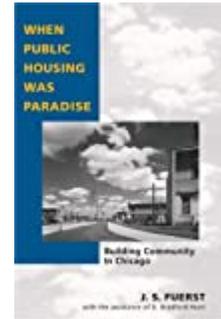




J. S. Fuerst. *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 228 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07213-0.



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The Way Back to Paradise

J. S. Fuerst's book, *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago*, is the culmination of his teaching, research, and administrative career at Loyola University in Chicago. Fuerst's experience in the field and his collaboration with Bradford Hunt has produced a book that successfully integrates social welfare, housing, and politics in Chicago. This work is distinctive because informative chapter introductions and interviews with eighty key informants provide the focus. Although originally published by the Greenwood Publishing Group in 2003, the paperback edition published in 2005 by the University of Illinois Press makes this important book more accessible to scholars, urban planners, community developers, and activists. It presents the little-known and fascinating story of public housing in its heyday. Fuerst's nostalgic call for a return to yesterday's public housing may be good advice, but, unfortunately, in light of the current policies being pursued by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), his insights may be all but ignored.

Against the backdrop of thirty years of federal housing policy and Chicago's current privatization of CHA known as the Plan for Transformation, launched in 2000,

the book reminds us that personal narratives can increase our understanding of public policy. Organized around the factors that made public housing work during its early years, Fuerst's interviews demonstrate that public policies have compelling and very real impacts on people's lives. Some interviewees were ordinary citizens and others were among some of the most respected names in the city. Their common bond was that they were residents of public housing in the forties, fifties, and sixties.

Despite the wide range of individuals interviewed, a common story emerges. The early years of public housing were successful because of a visionary leader who focused on providing a decent place to live for low-income people of all races while organizing a range of community supports to keep the housing viable. Evelyn Wood, the first executive director of the housing authority, nurtured the idea of integrated public housing; it was brought to fruition by extremely capable and dedicated public servants, workers, and community people. In other words, from the 1940s through the early 1960s, effective leadership, well-managed developments, community-building, and an emphasis on upward mo-

bility were the key components of the city's public housing program. Remarkably, for a city that still is among the most segregated in the country, this vision was inclusive. It saw the benefits of extending public housing to African Americans who had faced brutal housing discrimination and racially restrictive housing covenants since the 1920s.

These narratives were particularly engaging for me because I grew up in Henry Horner Homes on Chicago's west side during the late fifties and sixties. In addition, my father worked as a custodian for the housing authority for thirty-three years and my grandmother was among the first residents to move into the Ida B. Wells development in 1941.[1] Given my experiences in public housing, I was particularly impressed with how the book captured my own memories about residents who dedicated themselves to their communities and who provided me with important role models through youth activities, church groups, and the professional and social routines of the workers in the developments.

A less satisfying feature of the book is Fuerst's solution to the problems of housing the nation's poor. Essentially, the book argues that public housing should return to the model that existed under Elizabeth Wood. There is no question that sufficient funding, good management, reasonable tenant selection, and a focus on building community infrastructure are needed to successfully house the poor, but public housing's decline was brought about by a political betrayal of its low-income citizens, especially single black women with children. With the full support of the city's political leaders, public housing in Chicago changed from a system that developed housing as an engine of social and economic mobility for all races to one that used public housing as a mechanism to segregate low-income African Americans. Elizabeth Wood was indeed a visionary but Fuerst knows as well as anyone that she was impaled on the politics of race, gender, and class. These dynamics failed public housing residents and the residents of the city as a whole.[2] Despite the city's upbeat assessment of CHA's current plan, there is little reason to believe that the underlying race, gender, and class dynamics have changed to the point where public housing can again become a gateway to opportunity for the city's poor and working classes. Striking Fuerst's optimistic tone for the future of public housing would be plausible for those who do not know the city, but those familiar with Chicago's history know that politics often divides rather than unites its racial, ethnic, and class groups. Also, Chicago is not a city that cheerfully rewards its community-minded visionaries. More

often than not, true visionaries meet the same fate as Elizabeth Wood—they are slowly marginalized and eventually fired for their trouble. Fortunately, the city has many fine political and social leaders that continue to demand open and affordable housing in stable communities. Fuerst has worked with many of these groups and could have strengthened his argument by including a chapter on public housing's legacy of grassroots organizing and advocacy.[3]

Three other factors weaken this book's call for a return to public housing policies of the past, including shifts in labor markets, poor educational opportunities, and privatization; all of these factors work against public housing. In addition, Fuerst's premise that well-managed public housing could again become a stepping-stone to upward mobility is undermined by changes in the labor market caused by the realities of de-industrialization and the rise of globalization. Beginning in the 1950s, Chicago labor markets were already starting to move from a low-skill industrial economy to the high-skill service-based economy that we have today. As Chicago began to lose its manufacturing base, the corresponding dynamics of a global economy relegated a large segment of the city's industrial workforce to the contingent labor market where minimum-wage jobs, temporary employment, and contract work replace good jobs with steady incomes. Economic instability, especially among people with educational, racial, ethnic, language, gender, or age barriers to solid jobs at decent wages, threatens all forms of subsidized housing because these individuals have the greatest trouble paying their rent.[4] Many of Fuerst's key informants talked about living in developments where men and women worked. Today, chronic employment and weak attachments to the mainstream labor market mean that creating jobs is as essential to community stability as creating affordable housing.

Another challenge to restoring public housing as part of a strategy to lift people out of poverty is that the educational opportunities for low-income people are worse now than they were in the glory days of public housing. Also, after decades of poor education, limited income and social mobility, the social aspirations of public housing residents vary widely. Living in areas of concentrated poverty, some residents have adopted social behaviors that prevent them from integrating into the mainstream. These individuals and their families have multiple social problems and meeting their long-term needs will require the city's immediate and sustained attention.

Finally, the most significant challenge to Fuerst's pro-

posed return to the public housing of yesteryear is that Chicago has chosen to take advantage of federal incentives to use vouchers, known as Section 8, for very low-income people to obtain housing in the private market. At a time when the city is experiencing a tight rental-housing market, the CHA has been reducing its supply of affordable housing by bulldozing high-rise developments and providing vouchers to over 38,000 low-income residents, many of whom are relocating to vulnerable lower-middle-class and poor neighborhoods in the city and in the south suburbs.

According to recent studies of affordable housing in Chicago, thousands of families displaced by the renovation of their developments have been unable to find housing in the private market; thousands more have moved from CHA into substandard private housing in neighborhoods with soft real estate markets and isolated pockets of blight.[5] The *Chicago Tribune* recently reported that over the last five years, an average of twenty-five hundred tenants have been ordered to move because private landlords refused to fix problems with their properties. Thousands of landlords repeatedly fail housing inspections but still remain certified.[6] For many families, this situation is unlikely to improve because when the CHA's current plan is fully implemented, only twenty-five thousand of the displaced residents will be allowed to return to public housing while thirty-six thousand former residents of CHA will continue to rely on the housing voucher program. To further exacerbate these housing problems, an estimated thirty thousand residents who were not leaseholders but who lived in public housing will not be eligible to return to the renovated developments and will not qualify for housing subsidies because of criminal records, chronic unemployment, or other social ills.

Since current public policy and the significant challenges facing public housing residents in the Chicago area present major obstacles to Fuerst's recommendations for public housing, it is surprising that his book does not include an analysis of housing privatization. Today, public housing in Chicago is synonymous with private enterprise. For instance, nationally, in the last five years, more than thirteen billion dollars have been funneled into the private housing market. Not only are the design and construction components of the transformation operated by private developers, but the day-to-day inspection and certification of housing for the Section 8 component is handled by a private company. The social service component of the transformation that provides relocation counseling to residents has been privatized as

well. Fuerst, who has worked with community groups on housing issues, recognizes that when real estate interests and the needs of communities conflict, the more powerful interest often wins. The economic incentives that support public subsidies for private enterprise mean that while the majority of the Section 8 landlords provide quality market-rate housing, complaints about lead paint, inadequate heating, faulty plumbing, and rodent infestation reveal that taxpayers are subsidizing both reliable housing entrepreneurs and predatory landlords. A discussion of this aspect of public housing privatization would have deepened our understanding of the issues and implications of these policies.

To his credit, Fuerst interviews residents who remained in public housing long after its heyday. These interviews provide significant insight into the connection between the past successes of public housing and resident efforts to build positive communities. Unfortunately, the book does not include the concerns and experiences of residents that are relocating from public housing under the CHA Plan for Transformation. Interviews with some of these residents would have undoubtedly placed Fuerst's insights about the importance of positive and welcoming communities within the larger dynamics of low-income housing and neighborhood change. For instance, as the CHA displaces its former residents, neighborhoods struggling to revitalize like South Shore, Englewood, Avalon Park, Park Manor, Lawndale, and both East and West Garfield are left to deal with a new influx of low-income residents.[7] Residents of these neighborhoods who have worked hard to build equity in their homes may not be particularly sympathetic to the newcomers. If former residents of public housing become isolated within socially and economically distressed neighborhoods, they may find it difficult to access the benefits of living outside of public housing. Some low-income families are migrating from Chicago in search of decent affordable housing. These migrations are affecting communities all over the Midwest, yet the federal government, which is using taxpayer dollars to finance this change, has taken virtually no responsibility and provided little leadership to help neighborhoods assess the impact and address the needs of low-income people throughout the region.

Fuerst provides excellent examples of high-density, low-income housing developments that work, but his failure to address issues of neighborhood stability undermines his thesis. A more viable solution to the related problems of public housing, community-building, and neighborhood change involves organizing and ad-

vocacy. For instance, in response to issues of affordability, an emerging coalition of the city's community development corporations (CDCs), such as the Chicago Rehab Network, regional planning bodies such as the Metropolitan Planning Council, and groups working to end housing segregation such as the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, are coming together to represent residents and neighborhoods. This coalition can pressure federal, state, and city governments to promote programs that strengthen vulnerable neighborhoods while opposing the re-segregation of families affected by entrenched poverty. Also, CDCs need to advocate for programs that can allow them to develop innovative and affordable rental housing with employment opportunities and community supports that help lift residents out of poverty. To achieve these goals, the coalition will need to advocate for affordable housing set-asides and the expanded use of building-based housing subsidies.[8]

The conclusion of *When Public Housing was Paradise* discusses the national crisis in affordable housing. Fuerst's analysis exposes the origins of the political lethargy and shortsightedness of federal housing policy that turned public housing into warehouses for the poor. Fuerst's focus on the shortcomings of HOPE VI is especially important because he effectively explains how this approach exacerbated the shortage of affordable housing. For instance, Fuerst discusses the impact of the repeal of the one-to-one replacement housing provision under President Clinton that paved the way for the Department of Housing and Urban Development to use public funds to privatize public housing. Fuerst also notes the acceleration of the trend toward privatization under the current Bush administration.[9]

For those who believe that public housing was such a disaster that the city had no alternative but demolition and displacement, Fuerst provides a clear history of low-income housing and its proud legacy of producing solidly middle-class people of all races. We should honor the legacy of the citizens that Fuerst interviewed and many others who lived in public housing, but we should take special pride in the stories of African Americans who battled discrimination and were able to leverage community stability, decent housing, and neighborhood support into educational attainment and professional jobs.

Fuerst's work makes a vital contribution to our thinking about low-income communities in Chicago and elsewhere. The words of his informants and the background information provided by the authors effectively support

the premise that once CHA completes its transformation, it will need more money, better management, and citizen involvement to succeed.

The "way back to paradise" depends upon a regional strategy for housing poor people while creating and/or maintaining safe and viable communities.[10] The citizens of Chicago must hold their leadership accountable by demanding open housing, seeking regional solutions to affordable housing for low-income families, and supporting neighborhoods impacted by the CHA transformation. In short, Chicago must continue to build an organized and active political constituency that demands safe and decent public housing for low-income and aspiring families of all races.

Notes

[1]. My involvement with public housing also includes working for several years as an organizer in Wentworth Gardens. This work is discussed in studies such as William Peterman, *Neighborhood and Community-Based Development: The Potential and Limits of Grassroots Action* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000); and Roberta Feldman and Susan Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Resident's Activism in Chicago Public Housing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2]. Policies that reinforce segregation undermine neighborhood safety, promote urban sprawl, subvert racial justice, and weaken local economies.

[3]. In all fairness, Fuerst addresses skeptics like me in his "Afterword." He writes: "Many readers will remain skeptical that the [public housing] program's earlier achievements can be replicated today. This attitude is buttressed by the current policy of tearing down high-rise projects" (p. 205). He goes on to cite subsidized high-rise buildings in Chicago that are successful, including Long Grove House at 20th Street and Michigan Avenue and Lake Park Place at Pershing Road and Lake Park. His point is that high-rise buildings for low-income people can work. He writes: "The design of the buildings is less important than management" (p.209). On this point we agree, but I am arguing that the politics of race, gender, and class trump concerns about both management and design.

[4]. Numerous studies cite the shortage of affordable housing for low-income renters in 2005 as worse than at any point on record. As a result of the shortage of affordable housing, a low-income renter spends a high proportion of their income on housing, mak-

ing it impossible to save and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. For further information on this issue, see Philip Nyden, *Saving Our Homes: Lessons of Community Struggles to Preserve Affordable Housing in Chicago's Uptown* (Chicago: Loyola University, Center for Urban Research and Learning monograph, April 1996). See also: Anthony Downs, "Housing Policies in the New Millennium," speech given at the Housing and Urban Development Conference on Policies for the New Millennium, Washington, D.C., October 3, 2000, www.anthonydowns.com/Hudhousing.htm (accessed August 15, 2005). Anthony Downs is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute.

[5]. Susan J. Popkin and Mary K. Cunningham, *Searching for Rental Housing with Section 8 in the Chicago Region* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2000). See also, Janet L. Smith and Barbara Sherry, *Estimating Demand for Affordable Rental Housing in the Chicago Region* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, Urban Planning and Policy Program, 2000).

[6]. Antonia Olivo, John Bebow, and Darnell Little, "Landlords Fail to Fix Poor's Housing Woes," *Chicago Tribune*, 22 May 2005. Ninety-eight thousand housing violations were reported over a five-year period.

[7]. Howard Husock, "Let's End Housing Vouchers," *City Journal* (Autumn 2000) www.city-journal.org/html/104letsendhousing.html (accessed August 15, 2005). Although I understand Husock's analysis, I do not agree that the Section 8 program perpetuates poverty and ruins neighborhoods.

[8]. In the 1960s and 1970s, building-based subsi-

dies spurred growth in affordable housing units. They provided an incentive for private developers to build housing for low-income residents. Low interest mortgages allowed developers to make money while charging below-market rents. Unfortunately, a loophole in federal law and the policies of the Nixon administration allowed developers to prepay their loans and convert many of these buildings to market-rate housing. For information on the Bush Administration's continued efforts to reduce federal spending on low-income housing assistance, see "Low-Income Housing Coalition Fact Sheet on the 2005 Budget for the Housing Voucher Program," www.nlihc.org/news/Section8-05factsheet.html (accessed August 15, 2005). For information on housing set-asides and zoning for affordable housing, see the Chicago Rehab Network website at www.chicagorehab.org.

[9]. The erosion of the nation's commitment to affordable housing is demonstrated by the fact that for the past thirty years, as the federal government has reduced its investment in affordable housing, at the same time, there has been an increase in low-income households.

[10]. "The Way Back to Paradise" is the title of Audra McDonald's debut solo album released in 1998. The song served as the inspiration for this analysis because it highlights the challenges women face because of their social position in the broader society. The perspectives of black women at the bottom of our society who struggle for a decent place to raise their families shaped my analysis of Fuerst's book. Audra McDonald, lyrics Michael John LaChiusa, "Way Back to Paradise," Fiddleback Music Publishing Co., (1994) 1998.

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