Meet the Rising New Housing Movement That Wants to Create Homes for All

From rent regulation to social housing, activists are pushing for serious solutions to the affordable-housing crisis.

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Crossing the Frederick Douglass–Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge on a brisk spring morning in Rochester, New York, the first thing one sees is a small tent city scattered about the banks of the Genesee River. It's a sprawl of black tarps, folding chairs, and a charcoal grill, all set up on private land. The property's owner, a cable company called Spectrum, has attempted for some time to tear it down, urging local officials to clear the encampment. In an effort to forestall the destruction of their fragile shelters, the homeless people who live there have hung a banner at the edge of a nearby highway that reads, simply, "Forgive us our trespasses."

Continuing on toward the city's southwest side, one finds a 48-unit building on Thurston Road. It's a horseshoe-shaped structure of crimson brick; its facade is pleasing and clean. Inside, however, the mostly low-income tenants of color are subjected to bursting pipes, peeling paint, broken windows, and skittering mice—and the absentee landlord doesn't seem to care much about correcting the problems. "See?" says resident Marianne Caleo, a chatty white woman who relies on Section 8 housing subsidies, as she points to a caved-in bathroom ceiling, its rubble sprinkled about like a noxious spice. "They haven't done anything!"

Meanwhile, across town on the east side sits the modest two-story home of Liz McGriff. A resolute black woman in her 50s, she bought the place before the 2008 financial collapse. But when Wall Street went under, McGriff lost her job and, with it, her ability to pay the mortgage. Soon after, the foreclosure notice arrived, sparking a decade-long battle with the police, the courts, and the bank, and turning her into an insecure tenant in her own home. At least, McGriff says, "I am still there."

These places, these people, and so many others like them represent the face of today's housing crisis—a crisis so pervasive and enduring that it has become this country's status quo. In Rochester, a midsize postindustrial city on Lake Ontario's southern shore, evidence of the crisis is everywhere. During the 2016–17 school year, the city school district reported that 8.8 percent of its students—roughly 2,500 children—were homeless at some point. Last year, some 3,510 eviction warrants were issued. More than 50 percent of tenants in the city are rent-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. And while Rochester stands out as the fifth-poorest city in the country, it is no anomaly.

The national numbers are scandalous. On any given night, more than half a million homeless men, women, and children sleep on the streets or in shelters. In 2016 alone, according to research by the scholar Matthew Desmond, roughly 900,000 households were subject to eviction judgments. The same year, more than 11 million households spent at least 50 percent of their income, and another 9.8 million spent more than 30 percent, on rent. Nearly half of the nation's 43 million renting households, then, live with the crushing weight of excessive housing costs.

None of this happened overnight. As Bryce Covert explores in "Give Us Shelter," the roots of the current crisis extend back to the Nixon era. But it has intensified in recent decades, growing and spreading as the federal government engaged in a slow-drip campaign against public and other deeply affordable housing programs, all while stoking a relentlessly market-driven system.

At the same time, this country has suffered from the relative absence of a powerful national movement capable of agitating for transformative solutions. While progressives have pushed forcefully for immigrants' rights, universal health care, fossil-fuel abolition, and a living wage in recent years, they have given short shrift to human shelter. There is no equivalent of the Fight for $15 when it comes to housing—and prominent political leaders speak far too little of rising rents, eviction rates, and homelessness. During the last presidential election, the issue was almost entirely missing from the public debate.

But change, at last, seems imminent. Right now, from coast to costly coast, fed-up renters and their allies are creating some of the most compelling tenant-rights campaigns to emerge in a generation. In places like California, New York, Denver, Chicago, and beyond, residents and organizers are pushing for a slew of interventions like rent control and "just cause" eviction protections that will offer immediate relief to tenants. Such policies, they say, will alter the power balance between landlords and renters and offer tenants stronger tools to build their movement. In fighting for them, they hope to haul the housing crisis to the very top of the national political agenda.

This organizing, though, goes well beyond rent regulation—it aspires to the truly radical. Movement leaders and thinkers are strategizing for a future in which the private market is diminished and noncommercial, community-controlled housing plays a central role in American life. In this alternative reality, public housing is massively expanded and cooperatives, mutual-housing associations, and other nonmarket ownership models take root in cities large and small. Social housing, in all its varieties, thrives.

Such a future, of course, feels like a distant dream—but in places like Rochester, people are already reaching for it.

The revolt began last January, when residents at the horseshoe-shaped apartment complex in Rochester united to resist the slum conditions in which they were living. They began deliberately, strategically, knocking on neighbors' doors and cultivating a sense of camaraderie. Before long, they had formed a tenants' union and were filing official complaints with housing inspectors, speaking out at City Council meetings, and lobbying the local media to cover their struggle. By March 1, they had decided to take combative action: They stopped paying their landlord. They went on a rent strike.

"We knew that that was the best thing—to withhold that rent money, get 'em where it really hurts," says Mary Brown, a warm and stylish black woman in her 60s who serves as the union's leader. She says the residents will withhold their rent until adequate repairs are made or the city exercises its legal authority of receivership and takes control of the property. "We just want to live well, and we should be able to live well," Brown says. "Everybody should."

The Rochester strike is a radical break from the recent past. Organizers there say it's the first such strike in decades. And it didn't happen in a vacuum; it is intimately tied to a national movement for renters' rights that is sweeping the country like a summer storm.

Consider California, where a robust tenants' movement has electrified local politics in recent years. In 2016, the Bay Area city of Richmond passed an ordinance that enacted into law

both rent control and just-cause eviction protections. No longer can landlords in the city raise rents willy-nilly, or evict renters on a whim.

"It was enormous that rent control passed in Richmond in 2016, because that hadn't happened for 30 years in California or anywhere, really," said Aimee Inglis, the associate director of the California-based renters' group Tenants Together, speaking to *The Nation* earlier this year. "People didn't think it was possible."

Now the possibilities are plentiful. In at least a half-dozen California cities and counties, including San Diego, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, and Pasadena, housing organizers are working to put rent-control initiatives on the local ballot this year. And across the state, a network of political organizations is advocating a ballot initiative that would repeal the state's Costa-Hawkins Act, a law that prohibits rent control in buildings constructed after February 1995.

But the rent-control ferment isn't confined to the far side of the Sierra Nevada. Organizing drives are also bubbling up in cities like Chicago, where a coalition called Lift the Ban is pushing to repeal Illinois's longtime prohibition on rent control, as well as in Seattle, Minneapolis, Providence, Nashville, and other places where tenants sense the political ripeness of the moment.

Many of the new renters' groups are affiliated with a national housing-justice campaign called Homes for All. Launched in 2013 by the Right to the City Alliance, a network of progressive political organizations, the campaign is assembling a federation of tenant activists across the country to press their demands at the local, state, and federal levels.

The housing agitation in Rochester offers a fitting example of the movement's aims and methods. Last winter, organizers there launched a citywide tenants' union that includes a half-dozen unions in private developments, including Mary Brown's building, as well as a homeless union and a union of senior citizens in subsidized housing. The group grew out of militant anti-eviction organizing in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when Rochester activists regularly erected foreclosure blockades to prevent homeowners like Liz McGriff from being forced onto the street.

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One of the union's meeting places is a mural-covered Catholic Worker house known as St. Joe's. During the day, organizers decamp from the house to recruit new tenants to their cause, knocking on doors and teaching renters about their rights. At night, the crew hits the streets to conduct outreach at Rochester's homeless encampments.

Ryan David Acuff, a bearded white activist in big winter boots and a beanie, is a St. Joe's resident and an organizer with the citywide tenants' union. Armed with a sharp anti- capitalist analysis of the housing sector, Acuff can tick off details about local building codes, eviction statistics, and the legislation that the citywide tenants' union is advocating in Albany.

"There are two major stages to this movement," the 35-year-old says over coffee and eggs at a humble neighborhood cafe. "The first is building a mass movement and consolidating our forces around some of these really immediate anti-displacement needs, including the need for universal rent control and [just]-cause eviction protections."

To that end, the citywide tenants' union recently joined a new formation of New York community groups called the Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance. Sensing an opportunity in this year's Democratic gubernatorial primary fight, the alliance is pressing Governor Andrew Cuomo to take progressive action on housing issues. Among other things, they want Cuomo to establish just-cause eviction protections for all New York tenants—a cause his challenger,

Cynthia Nixon, has already endorsed. They're also gearing up to push for the expansion of New York City's rent-regulation system to the entire state in 2019.

"Rent control is a major, major thing," Acuff says between bites of breakfast. "Not only does it stop displacement, but it means housing is no longer completely governed by the market." But, Acuff adds, even the rent-control fight "is sort of making preparations for a more transformative struggle. That's the second stage of the movement: to move toward universal social housing."

Indeed, nearly all of the activists and organizers interviewed for this story acknowledged that reforms like rent control and just-cause protections will not be enough to strike at the root of the housing crisis. To truly eradicate housing insecurity, to put an end to displacement, segregation, eviction, and homelessness—these goals demand radical solutions, the kind that don't merely chip crumbs of affordability from the market-rate mega-developments sprouting up in our cities. These solutions have to be bold. They have to push back against a national housing policy that benefits monied homeowners while leaving most low-income renters to fend for themselves. Above all, they have to begin to promote models that exist outside the market.

Needless to say, that won't be easy. But scratch the surface of US history, and you will find that this country is filled with ideals on which activists can build—and, in many places, already are.

Politicians of both parties have spent decades denigrating the egalitarian American institution that we call "public housing." Relying on heavily racist tropes, they have portrayed it variously as a failed socialist experiment, a den of iniquity, and an ugly architectural blight—a place of squalor and violence that residents seek to escape as soon as possible.

Yet the actual story of public housing tells a far more nuanced tale—one of hopeful promise despite government defunding, and stubborn resilience despite serious structural flaws. "The United States has gone out of its way to undermine public housing," says David Madden, a housing expert at the London School of Economics. "But at its core, public housing is a crucial lifeline for people structurally excluded from private-housing markets, as well as a living demonstration that alternative residential arrangements are possible."

This vital role is evident in public housing's enduring popularity—in spite of imperfections and popular misconceptions. In Washington, DC, the housing authority closed its waiting list, which contains 70,000 names, back in 2013. The New York City Housing Authority has a 1 percent vacancy rate and a waiting list of hundreds of thousands. Indeed, most of the roughly 3,000 housing authorities across the country have waiting lists.

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That's because many people appreciate their public-housing communities. They are places where residents spend 30 percent of their income on rent, making them consistently affordable. They often boast deep networks of mutual aid, where neighbors look after one another, have barbecues, and take care of the kids. And they aren't necessarily stepping-stones to a "better" neighborhood or a house in the suburbs, because for many, they *are* home. That's why public-housing residents so often come to the defense of their buildings when bureaucrats attempt to destroy them.

This is precisely the story that has been playing out at Barry Farm, a neighborhood of beige row houses and sloping green lawns in Washington, not far from the Anacostia River. After years of neglect and insufficient funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and DC's local housing authority, the latter now wants to follow the

neoliberal recipe du jour by demolishing all 432 units of Barry Farm and replacing them with a mixed-income complex that will be controlled in part by a private developer. The new development will provide 100 fewer public-housing units on the site.

Already, the local authority has removed hundreds of tenants as it prepares for the demolition, but some refuse to leave. They want to remain in their community, with its extremely low rents and lawns perfectly suited for family picnics, and they fear that the new development will exclude some current residents, forcing them to scramble for shelter in the nation's overpriced capital.

"For them to want to kick us out like we are trash and bring in people from other places—I have a problem with that," says Paulette Matthews, a slim black woman standing on the walkway of her home. "It's inhumane."

And so Matthews, along with a small but vocal group of other tenants, formed the Barry Farm Tenant and Allies Association and brought a lawsuit to block the destruction of the property. In late April, the highest court in the city sided with the tenants, halting the proposed demolition and sending the plan back to the zoning commission for reconsideration.

It was a small but crucial victory, helping to temporarily stem the hemorrhage of publicly owned units. Even so, public-housing advocates are itching to break out of the reactive mode in which they've been able to do little else besides beat back the constant attempts to privatize places like Barry Farm. "We've been in a defensive posture so long that we've just let the capitalist tide roll over us," says Tara Raghuveer, housing-campaign director at People's Action, a grassroots coalition that includes many housing-justice groups. "People are hungry for something more. We need to reinvest in public housing."

To that end, People's Action helped create the #NoCuts Coalition, joining with more than 100 other community organizations from around the country last spring to resist the Trump administration's proposed $7 billion in cuts to HUD's budget. They lobbied on Capitol Hill, got arrested in front of a HUD office, and organized rallies across the country. Ultimately, they prevailed: Not a dime was slashed from the department's budget this year.

But these activists want more. This spring, they put together a new policy platform that calls on Congress to invest $200 billion to rehabilitate the country's more than 1 million existing public-housing units. At the same time, they're calling for an immediate moratorium on the sale of public housing and public land to private interests. And they're pressing for reparations, in the form of affordable loans and down-payment assistance grants, for black and brown communities that have been subject to decades of red-lining and other racist policies.

These aren't small demands, but that's the point. "We need to use what we already have, which is public housing, to beat back the totally insane right wing that wants to privatize everything," Raghuveer says. "That feels like it needs to be the first order of business."

Public housing, then, is a crucial base from which to fight for real and enduring affordable housing. It's part of the solution, but it doesn't stand alone. History points to other possibilities.

Today's organizing goes well beyond rent regulation— it aspires to the truly radical.

For a brief time in the early 20th century, the United States engaged in an experiment that had the potential to radically reshape the country's housing sector. It started in 1933, when the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt established a Housing Division within the Public Works Administration (PWA), a New Deal agency that put people to work building dams, bridges, and other large-scale infrastructure.

The PWA's Housing Division emerged out of the exigencies of the Great Depression, but its path was also influenced by a cohort of left-wing labor unions and progressive urbanists who called on the federal government to follow the European example and engage in the direct construction of noncommercial housing for a broad American constituency. Among the most forceful of these advocates was Catherine Bauer. In 1934, she published *Modern Housing*, which sought to introduce alternative nonmarket housing models to US readers. Soon after, Bauer became the executive secretary of the union-backed Labor Housing Conference.

As the historian Gail Radford has written, Bauer's vision was rooted in the idea that housing should be insulated from the cold logic of the capitalist market. Or as Bauer herself once wrote: "The premises underlying the most successful and forward-pointing housing developments are not the premises of capitalism." And during its brief existence, the PWA Housing Division came to embody much of this ethos. It built or financed 58 public or otherwise noncommercial housing developments, containing 25,000 units, around the country. As important, the division's work wasn't focused solely on alleviating poverty, nor were its units completely means-tested, as public housing is today. With the help of leading architects, it built stylish, quality housing open to poor, working-class, and struggling middle-class people. Its work included the Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, a complex of 20 four-story buildings designed by the modernist architect William Lescaze, as well as the Harlem River Houses, a 574-unit complex where residents enjoyed amenities like a community newspaper, a women's club, and a nursery school.

These developments could not be bought or sold, nor could landlords raise the rents at will, so they remained consistently affordable. However, this made them a threat to the real-estate industry. David Walsh, a US senator at the time, complained that the PWA-constructed houses "in New York, Cleveland, and Boston and elsewhere are really in competition with private property."

One of the Housing Division's most grievous failures, it is essential to note, was its unwillingness to challenge racial segregation in American cities. In many cases, it even spread the sin by developing separate white-only and black-only developments. The legacy of this government-sanctioned segregation lives on in federal housing policy to the present day.

The PWA Housing Division was ultimately short-lived. It was abolished and replaced by the foundational but fundamentally flawed Housing Act of 1937. What emerged over the following decades was a two-tier approach to national housing policy. On the one hand, the federal government developed a public-housing program that was constrained by cost controls and served only the lowest- income people in the country, many of them politically marginalized people of color. On the other, it established massive incentive and insurance programs that fueled the commercial real-estate industry and bankrolled homeownership for middle-class (and mostly white) Americans. The universalist approach to noncommercial housing that Catherine Bauer imagined never materialized.

Now, however, Bauer's vision is being resurrected, embraced by a growing corps of thinkers and activists under the rubric of "social housing."

Last month, the People's Policy Project (3P), a socialist-leaning think tank founded by the writer and lawyer Matt Bruenig, released a report, "Social Housing in the United States," which argued that the country's market-oriented approach to affordable-housing development is woefully inadequate. Programs like Section 8 vouchers, the low-income housing tax credit, and inclusionary zoning use a variety of incentives and subsidies to encourage private developers to build or maintain affordable housing across the nation. While these are important tools in the

current political context, they are too small, too timid, and rely too heavily on private interests to truly meet the needs of desperate renters. They simply haven't provided enough affordable housing.

In place of such market schemes, 3P offers the radical solution of mass social housing in the United States. Social housing, as a recent exhibit at New York City's Center for Architecture describes it, is defined by "a mix of public projects led by city authorities, philanthropic schemes led by charities and collective schemes led by residents. Common to them all…is the idea that there are alternatives to a purely market-oriented system of housing provision."

With this concept as context, the People's Policy Project put forward its proposal: The American people should endeavor to develop 10 million units of "large-scale municipal housing, built and owned by the state," over the next 10 years (the country currently faces a shortfall of an estimated 7 million so-called deeply affordable units). Such a program, the 3P researchers contend, could model itself on the social-housing developments that thrive across the Atlantic. They point to Sweden, where municipal governments built 1 million social-housing units over the course of a decade beginning in the 1960s. They point as well to Vienna, where three in five residents live in housing built, owned, or managed by the municipal government. This housing provides not just for the poor or working class, but "serves the middle class as well…and has thus avoided the stigma of being either vertical ghettos or housing of last resort," as the urban-policy scholar Peter Dreier has written.

Social housing in the United States, the 3P report argues, should be based on universalist principles, with the aim of moving toward a housing model with no means-testing. Such developments "should be mixed-income, adequately served by public transport, and have easy access to amenities and shops." They should be regulated in a manner that prohibits discrimination and provides for the disabled and other marginalized populations, and should be largely self-financing, with tenants paying rents on a sliding scale.

How could we fund such an ambitious program? The report notes that a simple repeal of the Republican tax plan could generate enough revenue to build 10 million houses, at an average cost of $150,000 to $220,000 per unit. But the true solution is a massive expansion of federal support for municipal housing. Among other proposals, the 3P report's authors call on the federal government to institute a revenue-neutral low-interest loan program to fund urban housing authorities across the country. They also call for a suite of federal capital-grant programs, including one that would provide financing to municipal housing authorities equal in value to what the private sector receives under the low-income housing tax credit. And if federal funding fails to materialize in the near term, they call on municipalities to start building right away with financing from the bond market and other available capital sources. As for where to site these developments, the 3P authors believe that cities should turn first to unused public land.

A social-housing program of this sort would be different from traditional public housing in many respects, but one of the most essential ways is this: By developing homes for a broad range of Americans, such a program would quickly generate a powerful constituency capable of resisting the sort of political attacks that have plagued public housing for decades. It would also create an enormous number of jobs.

Plus there's a precedent for it—many, in fact. "Americans are used to national parks, state parks, fire departments, police departments, public schools, public-utility companies, water utilities—they are used to public ownership of essential services, but somehow they don't think of housing in the same way," Dreier says. The challenge will be to change their minds.

To do that demands a movement—a movement capable of reshaping popular narratives and overcoming a gargantuan real-estate lobby that has spent untold sums to safeguard the speculative housing market. That movement will need to reach beyond the traditional borders of housing advocacy and include unions, environmentalists, racial-justice advocates, feminists, and, yes, politicians. It will require, as Catherine Bauer once wrote, an army of people "who need better houses to live in and workers who need work building those houses."

Tara Raghuveer of People's Action agrees—and believes the current political atmosphere is ripe. "We're in an incredibly urgent moment that requires a movement response," she says. "Housing is the biggest tent issue there is." It's an issue that should be at the top of the left's political agenda and on the tip of every progressive politician's tongue.

Back in Rochester, tenants and organizers are anxious to undertake this necessary work. In 2016, they helped found Rochester's first community land trust, a legal tool with roots in the civil-rights movement that enables community-controlled landownership. In January 2018, the City Roots CLT, as it's known, finalized a deal with the bank that foreclosed on Liz McGriff's home. The CLT purchased and will hold in perpetuity the land under her residence, while she regained title to the structure. She now lives there as an owner, without fear. "I am happy. I sleep better at night. I am putting things back together," says McGriff, now a leader with the citywide tenants' union.

On Thurston Road, meanwhile, the residents continue their rent strike. They're pushing the city to invoke its receivership authority and take temporary control of the building. If they succeed, they hope to raise money and use their leverage to purchase the property from the owner at a reduced price. They say they'd like to place the land under the control of the CLT and convert the building into an affordable cooperative managed by the tenants themselves. "The landlord could sell the building to us," says Mary Brown, "and we'll get our own property manager and have it renovated and fixed up the way we want it fixed up."

For Ryan David Acuff, cooperatives, CLTs, and other community-controlled housing are the building blocks for a truly democratic social-housing system. "The way I define social housing," Acuff says, "is permanent affordability and resident control."

Yet even as the Rochester tenants inch toward that ideal, they must respond to the bitter emergencies that define this country's housing system. In late April, Spectrum moved to evict the homeless encampment near the Freddie-Sue Bridge. Under police supervision, company employees arrived in hazmat suits to tear down tents and confiscate possessions, to erase the inconvenient evidence of our housing crisis. But the citywide tenants' union and its allies mobilized. They arrived en masse, in militant style, and physically blocked the eviction. There was one arrest, but the police and hazmat men soon retreated. For now, the tent city doggedly endures. "Forgive us our trespasses," its occupants insist.