

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY AND HISTORY OF FEDERAL
SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

HOUSING POLICY AND HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

In late January, I remotely attended a city council meeting in the City of Durham. The meeting was same as usual and priority agenda items did not indicate any controversy. The council members were only able to get through one agenda item before a group of community members from McDougald Terrace, Durham's oldest public housing complex, demanded to



Firefighters inspect McDougald Terrace for carbon monoxide.
Photo courtesy: WRAL

have their voices heard. The community members began voicing their anger and frustration and grief at the state of their reality. In November of 2019, first responders began identifying at least 15 people with elevated carbon dioxide levels. Firefighters and Medical responders began warning residents of the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning, especially after an infant was hospitalized with carbon monoxide poisoning.¹ The Durham Housing Authority (DHA) begin relocating more than 300 residents to nearby hotels in early January until the buildings could be inspected and the problem solved. It has been over two months and residents are still waiting to get the call that they can go home. Families are cramped in one room with nothing to make food with but a microwave, which is leading them to consume a sodium-rich diet that has lead a child into cardiac arrest. The disruption is causing a mental health crisis, children's grades are dropping and some receiving suspensions for lashing out, hotel owners are losing business for housing residents from McDougald Terrace, and residents that are being cleared to return home are finding that their homes have been robbed in their absence. Many of them are so angry that in light of what has happened, Anthony Scott, Durham Housing Authority's (DHA) chief executive director, was given a raise. Although council members



A family of five must live the tight quarters of a hotel room in Durham, as they wait for the greenlight to go back home to McDougald Terrace.
Photo credit: Suzy Khimm/NBC News

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/carbon-monoxide-leaks-leave-durham-n-c-public-housing-residents-n1113836>

clarified that the source of funding is different, many are calling for him to step down for a poor job in bettering the communities he is responsible for. Among elevated carbon monoxide levels, there are other problems associated with the complex, like lead paint, mold, sewage, bed bugs, cockroaches, and high crime.² Many residents are calling for the 67-year old housing complex to be demolished and rebuilt, but as a city council member said in a council meeting on February 17th, the city does not have 300 available affordable housing units.

This is not an issue exclusive to McDougald Terrace. Federally subsidized homes across the country are experiencing a rise in carbon monoxide poisoning cases. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) routinely conducts inspections on public housing units, and yet carbon monoxide detectors are not required at the federal level. A bizarre case in South Carolina involved two deaths related to monoxide poisoning and in a recent inspection a year and a half prior the complex had passed inspection with an 86 out of 100. The fire chief inspecting the homes since the incident indicated that there weren't any detectors in all 244 units, and since then the entire property has been evacuated and set to be demolished.³ Carbon monoxide is impossible to detect without these detectors due to its odorless and colorless nature. Thirteen carbon monoxide poisoning related deaths have occurred since 2013. In light of the investigation conducted by NBC, HUD has begun writing up a federal level rule to make detectors mandatory, but the rule would have to go through a formal rule-making process under the Administrative Procedure Act. The general process involves the agency conceiving the idea, reporting the change they want to make with a summary and timeline for completion so that it appears in the current Unified Agenda of Federal Regulatory and Deregulatory Actions, the agency completes the proposal after internal and external review is conducted, the agency submits the proposal to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review, OMB takes on average 90 days to review the proposal, it gets returned to the agency who will publish it in the Federal Register for public comment which lasts from 30-90 days, comments are analyzed and amendments are made, the agency will return the final rule

² <https://indyweek.com/news/durham/mcdougald-residents-hotels-at-least-another-week/>

³ [https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/carbon-monoxide-killing-public-housing-residents-hud-doesn't-require-n977896](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/carbon-monoxide-killing-public-housing-residents-hud-doesn-t-require-n977896)

to OMB who will then return it to the agency to publish in the Federal Register again as a final rule with an effective date usually at least 30 days in advance.⁴ The process could take months or even a year to become a reality and by then many more could die as they wait for change. The House has since passed a bill that would require carbon monoxide detectors to be installed in federally subsidized housing, although the Senate has stalled this legislation as they work on their own version. In states that have proposed requirements for detectors to be installed there has been opposition from lobbyists representing property managers, builders, and realtors. They claim that it would put an excessive economic burden on landlords and ultimately harm tenants. In Arkansas, industry groups were able to pressure state legislators to remove requirements for smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in rental homes.⁵ This was infuriating to read, as if the economic burden of a developer trumps the necessity to ensure a safe and dignified living condition for the individual. This crisis has sparked a personal interest in understanding the state of housing policy in this country and delving into the issue of housing

affordability. The reality of this situation has been heartbreakingly perplexing how people living in first-world America are going through such horrendous living conditions.



People march outside McDougald Terrace demanding accountability and answers.
Photo courtesy: ABC11

⁴ <https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/browse-by-interest/general-rulemaking-process-under-apa?login=success>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/washington-vows-act-carbon-monoxide-hazards-protections-could-be-delayed-n1007081>

What planning issues are represented here?

These issues are revealing a deeper trend of gross underfunding and negligence on the part of HUD. “While HUD oversees the public housing program, it is administered locally by about 2,900 public housing agencies. Most agencies own and manage the public housing developments themselves, but some contract with private management companies or transfer ownership to a private subsidiary or another entity that operates the development under public housing rules.”⁶ In McDougald Terrace’s case, the property manager is an employee of the City of Durham. In any case, I agree with David Price, a democratic representative for North Carolina who said, “HUD is the agency that, at the end of the day, has responsibility for the national standards.”⁷ Those that are living in federally subsidized housing are not sub-human. Many of the residents are elderly and young, and they are often the victims of neglect. Ashley Canady, the community’s council president argues that she’s almost paying market value rent for less. Theoretically, the federal government funds public housing through two funding pools: The Public Housing Operating Fund, which is intended to meet the gap between the rents that public housing tenants pay (about 30% of their income) and the developments’ operating costs (such as maintenance and security); and the Public Housing Capital Fund, which funds development renovations and replacement of items, such as appliances and heating and cooling equipment. Both pools have long been seeing a reduction in funding, which has created a severe backlog of repairs worth billions of dollars.⁸

I think the real issues at stake here are equity, human dignity, and true grassroots activism. I was astounded to see that many of the residents were rising up and making their voices heard, even “threatening” to vote city council members out of office if they wouldn’t address this issue. Ashley Canady said she would run for city council if the issues of her community are not addressed. We are past the time of a passive political term. Community members are calling city council members out that have not spent time in the communities they are representing or

⁶ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-public-housing>

⁷ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/carbon-monoxide-leaks-leave-durham-n-c-public-housing-residents-n1113836>

⁸ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-public-housing>

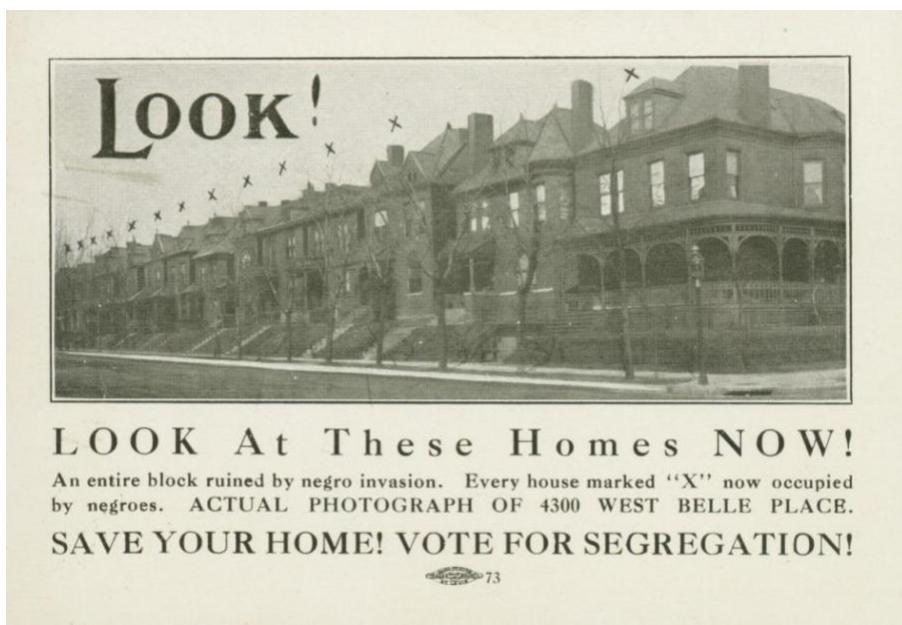
spoken up or even asked questions to understand the extent of their suffering. I think this correlates to our heritage of undermining vulnerable communities that tend to be black and low-income, and I think they are remnants of our racist past. Some of the residents felt that the state of dilapidation that the city had allowed the complex to reach was a message to the residents that they didn't matter. This is a conversation about providing affordable housing that is not just livable but AS HIGH A QUALITY as any of the housing being built for anybody else. This will require short-term interventions, such as circumventing the formal rule-making process, which HUD has the capability to do and require life-saving technology like carbon monoxide detectors and will require long-term interventions such as bigger budget allocations to green affordable housing that does not isolate its residents from the wider city fabric.

To begin to piece together the complexity of federally subsidized housing, the conversation has to go further back than subsidized housing. The timeline needs to take into consideration zoning laws, which is "really a story of how Americans learned to legislate their 'Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) impulses, according to Amanda Erickson a former editor of CityLab."⁹ Zoning has a dark history in this country of segregating and discriminating against minorities. Yale Rabin, a Philadelphia urban planner who was well regarded in the connection between civil rights issues and planning said, "What began as a means of improving the blighted physical environment in which people lived and worked became a mechanism for protecting property values and excluding the undesirables." The undesirables at the time were immigrants and African Americans.¹⁰ Rabin suggests that southern cities in the early twentieth century used zoning to enforce racial segregation whose timeline directly coincides with the first zoning ordinances in the country. "While northern Progressives were enacting zoning as a mechanism for protecting and enhancing property values, southern Progressives were testing its effectiveness as a means of enforcing racial segregation." One of the earliest experiments with regulating land use was in San Francisco in 1885. The city passed an ordinance that would make

⁹ <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2012/06/birth-zoning-codes-history/2275/>

¹⁰ <https://www.asu.edu/courses/aph294/total-readings/silver%20--%20racialoriginsofzoning.pdf>

operating public laundries without a permit illegal. At the time more than two thirds of public laundries were Chinese-operated. Virtually all non-Chinese permits were approved while only one Chinese laundry owner got a permit. Lee Yick, a Chinese laundry store owner, sued the city in the *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* case to the Supreme Court over “discriminatory enforcement of a fire-safety ordinance—and won—in 1886. The *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* court case was one of the earliest victories for modern era civil rights.”¹¹ In 1910, Baltimore adopted the first racial zoning laws that were explicitly written to keep African Americans and whites separated. The mayor of Baltimore, J. Barry Mahool said, “Blacks should be quarantined in isolated slums in order to reduce the incidents of civil disturbance, to prevent the spread of communicable disease into the nearby White neighborhoods, and to protect property values among the White majority.”¹²



Flyer urging voters to adopt referendum preventing African Americans from moving into predominantly white neighborhoods. 1916.

Source: Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center
Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center

to prepare them for citizenship or even how to make them more productive and useful members of the community. The new prognosis pointed rather to the need to segregate or quarantine a race liable to be a source of contamination and social danger to the white

George M. Fredrickson, the late historian and professor at Stanford University, gathered in his book *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny* that “If Blacks were a degenerating race with no future, the problem ceased to be one of how

¹¹ <https://hoodline.com/2015/08/yick-wo-and-the-san-francisco-laundry-litigation-of-the-late-1800s>

¹² <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2498&context=mlr>

community, as it sank even deeper into the slough of disease, vice and criminality.”⁵ And although this was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the 1917 case Buchanan v. Warley, the court’s decision did not stop cities and towns nationwide from continuing to business as usual¹³. Another article by Erickson in CityLab quotes Stuart Meck, the late professor of urban planning at Rutgers, where he explains that “cities used urban planning not to build better, or cleaner, or morally uplifting cities. They used planners to divide the city, creating beautiful spaces at the expense of the poor. In an email to her, he writes: “City planning, along with zoning, was a vehicle to control where African-Americans, the poor, and immigrants lived, and to keep them out of the areas where middle and upper class people resided. It is no coincidence that the initial efforts to adopt land use controls in the U.S. were aimed at enacting racial zoning—zoning that segregated cities by race.”¹⁴ Planners continued this pattern and some with policies more heinous than others. Harland Bartholomew, the first planner hired by a city served as the city planner for St. Louis, Missouri’s from 1916-1950.¹⁵ In an effort to revitalize the city and slow the growing trend of white families moving to the suburbs, Bartholomew concluded that the most efficient way to revitalize St. Louis was through the practice of slum clearance.¹⁶ Bartholomew was a strong advocate of slum clearance and redevelopment, and through his power as city planner his slum clearance displaced 70,000 black residents in the city of St. Louis. According to Mark Benton, a PhD at the University of Missouri who wrote about Bartholomew and the dire implications of his planning decisions in St. Louis, Bartholomew’s concerns were rational. “Many of the slum residences did not have running water, adequate sunlight, reasonable living space, and were next to polluting industries. They typically consumed more than they paid in municipal taxes, and the white and affluent populations were beginning to deurbanize from the central city into the suburbs, yet his planning policies used to alter the built environment of St. Louis happened to the detriment

¹³ <https://fee.org/articles/the-racist-history-of-zoning-laws/>

¹⁴ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2012/08/brief-history-birth-urban-planning/2365/>

¹⁵

https://web.archive.org/web/20061108023241/http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/archives/guides/bysubject_stlouis/hba.html

¹⁶

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10999922.2017.1306902?journalCode=mpin20>

of black residents. Black neighborhoods were destroyed and residents were displaced without assistance. Those who could not afford new housing in the city had little choice but to move.

Benton argues that “the displacement of black populations in St. Louis was a policy of exodus.”¹⁷ He later served as an advisor on the Housing Act of 1937, the first legislatively-based American federal public housing program, and the Housing Act of 1949 that initiated the federal urban redevelopment program.¹⁸

Public housing was a product of the progressive movement that swept through the United States and more specifically from the New Deal that started in 1933. The Housing Act of 1937 was the first major federal legislation involving the provision of public housing. The “goal was to improve housing conditions and address the shortage of acceptable housing for low-income families.” A major amendment led to the Housing Act of 1949, and in 1965, the Public Housing Administration, the U.S. Housing Authority, and the House and Home Financing Agency were all consolidated into the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Catherine Bauer was the primary author of the Housing Act of 1937. Bauer was a prominent American public housing advocate and taught urban planning in various universities before joining the department of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley. Early on in her career, she worked with Lewis Mumford, a historian and sociologist most known for his study of cities and the urban realm. “Her involvement with architecture and her experiences following the Great Depression led her to become a social housing advocate. Her book, *Modern Housing*, was a study of housing successes in Europe that she wanted the United States to consider. Initially Bauer was a proponent of slum clearance and urban renewal as a necessity to build new low-cost buildings. She also thought that standardized construction would reduce costs.”¹⁹ In her article, “Dreary Deadlock in Public Housing,” she admitted that public housing was not favorable and only those in desperate need were actually applying to live there. In that we were

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<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10999922.2017.1306902?journalCode=mpin20>

¹⁸ <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~sdbest/up594/people/Hbarth.htm>

¹⁹ <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/14119-women-of-the-bauhaus-catherine-bauer-wurster>

segregating that income group from the rest of the city. She believed that standardization led to institutionalization. Bauer wrote, “We’ve embraced too many functional and collectivist theories and ignored certain subtleties and aesthetic values and basic social needs.”²⁰ Bauer had hopes that “public housing legislation would create low-rise, working-class rental communities that were well-connected, locally managed, and built on vacant land.” She believed standardization lead to institutionalization and therefore was against the “massive, cheaply-built towers we see today, but instead reflected values of community connectivity and quality of life. Bauer’s vision was reduced to bare bones as she compromised her grand idea at the hands of another Progressive group—the slum reformers. Both Bauer and the



An example of standardized public housing in Manhattan.
Photo Courtesy: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Progressive slum reformers wanted the government to step up in sponsoring public housing for those who couldn’t afford adequate housing, yet they disagreed over where to locate new public housing units. Bauer believed that new developments should be freshly built on vacant land, whereas Progressive slum reformers thought that public housing should replace old slums. On the surface this was just a question of location, but in hindsight the answer to this question gave rise to the challenges public housing faces today. Essentially they had to decide whether to expand low-income housing options or to push slum clearance. In the end, the latter prevailed, and to maintain political influence, Bauer was forced to scale back her opposition against building on former slum land. She predicted that slum clearance ‘would exacerbate housing shortages and reward slum lords,’ and instead of incentivizing the development of public housing on vacant land as Bauer had initially envisioned, the 1937 Housing Act created the link between public housing development and slum clearance. Further amendments to the bill in 1949 lowered construction cost,

²⁰ <https://placesjournal.org/article/catherine-bauer-and-the-need-for-public-housing/>

weakened federal control and tightened income limits. These amendments were far from Bauer's vision of high quality, community-oriented housing. Bauer's writing show that her visions for housing the poor were much more idealistic than her written legislation could have ever been. The bare bones of her initial ideals shone through the legislation, but they were mangled with guides on cutting costs and house as many low-income people as possible. These simplifications enabled the displacement of low income, largely black communities, the construction of hostile housing towers, and ultimately the racial and economic segregation facilitated by local public housing implementation.²¹ Bauer never saw her hopes of raising the quality of housing in the United States, and we can argue that McDougall Terrace is a shining example of our inability to find change. "The federal government's role in supporting affordable housing peaked in the 1960s and '70s", according to Stockton Williams, executive director of the Terwilliger Center for Housing at the Urban Land Institute. Cuts to HUD began during the Reagan administration in the '80s, which was part of a larger goal to reduce federal spending. The trend has shown funding being reduced or not increasing since then, although according to a 2010 HUD report, the nation's 1.2 million public housing units face a massive repair backlog that would takes tens of billions of dollars to fix.²²

To go back to McDougald Terrace, what is happening to that community and federally subsidized communities all across the country that are in need of dire repairs is below the standards we hold this country to. Cities across the country are experiencing an affordable housing shortage and are not able to adequately incentivize developers in a hot real estate market to set aside affordable units. As mentioned before Mayor Steve Schewel brought a 95-million-dollar affordable housing referendum to vote that passed, which has been combined with \$65 million from local and federal funding for a total of \$160 million to fund the City's Affordable Housing Bond Investment Plan. The plan aims to significantly increase the city's quantity of affordable housing by working closely with Durham Housing Authority to:

²¹ <https://agorajournal.squarespace.com/blog/2018/1/28/iuy069wtf5j0o0ed3s11wn4sig7hx2>

²² <https://www.curbed.com/2017/3/15/14935468/hud-explainer-housing-urban-development-public-housing>

build 1,600 new affordable housing units and preserve 800 affordable rental units, move 1,700 homeless individuals and households into permanent housing, provide 400 affordable home ownership opportunities for first-time homebuyers, and help 3,000 low-income renters and homeowners remain in or improve their homes.²³ Durham's housing market is in great demand, especially near downtown, and city leaders are considering opening up the zoning to allow higher density development. The mayor along with DHA CEO Anthony Scott are proposing mixed-use development and mixed-income neighborhoods as a strategy to implement affordable housing. The basic premise behind mixed-income housing is that concentrated poverty, which is comprised of low-income households living in high-poverty and resource-poor areas, leads to a cycle of diminished life chances for children and adults. Mixed income housing attempts to alleviate that by dispersing poverty, typically by vouchers that house low-income families in neighborhoods with higher wealth or attracting higher-income families to typically poorer neighborhoods.²⁴ Mixed income housing hasn't always provided the greatest results for poor families, but Scott has promised that families won't lose their homes. The city has chosen to redevelop the properties closest to downtown. Scott said, rather than selling the land, DHA wants to use its downtown Durham locations to leverage its goal of a mixed-income, mixed-use and a public-private partnership. ,And while the goal is ambitious, Scott says "it could take 10 years or more to complete the redevelopment plan."²⁵ In the meantime, there are some out-of-the-box kind of solutions that we talked about in class that could address some of the burden, such as filling in demand for the long-time missing middle housing. These housing types include duplexes, tiny or micro houses, and potentially accessory dwelling units on single-family lots. Like Mayor Schewel suggested it would be wise to open up zoning to allow higher density on lots typically zoned for a single family, and I think by adding middle housing that will help bridge the gap in affordability.

²³ <https://durhamnc.gov/3932/Affordable-Housing-Bond>

²⁴ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscape/vol15num2/ch1.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article233157387.html>

In conclusion, I think mixed-income housing is the way to go in the conversation surrounding affordable housing. This will force development to apply the same quality it would give to high-income qualifying units as low-income units, it would bring much needed services to a community, such as grocery stores and parks, and the higher incomes will serve as an economic backbone that will elevate the economic opportunity of all community members. It's a long road ahead, but I'm optimistic that Durham cares about its constituents and I hope to see more cities across America follow suit in the fight for affordable housing for all.

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