

# How HUD's HOPE VI Program is Destroying a Historic Houston Neighborhood

Paper Presented at the 1999 Urban Issues Program GSN Forum  
University of Texas at Austin  
©1999 Fred L. McGhee

HOPE VI is an acronym for "Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere," and is now the country's largest and most funded public housing improvement initiative. The program is an outgrowth of former HUD secretary Jack Kemp's attempts to induce public housing residents to purchase their own homes (the attempt was a failure), and the efforts and findings of the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing which was established in 1989. In its FY2000 budget HUD has reduced its request for the public housing capital fund by almost 500 million dollars and has requested 625 million dollars for the HOPE VI program, the same amount it requested in 1999<sup>1</sup>. Since 1993 Congress has appropriated over \$3 billion in HOPE VI grants for 81 sites in 55 cities.<sup>2</sup>

This paper discusses some of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the program and also will make some comments about what the results of this sort of urban engineering look like on the ground. As I hope to make clear, HUD's degree of doublethink and deception about this program and its professed intentions are deeply disturbing and cynical, and marks one of the more sinister—although scarcely recognized—aspects of the recently accelerating attempts by both conservatives and Clinton democrats to eradicate what remains of the American welfare state. I also hope to show that this type of intellectual cloroxing is the rule instead of the exception in the Teflon 1990's of President Bill Clinton and former HUD secretary Henry Cisneros.

## Local Color

Houston, the nation's fourth largest city, is home to the south's largest black community<sup>3</sup>, and Fourth Ward is Houston's oldest and most historically significant black neighborhood. It was established shortly after Texas emancipation on June 19, 1865 (commonly referred to as "Juneteenth") when formerly enslaved African-Americans from plantations in the Brazos river valley emigrated to Houston in search of jobs. They named the area "Freedmen's Town" and established a thriving community of black businesses and churches and developed a tightly-knit network of cultural and social institutions. Because the area of Buffalo Bayou where the settlement was located was part of a swamp and was deemed undesirable for habitation by whites, the new settlers to the area backfilled the land with dirt one bucket at a time. The rich

---

<sup>1</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition web site: <http://www.nlihc.org>.

<sup>2</sup> *Progress and Problems in Revitalizing Distressed Public Housing*. General Accounting Office Report GAO/RCED-98-187, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> In 1980, "the Houston metropolitan area contained 2.9 million people; of these over 521,512, or more than 18 percent, were black. The city of Houston itself included some 1.6 million people, with over 440,257 blacks, who comprised about 28 percent of the Bayou City's population" (Bullard 1992:236). According to data released by the Bureau of the Census in December 1997, the Harris County PMSA had a July 1996 population of 3,126,966 persons.

oral history tradition in Fourth Ward about this time period as well as topics such as the Houston Race Riots of 1917 has been recognized by many Texas folklorists<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Fourth Ward is home to one of the most representative examples of African-American vernacular architecture in the south; turn of the century single row or “shotgun” houses in this neighborhood have been occupied in many instances for generations.

Impressively, by the 1880’s most of the land in Fourth Ward was owned by black settlers into the area. But the depression of the 1920’s and 30’s hit the area hard, and by 1980 less than 5 percent of the housing in the area was owner occupied (Bullard 1987: 15). For most of the twentieth century, due to discrimination and other factors, the neighborhood was allowed to deteriorate and much of the housing stock and neighborhood amenities declined significantly. Allen Parkway Village, a 1000 unit housing project built in the early 1940’s as an all white development for returning war veterans, sits atop what used to be Freedmen’s Town. The city acquired the land utilizing newly enacted eminent domain laws, and also survived a supreme court challenge from several black families who objected to being evicted from land their ancestors had brought under occupation and cultivation. The black families lost. The segregated housing project was built on the historic site and a fence was built around the development to differentiate it from the adjacent “undesirable” neighborhood.

The city of Houston has never been a friend of public housing. “Conventional public housing construction,” for instance, “suffered a major setback in 1950, when a referendum passed limiting the number of housing units. As a result, few public housing developments were built in the city between 1952 and 1975” (Bullard 1992: 239-40), which largely explains the current affordable housing crisis currently experienced by many low and moderate income families in Houston.

Fourth Ward, and Allen Parkway Village now sit on the western edge of Houston’s central business district and occupy some of the most desirable real estate in Houston. The neighborhood has been under a state of siege for over twenty years. Since the mid-1970’s the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) has attempted to demolish Allen Parkway Village and to sell the land to well connected and development minded real estate speculators. Heroic efforts by Fourth Ward residents and the Allen Parkway Village resident’s council and its president Lenwood Johnson stalled many of the housing authority’s plans<sup>5</sup>, but after the republican takeover of congress in 1994 and the departure of the few remaining pro-housing minded officials in local, state, and federal government, the HACH, the administration of former Houston mayor Bob Lanier, and others were able to secure authorization from HUD to demolish most of APV in 1995.

On a hypothetical “utter corruption” or “FUBAR” scale, The Allen Parkway Village fiasco is in many ways in a class by itself. The story is a complex one, and involves many, oftentimes competing, narratives and layers. Among other things, it is a story of greed, avarice,

---

<sup>4</sup> See for instance the collection *Juneteenth Texas: Essays in African-American Folklore* edited by Francis E. Abernethy, Patrick B. Mullen, and Alan B. Govenar.

<sup>5</sup> As a result of resident and citizen efforts, the San Felipe Courts Historic District and Allen Parkway Village were inducted into the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

race and class prejudice, and hypocrisy. Above all else, it is a protracted “one stop shopping” lesson in Houston and Texas power politics. But it is also a story of broken dreams and promises, of fighting against seemingly insurmountable odds against a well organized and funded political machine, and of a community that despite much in-fighting retains a unique character and spirit with strong linkages to the past.

A recent GAO report on the HOPE VI program surveyed several HOPE VI projects across the country, but conveniently neglected to examine the situation in Houston, despite the fact that Lenwood Johnson, the president of the Allen Parkway Village residents’ council was a member of the 1989 commission gathered to study the problem in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Since the supposedly liberal GAO decided to avoid coming to Houston, let me provide some details about what the HOPE VI program has been doing in the bayou city and who stands to benefit from what has been done and why. Please bear in mind that over twenty-five years of history is difficult to condense into a 15 minute talk and that there is far more to this story than just the numbers; I will not greatly discuss the significant historic preservation concerns involved in this project, for instance, other than to make the comment that when it comes to these sorts of “urban revitalization” schemes (and when many people line up at the trough to “bid” on millions of dollars of taxpayer funded contracts), historic preservation is relegated to the outhouse. The story of HOPE VI in Houston is a story of flawed policy decisions, but the “story within the story” is the lives that have been destroyed as a result of the greed, hypocrisy, corruption, influence peddling, and protracted and continuing institutional racism that persists in that city.

- Almost 70% of Allen Parkway Village (677 units) has been destroyed. 500 units are to be built as replacement units: 222 units of historic rehabilitation in the units that were not destroyed, and 278 new construction units. The breakdown is as follows:
  - of the 222 units, 156 will be made up of a “senior village.” 147 of these units will be 1 bedroom units and 9 will be 2 bedroom units.
  - 66 of the 222 units will be “family units.” 39 will be 1 bedroom units (for “small” families I guess), and 27 will be 2 bedroom units.
  - of the 278 new construction units, the breakdown is as follows:
    - 28 - 1 bedroom units
    - 131 - 2 bedroom units
    - 99 - 3 bedroom units
    - 13 - 4 bedroom units
    - 7 - 5 bedroom units
- Income Mix: of the 334 “family” units (66 rehab plus 278 new construction), the income characteristics are as follows:
  - 112 units - 0-30% of median
  - 111 units - 31-50% of median
  - 111 units - 51-80% of median

---

<sup>6</sup> The relatively few resident safeguards included in the HOPE VI program were largely the result of efforts by Johnson and other housing residents and advocates.

The 156 elderly units are anticipated to serve a population between 0-20% of HAMFI.

The 1998 median income in Houston was \$49,100. The average public housing tenant in Houston has an annual income of approximately \$6,000.

- Financing: Extremely complex, heavily leveraged. A combination of CDBG, LIHTC, Historic Tax Credits, HOPE VI funding, City Park Funding, and varying public and private capital.
- Off site replacement housing: 250 units targeted for 50-80% of AMI, 50 units of historic rehab in Fourth Ward for 0-80% of AMI, and 100 units for 0-60% of AMI and participating in “Welfare-to-Work” programs.

In an article titled *Failing, But not Fooling, Public Housing Residents*, lead authors Jacqueline Leavitt and Mary Ochs noted that there are many similarities between the so-called “welfare reform” and of public housing reform. They note that “Poverty & Race Research Action Council funding led to research that reveals similarities between public housing and welfare policies; both “reforms” reflect a punitive approach to public policy and both rely on misleading assumptions about available jobs at living wages and adequate job training.”<sup>7</sup>

In a climate of mean-spiritedness, moral and historical amnesia, fear, condescension, and old-fashioned political patronage and power, politically disenfranchised entities such as urban ethnic minorities and the poor (of all races) are frequently used as political footballs, tossed to whomever is (or seems to be) the political flavor of the moment. Nearly no one looks to these people for solutions to what are largely problems in their neighborhoods; the assumption of their intellectual and moral inferiority (the result, perhaps of “genetic” factors or “cultures of poverty”) goes unquestioned, hence undiscussed. And when neighborhood leaders and community members do produce viable, well researched, and realistic suggestions for improving the situations, their intelligence is insulted, their motives are questioned, their recommendations are not taken seriously, indeed their very agency and personhood is minimized and rendered invisible. It would seem that to policy makers (city council members, as well as state and federal politicians) these poor, Black, and Asian, Native American, and Hispanic citizens really have nothing important to say; their views are irrelevant, indeed a distraction to the right sort of forward-thinking bureaucrat eager to get on with business. In my activism related to these issues I have had the opportunity to observe the pervasive hypocrisy up close; nothing so infuriates housing officials and other bureaucrats as intelligent and well reasoned alternative planning solutions often put together by the affected residents themselves along with sympathetic graduate students and faculty at respected planning and architecture schools such as at Rice University and the University of Houston, among others. The measures undertaken by powerful officials to neutralize opposition to their objectives are also instructive, but unfortunately time prevents me from discussing the sordid history of death threats and other forms of subtle and

---

<sup>7</sup> *Failing, But Not Fooling Public Housing Residents: The Impact of Job Interventions*. National Low Income Housing Coalition web site: <http://www.nlihc.org/fail.htm>

not-so-subtle intimidation that have been inflicted upon those daring to care about how their taxpayer dollars get spent enriching a few well connected developers hell-bent on destroying an aspect of history that they don't like to discuss.

None of this should come as a surprise. Indeed, the sordid pattern is all too familiar to those who honestly take

...a look at some of history's striking regularities, among them, that those in a position to impose their projects not only hail them with enthusiasm but also typically benefit from them, whether the values professed involve free trade or other grand principles—which turn out in practice to be finely tuned to the needs of those running the game and cheering the outcome. Logic alone would suggest a touch of skepticism when the pattern is repeated. History should raise it a notch higher.<sup>8</sup>

The top-down urban renewal strategy favored by city hall and its benefactors is symptomatic of the political climate. In an era of accelerating need, governments are cutting resources and in many instances abdicating responsibility for serving the poor and disenfranchised. It is within this extremely narrow intellectual bottleneck that those in power formulate their political strategies.

### **No HOPE: Assumptions**

As my (all too brief) discussion of the numbers hopefully makes clear, HOPE VI is centered around the following three objectives, although these are not the only ones:

- Partial or complete demolition of the housing project
- “Deconcentration” of poverty, via more open use of space and the built and unbuilt environment and a significant reduction in the number of units available for occupancy by residents. This results in a net reduction of affordable housing stock (although HUD claims otherwise).
- “Mixed Income” residents occupying the units. In practice this results in a decrease in the number of housing units truly “affordable” to a typical public housing resident.
- “Mixed Income” and “Demolition” are to be pronounced together. Rehabilitation of housing units (which is considerably less expensive than demolition and preserves precious housing units) is not an option; the way HUD conceptualizes “mixed income,” invariably involves at least some degree of “demolition.”

Much of the HOPE VI program is premised on a debatable and unproven concept that has by this point taken on the status of religion within right thinking urban planning circles in the academy and the private sector. The new religion is “mixed income.” One would think that such a wise and penetrating insight would have been rigorously researched and that the social science literature on the subject would be extensive. Clearly a notion with such profound implications for hundreds of thousands if not millions of American citizens would have had to withstand at least some measure of scientific scrutiny and perhaps even testing? Insights such as these are far

---

<sup>8</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Passion for Free Markets*, *Z Magazine*, 1997, p. 28)

too important to be left to the ambitions and imaginations of professors and graduate students at planning and architecture schools—where are the voices of the sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and social workers on this issue and what do they have to say about the supposed virtues of “mixed income?” As an anthropologist, I like to at least think that I’m relatively current on much of the cultural research of the supposed “benefits” of having the poor and pigmented be forced to live with the supposed “good example” of having moderate and even middle income betters as their “good influence” neighbors. What is fairly plain is that this line of thinking has a long and sordid history in American history. “Mixed income” and other such mantras have far more to do with assumptions of inferiority, cultural and elitist bias, and self-serving condescension than with empirical evidence. Let’s call this sort of “culture of poverty” mentality, whether it be proffered by Myrdal, Moynihan, or William Julius Wilson, what it really is: racism and classism. Even if for the sake of argument one were to grant that “mixed income” is somehow “beneficial,” the next questions almost follow *a fortiori*: 1.) in whose benefit are these supposedly beneficial policies conceptualized and enacted? Are those targeted by the policies given the opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision making processes? 2.) Why is it the poor who are expected to have to give up their homes and neighborhoods? I don’t see the rich and powerful (who presumably are mired in an equally peculiar “culture of affluence”) destroying their neighborhoods and uprooting their communities to produce the “mixed income” so lauded and desired. If “mixed income” has a supposed societal benefit, then shouldn’t all of society should be expected to embrace its supposed virtues? But as mentioned, the “new religion” has nothing to do with the production of a better society based on democratic values; it simply is another way to enact punitive and patronizing policy on a population group that has been scapegoated and vilified and is increasingly being targeted as expendable.

R. Allen Hays in his well known book on the history of American housing policy distinguishes between what he calls the “liberal” view and what he terms the “conservative” view. Most American political discussion takes place within this rather constricted range; anyone daring to put forth progressive (i.e. socialized) policy options is usually dismissed as “politically unfeasible” or “unrealistic” and is deemed to be beyond the bounds of the politically feasible. Worse yet, when activists and advocates for the poor not only make very real and workable policy recommendations but also go out of their way to cast a light on the staggering hypocrisy and elitism of policy makers, as is often the case, they are angrily repudiated as “dangerous radical agitators” or as “red loonies” by nostalgic anti-communists. It’s truly a sign of the times when Bob Dole during the 1996 presidential race can call public housing “the last bastion of socialism in the United States,” and that instead of vigorously defending the program, the reaction of Clintonites and their groveling self-serving liberal worshippers facilitate the passage of devastating pieces of legislation such as the 1996 welfare “reform” bill and now the “Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act” of 1998. Hays is clear in his description of what separates liberals and conservatives; by implication he is also clear about what separates liberals from progressives—a belief in the market. Progressives believe that housing, like health care and education, is a right, not a privilege. The problem is that American liberals want to have their cake and eat it too: they realize that what’s happening is wrong and unjust, but they’re too busy enriching themselves to truly and finally face the massive infusions of capital required to fix the American housing problem. And above all else, they are not prepared to recognize that the staggering levels of underdevelopment in American inner cities are the by-product of historically

constituted tendencies and trends that are deeply rooted in American institutions, not the result of individual acts of racism or classism.

As American Indian activists Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke note, “land has always been the issue central to North American politics and economics. Those who control the land are those who control the resources within and upon it....land ownership, social control, and all the other aggregate components of power are fundamentally interrelated.”<sup>9</sup>

As former residents of Bantustans in South Africa or displaced Palestinians in Israel today know all too well, Churchill and LaDuke’s insights don’t just apply to the North American situation. The peculiar politics of the land under capitalism have been with us for several centuries. And as the “free market” principles that have been implemented in the third world come to increasingly predominate at home, liberals are going to have to ask themselves some fundamental and tough questions about their role in the destruction of the American social safety net when the bubble finally bursts. Although they may be critical of the results of the HOPE VI program, liberals still operate within the same bottlenecked framework of assumptions.

---

<sup>9</sup> Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism. In *From a Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism*, pp. 147-190.