their own reactions to the project and tend to stick together. There is, however, another style of life which is perhaps the unique product of public housing. We will call this new style “community activism.” It is defined by two characteristics: first a definition of the Housing Authority and its managers as “public servants,” bureaucrats whose job it is to attend to the needs of the “public,” that is, the tenants; secondly, a deliberately interracial organization.

The definition of a manager as public servant is a reaction to the manager’s own view of “his” tenants as people in need of public assistance. The activists are extremely sensitive to the usual definition of a project as a place for the poor. Many of them are upwardly mobile and have had the benefits of education but find themselves trapped by economic circumstance. The prestige of being an official in an organization and the chance to associate with others holding similar values and aspirations bring them together into the Tenant Association.

Once organized, these tenants challenge “the prerogatives of management” by forming a Grievance Committee apparatus, presenting the claims of tenants who feel they have been treated arbitrarily. Members of the new organization soon learn to go over the manager’s head to the commissioners of the Housing Authority in order to get what they want

in the local project. The successful Tenant Association thus creates a significant shift in power. This is not to say that a genuine "pluralistic" setting develops, one in which real power is shared. Since the manager is not responsible in any way to the tenants, such pluralism is impossible. What is accomplished is a new sense of dignity for those in the project who undertake the struggle.

Out of common experience with the management and common efforts to change certain aspects of project life, a new interracial unity grows. As the tenants become involved in the struggle to play a role in project administration, they self-consciously turn their back on the styles of ethnic parochialism they see around them. They recognize its divisive consequences and begin to recruit members into the Association. "We've got to be together if we are going to get any place," commented the president of a Tenant Association. Although interracial unity develops primarily through conflicts over family grievances and repair problems, self-help activities such as blood banks, day nurseries, and safety committees which work to improve lighting, street signs, and paving also play a part. When tenants who stay close to their own ethnic groups begin to see the results of meaningful integration, they first support and then join the movement. Gradually, a genuine interracial community begins to take the place of a racial organization based on prejudice.

IV

The tenant revolt and the formation of an association lead to counterattack on the part of the Authority. Managers hostile to tenant associations refuse them the right to post material on building walls, interfere with meetings and, in some cases, help set up rival groups. Tenant-oriented managers are often willing to work with the new associations, but even the best of them cannot officially share power and authority with the tenants. And informal consultation often makes the Tenant Association an "arm" of management instead of giving the people who live in the project a voice in the control and organization of their daily lives. How a manager enforces rules will determine whether he is thought of as a despot or a benevolent king. In either case he is the sole ruler; he must carry out certain rules which go against the grain of what activists want in their project. Good and bad managers alike must enforce the regulations on occupancy, painting, and rent.

An examination of the arguments used on both sides of the battle suggests the ideological confusion that exists among the administrators of the welfare state. At the same time that the New York Public Housing Authority fights to obtain community centers, extra police protection, new services, a social work staff, and store space in the projects, it has refused to let tenants fight independently for similar facilities.

In a "Bulletin to Managers," the New York Housing Authority Commissioners state that:

encouragement and cooperation will be given organizations composed of residents of our projects, provided such organizations are formed for the

purpose of promoting the welfare of the tenant body and the maximum enjoyment of the project by the residents.

This same document, however, contains a revealing clause:

The Authority does reserve the right to withhold recognition from any organization which, in its judgment, is of a *partisan* or *controversial* (emphasis ours) nature or which engages in discriminatory practices.

A Tenant Association newspaper in one of the projects on New York's Lower East Side aptly stated the Authority's dilemma. The article looked like this:

U. S. CONSTITUTION VS. N. Y. CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY

First Amendment, U. S. Constitution: Mr. R—(the project manager) said you exist by the wish of the Housing Authority; you are not completely independent. The Authority allows your Association to exist and can end tenant organizations whenever it wishes. The Authority ended tenant organizations a few years ago, and it can do so now if it wishes.

WE ARE PUZZLED—WHICH SHOULD WE GO BY?

The manager at whom this comment was directed was not puzzled. In a meeting with top-level Housing Authority personnel he claimed that:

The Tenants' Association is now in a power struggle with management. The Chairman of this Association told me that the Tenants' Association was independent of management. I told them we could terminate their organization if the Housing Authority desired to do so.

Higher personnel in the Housing Authority, disturbed by the conflict existing in the project, told the manager to act so as to "facilitate communication between management and tenants." Among management groups in both industry and welfare, this has been the most common solution to problems posed by conflict. It has even been given scientific status by certain sociologists engaged in the study of organizations. Legitimate conflicts of interest simply do not exist. Upon close inspection, the only things that are ever found are problems of "communication" which hinder "mutual understanding."

THE CONFUSION of the Public Housing Authority over the extent of tenant's rights—some of which are constitutionally guaranteed—as well as its systematic refusal to admit that genuine conflicts of interest exist, reflects the general ideological dilemma facing American administrative liberalism today. In the course of the national struggle between welfare statism and free enterprise, the officials of the welfare state have been forced to make major concessions. In the pure form of the welfare

state, individuals who, through no fault of their own, find themselves unable to reap the rewards of a productive economy are allowed to live under semi-socialistic principles. "To each according to his need, from each according to his work" is precisely the principle on which low-income public housing is based. Tenants who earn less than some fixed figure pay rent which is proportional to their income.

In deference to the view that the best men are those who can afford to pay their own way, however, the Public Housing Authority has slipped in the half-hidden assumption that tenants should be penalized for receiving state support. This view is reflected in the income ceiling imposed on occupants, a built-in assurance that projects will remain lower-class and that mobile leadership will disappear. The battle over the Tenant Association indicates that a further penalty may be the forfeiture of certain constitutional rights. The project thus becomes a sort of purgatory for the temporary casualties of the economic struggle, and the idea of the welfare state takes a clear second place to the American conception of freedom as successful competition.

THE WEST VILLAGE: LET THERE BE BLIGHT

Stephen Zoll

The Housing and Redevelopment Board has replaced Robert Moses's Slum Clearance Committee, and a new order has been proclaimed for the on-going work of tucking in New York's residential shirt tails. Robert Moses, who now deals only with sovereign nations, has been declared the villain of Title I, and his successors, previously his assistants, have announced themselves the heroes of Urban Renewal.

A solution to the housing emergency in New York has two complicated parts that must first be separated in order to describe the problem itself: first, how to go about it, and second, what to end up with. This article is meant to describe how neither part has been fundamentally changed from the original destructive program, whatever the good intentions that have been declared.

With slogans that everyone can understand, James A. Felt, the City Planning Commissioner, promises an end to bulldozing first and questions later. But bulldozing is not a method, it is an inevitable result of bad planning. Nor did Moses's crimes begin and end with bulldozing. His way of getting things done involved manipulations of the City Charter, the Municipal Code, and federal and state regulations; his objective was arrogantly monumental architecture, and his method was expressed in contempt for obstacles—he had help. The chief

obstacles were the people and their laws; but in a curious way the opaque waters of the law offered Moses protection: no one, apparently, understood the law as well as he did.

Briefly, the procedure by which eligibility for federally assisted renewal is established involves first the City's Master Plan and Map. A public hearing and Board of Estimate approval must precede any map change whereby an area is officially listed as blighted. Once on the map, an area may be designated for renewal only after a second hearing, required by state law. Only then may the City Planning Commission direct the Housing and Redevelopment Board to request permission of the Board of Estimate to ask for federal study funds with which to decide how to renew.

The actual plans for renewal are subject to further public hearings. This may seem like a cumbersome procedure; certainly it did to Moses. But the lifetime of residential construction is long, the space it occupies valuable, and its effect within the fabric of the city profound. Moses was able to condense nearly all these operations into one session, and make the map change retroactive. Opposition never had a chance. Neighborhoods disappeared not so much by bulldozer as by fiat.

So the days of Moses are past. Yet the waters which he parted to lead his children out of bondage remain con-