

New York City Needs a Public Housing Renaissance

Public housing today could be so much better—architecturally and urbanistically—than it was in the 20th century

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If you want to contemplate a healthy future for public housing in the United States, you could visit Brooklyn's Ingersoll Houses, a cluster of red brick apartment buildings completed in 1944.

The 20 buildings, ranging from six to 11 stories, occupy a 23-acre site in Fort Greene, squeezed between Myrtle Avenue and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. There's an old-fashioned charm to the complex, with its mature shade trees and meandering pathways. And on what is surely the most desirable spot on the property, kitty-corner from Fort Greene Park, stands Stonewall House, a newly completed 17-story building that exemplifies one approach to revitalizing New York City's 300-plus public housing projects.

Although the building sits on NYCHA property, it's technically not public housing. Instead, Stonewall House is the first building completed for NextGen NYCHA, a program intended to make New York's housing authority financially stable by developing open space surrounding its buildings, including parking lots and playgrounds. Because of the mid-20th-century modernist belief in the virtue of open space between apartment towers, NYCHA has custody of a unique supply of New York City's rarest commodity: undeveloped land.

At Ingersoll, one of those undeveloped spaces was leased for 99 years to BFC Partners, a for-profit developer, and SAGE, a nonprofit that addresses the needs of the elderly LGBT community. The result is a handsome, 100 percent affordable building designed by Marvel Architects, better known for upscale projects like Pierhouse in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

At the opposite end of Ingersoll, a very different approach to the future of public housing is underway. Developers Madd Equities and Joy Construction agreed to pay \$25 million to NYCHA for the air rights to Ingersoll, allowing them to build 31- and 33-story towers on property adjacent to the complex. The developers have promised that 25 percent of the units in the otherwise market-rate towers will be affordable, and that \$25 million will be earmarked for badly needed repairs at Ingersoll.

Both deals are illustrative of the current challenges to shoring up NYCHA complexes, which house roughly half a million New Yorkers. In a city where affordable housing is always in short supply, NYCHA's properties contain over 173,000 units permanently reserved for low-income tenants. In practical terms, they're irreplaceable. But because most of the complexes are between 50 and 80 years old, and the federal government has had little inclination in recent years to kick in for upkeep, NYCHA has a \$32 billion backlog of what it calls "unmet capital needs." Lead paint needs to be removed, furnaces must be replaced, and elevators desperately need repairs.

Public housing complexes in other American cities are similarly stressed, so for those involved with low-income housing, a pressing question is, "How can we upgrade what we already have?" But a project like Stonewall House suggests another question that is, in some ways, harder to answer: Why don't we take all the lessons we've learned about public housing—its successes and failures—and apply them to building *new* public housing?

The process of redeveloping NYCHA land is politically fraught, and there have been some misfires. A controversial attempt to shoehorn a new 50-story building—half market-rate and half subsidized—into the site of a playground at the Holmes Towers complex on the Upper East Side has prompted fierce pushback from tenants of the complex; so, too, has an alarming plan to demolish a couple of buildings in Chelsea’s Fulton Houses to make more room for market-rate development.

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The Fulton plan is now being reconsidered by a working group that meets weekly and includes NYCHA residents. Any deal that would involve leasing or selling NYCHA land would have to involve a “honest conversation” about the trade-offs, insists Betsy Maclean, co-executive director of Hester Street, a nonprofit community-planning organization that’s been running the Chelsea meetings.

Maclean, who has also been “participating in a national effort to reimagine public housing” organized by the Ford Foundation, acknowledges that the effort is all about the future of the existing housing complexes. When I suggest that the future should include new public housing, she tells me that’s not really on her agenda, adding, “There’s such a lack of super-transformative radical thought like that, about how you interrupt the real estate market.”

Why would we need more of a type of housing that was, for decades, written off as dysfunctional, and that acted as a notorious generator of racial and economic segregation? Because we don’t have nearly enough. As of last year, more than 181,000 families were on NYCHA’s waiting list for an apartment. Another 138,705 families were on a list for Section 8 housing, privately managed NYCHA properties. NYCHA has a 1 percent vacancy rate and a 2.5 percent annual turnover rate—in other words, most people on those waiting lists will be on them forever.

The situation isn’t any better nationally, in part because public housing’s history effectively ended over 20 years ago. A 1998 amendment to the Housing Act of 1937, drafted by North Carolina Sen. Lauch Faircloth and signed by President Bill Clinton, capped the number of public housing units in the United States at close to 1.28 million, the number that existed on October 1, 1999. That ceiling is spelled out in a list of hundreds of local housing authorities across the country, each with its own Faircloth limit: In New York City, it’s 178,001; in Auburn, Alabama, the number is 18. At the time those caps kicked in, the U.S. population was 279.3 million; now, it’s around 329.4 million.

Since the caps were imposed, the ability of working people to afford housing—not just in expensive big cities, but in much of the country—has diminished. The newly released *State of the Nation’s Housing Report* from Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing Studies cites a 2017 study showing that there were “37 affordable and available units for every 100 extremely low-income renters,” and “58 units affordable and available for every 100 households” of very low income renters.

It’s not surprising that we’re beginning to hear calls for a restart of public housing, mostly from the political left. A 2018 paper called “Social Housing in the United States”, issued by a small left-leaning think tank called the People’s Policy Project, points out that countries like Finland and Sweden do a great job of creating and maintaining subsidized housing. It argues that we could do the same here: “Local governments, supported by the federal government, must build a very large amount of affordable, mixed income, publicly-owned housing, initially by developing existing publicly-owned land,” the document concludes, calling for 10 million units of housing in 10 years.

If you go by recently introduced legislation, the topic of public housing is becoming fashionable. In September, Brooklyn Congressman Nydia Velazquez introduced a bill called the “Public Housing Emergency Response Act” that would appropriate \$70 billion to address the capital repair needs of existing public housing nationwide, including \$32 billion earmarked for NYCHA’s unmet capital needs. While the bill has yet to be voted on—and in fact seems unlikely to become law—Velazquez sees it as a starting point in a much larger conversation about public housing. “My legislation would allow for long overdue repairs in existing public housing, and we must simultaneously be looking to expand the availability of public housing,” she said in a statement. She, too, is interested in undoing the Faircloth Amendment in the interest of developing “net new housing.”

In addition to Velazquez’s September bill, Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar debuted a trillion-dollar Homes for All Act in November; much of the money is earmarked for 9.5 million new units of public housing. And in early February, Vaughn Stewart, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, introduced his own Homes for All package which would change restrictive zoning in certain parts of the state to allow more affordable housing, and build thousands of units of mixed-income social housing.

But those who are intimate with the business of affordable housing—people whose work suggests to me that we could build great public housing if we wanted to—are less enthusiastic about the concept. I checked in with Jonathan Rose, a prominent developer of affordable housing whose current projects include Sendero Verde, a mixed-income cluster of 709 apartments and community gardens in East Harlem. Developers like him have prospered in the current environment, partnering with nonprofits and local governments to fund and build housing.

“I think that, in general, affordable housing owned by the private sector has done much better than public housing in the USA,” he says. When I suggest that we should be able to do things differently today than we’ve done in the past, Rose sends me to a passage in his 2016 book, *The Well-Tempered City*, in which President Harry S. Truman’s efforts to pass a bill to alleviate postwar housing shortages were subverted by Congressional Republicans, including a young Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who backed “lobbies for the home builders, real estate brokers, and mortgage lenders.” In 1949, a public housing bill passed, but “Republicans forbade the creation of mixed-income communities, mandating that public housing could be rented only to the poor.” As a result, the housing subsidies for middle-class families were mortgages for single-family homes and, Rose writes, “the effect on public housing communities proved to be devastating; instead of becoming healthy, diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods, they became ghettos of concentrated poverty.”

It’s an ugly history. And Rose contends that elected officials from either party are unlikely to do it better next time—if there is a next time. “Democrats “have defended union rules for public housing workers that makes public housing much more expensive and often less functional than privately developed affordable housing,” he argues. “And so neither Republicans nor Democrats have the courage for a massive re-do.”

One of the original New Urbanists, Berkeley-based architect Peter Calthorpe, was hired by HUD in the 1990s to reinvent public housing for a program called HOPE VI, replacing large-scale high-rise development with more cheerful mixed-income low-rise neighborhoods, such as Denver’s Curtis Park or Oakland’s Mandela Gateway. When I called to see if he’d like to take another shot at reinventing public housing, Calthorpe countered with a proposal to repurpose California’s plentiful strip malls, suffering from the decline of retail, converting them to dense ribbons of housing.

“El Camino Real runs through the heart of Silicon Valley. You could put a quarter million households on that street alone,” reasons Calthorpe. And how to pay for this housing? It’s a sleight of hand, much like “inclusionary zoning” in New York City, which allows market-rate developers to build taller in exchange for affordable units. Calthorpe’s theory involves upzoning the strip malls, “which is a windfall for the property owner.” In return, the owners “have to provide 15 or 20 percent inclusionary housing.”

Even Brooklyn-based architect Andrew Bernheimer, whose firm is committed to the design of low-cost housing, is skeptical. His firm’s recent projects for private developers (including Rose) include a Bronx building that will provide 115 affordable units for seniors, and Caesura Brooklyn, with 123 mixed-income apartments atop the headquarters of the Mark Morris Dance Group. Another recently completed building, One Flushing, has 230 apartments, all affordable with some units reserved for seniors. “Construction on this building was done very smoothly. Right on schedule,” he says. “Two years from closing to end of construction. Really good developer, really good builder.” He compares that to a small library renovation his firm has been working on for a city agency. “We started our design in 2013 or 2014,” he explains. “The construction’s going to be completed this year—it’s a few thousand feet of interior space.”

Even someone who’s ardent about the value of affordable housing doesn’t trust the government to do it right. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, the standard-bearer of Big Structural Change, whose campaign website features a \$500 billion plan to increase the supply of affordable housing, seems to be advocating better funded versions of what we do now: “A big chunk of that investment leverages private dollars so that taxpayers get the most bang for their buck,” notes her plan.

But the reasons I’d like to see a renewed federal public housing program are two-fold. First, a building effort driven by a fully funded national housing policy—one predicated on the idea that today’s housing situation is an emergency—could generate enough units to significantly reduce or even eliminate the shortage. While, ideally, the feds would be working cooperatively with local governments, they would also have the clout to build in areas otherwise resistant to housing. Perhaps big government could do what local officials won’t; consider the failure in January of California’s state senate to pass SB 50, a bill that would have allowed increased housing density in proximity to transit. This is a situation in which an *enlightened* federal government (meaning not the current version), wielding either carrot or stick, could intercede. Maybe the solution wouldn’t be blunt old tools like urban renewal or eminent domain, but sharp new ones like targeted incentives for upzoning.

And second, public housing today could be so much better architecturally and urbanistically than it was in the 20th century. The historic housing projects were the output of a generation of architects and planners seduced by Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse, who believed that widely spaced arrays of tall buildings would fix society’s woes. But today, we have talented architects all over the country who understand that good residential design prioritizes the connections between buildings and the street, between one building and another, and between all kinds of people. Today’s planners prize the vitality of mixed-use developments and know a tremendous amount about how to make outdoor spaces attractive and appealing.

Just look at Stonewall House and the way Marvel’s architects get mileage out of small gestures. Guido Hartray, a founding partner at the firm, describes a design process that involved figuring out how to “fit a building on this site and make it hold this really important corner and address the street, but also respond to the NYCHA complex.” The solution was an outward-facing entrance for the residents on the street side, and an entrance to the community center opening onto Monument Walk, one of Ingersoll’s interior thoroughfares. With only eight units per floor, many

apartments feature big corner windows—nice for the residents—and passersby might appreciate the way slight variations in the color of the bricks give the building texture, like a subtle mosaic, and the way that the community center animates the building’s immediate surroundings.

The real obstacle to renewed public housing isn’t the present administration—not in the long run, anyway. Instead, it’s that most of us, across the political spectrum, have internalized the idea that the government can’t do anything right. We’ve bought into decades of propaganda about the superior skills of the private sector. But without a government with big, ambitious, clear-eyed policy goals, none of our immense problems—transportation, resilience, climate change, you name it—can be addressed in any meaningful way. While corporations can surely help execute a national housing plan, setting the agenda is our job. It may be a hard fact to accept right now, but the government is us. And the “public” in public housing is also us. Perhaps if we can rehabilitate the idea of “public,” the political will and the housing might follow.