

TOPIC FIVE: DEBATING HIGH-RISE PUBLIC HOUSING

After WWII, America experienced a surge in public housing construction, especially high-rise buildings that served as a modern solution to urban housing shortages. Later on, these high-rise public housing complexes that were constructed in the 1950s and 60s faced growing criticism due to their unlivable conditions. Mixed-income low-rise complexes and private vouchers soon became favored over tall public housing buildings, which were demolished in several cities. For example, the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri and the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, Illinois became well-known for their failures. Scholars and policy makers presented mixed reasons to explain this decline of high-rise public housing. *High-Rise Voices* presents firsthand perspectives of former public housing residents; their oral testimonies showcase insightful opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of living in Chicago's public high-rises. Some might argue that design flaws were the main factor of challenge public housing challenges. However, in reality, the primary causes of struggle stemmed from mismanagement by Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) and broader societal issues like concentrated poverty and racial segregation.

It is important to look first at the counterargument to the position that design flaws were the primary cause of public housing challenges. Oscar Newman's "Defensible Space" theory argues that specific design elements can unintentionally contribute to crime and hinder community building (Newman, 3). For example, the large and impersonal nature of high-rise structures caused numerous residents to share entryways and corridors, creating less boundaries and more anonymity (Newman, 12). This design flaw resulted in residents experiencing less ownership and responsibility in high-rise structures, which hindered community building. In addition, Newman contends that isolated buildings are surrounded by open space that are

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accessible to strangers, making it difficult for residents to observe those surrounding spaces (Newman, 20). Thus, the lack of natural surveillance in high-rise buildings causes residents to feel vulnerable and unprotected, allowing more opportunities for crime to occur. Newman illustrates this concept by comparing Pruitt-Igoe (a high-rise with crime in shared spaces) to Carr Square Village (a low-rise which remained relatively safe) with similar demographics of residents (Newman, 11). He argues that the high-rise design of Pruitt-Igoe caused vulnerability of residents and therefore more opportunities for crime, versus the low-rise design of Carr Square Village that promoted natural surveillance among residents.

While Newman contends that architectural designs are the main reason for the challenges of high-rise public housing, he overlooks the bigger picture of social and political factors. Specifically, public housing was underfunded from the start, causing poor management from PHAs and inadequate maintenance, security, and essential services (Osman, 10/3). *High-Rise Stories* presents compelling firsthand stories of how mismanagement by PHAs contributed to these issues, rather than design flaws. For example, Dolores Wilson describes an instance where PHA mismanagement is the root of the problem. As a former resident of Cabrini-Green, a high-rise public housing project in Chicago, Wilson describes her chaotic move-out process. She specifically discusses the short notice and lack of support from the Chicago Housing Authority, which implies a disregard for residents' well-being (Petty et.al, 40). The unpleasant experience of Dolores Wilson moving stems directly from the lack of the Chicago Housing Authority's support. This account directly contradicts Newman's argument that the architectural design of the building caused issues. Another oral example from *High-Rise Stories* is Ashley Cortland's description of the deterioration of Ogden Courts, another former Chicago Housing Authority

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project. In her testimony, Cortland highlights the lack of maintenance and security of Ogden Courts that weakened residents' sense of territory and observations of surrounding areas (Petty et al., 157). Instead of the structure of high-rise buildings contributing to the residents' weakened sense of territoriality and natural surveillance, Cortland's testimony proves that the lack of security and maintenance is the key factor of Ogden Courts being an environment that produces crime. These oral history examples showcase the firsthand effects of PHA's poor management on the residents' daily lives as opposed to flawed architectural designs. Moreover, they demonstrate that the systemic failure to invest in residents' lives and provide decent living conditions resulted in the challenges of high-rise public housing.

Furthermore, Newman's argument also overlooks broader societal and economic issues like concentrated poverty and racial segregation. For instance, concentrated poverty in many urban areas was exacerbated by economic shifts and deindustrialization (Osman, 10/3). This means that even if public housing was designed and managed well, it was difficult for communities to thrive with concentrated poverty nearby. In *High Rise Stories*, Dawn Knight experienced crime and violence in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes. From her brother being shot dead in an elevator all the way to "rampant drug selling," Knight illustrates the concerning level of poverty she experienced during her time in Chicago's public high-rise communities (Petty et al., 46). Because high-rise residents like Knight were influenced and peer-pressured to engage in unhealthy and dangerous activities like gang violence and drugs (Petty et al., 45), they experienced a lack of opportunity due to poverty. In addition, systemic racism was evident in discriminatory housing policies and practices; this led to the segregation and isolation of public housing residents, denying them opportunities and resources in public housing communities

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(Osman, 10/1). For instance, Dawn Knight's family was forced to move to a majority Black area due to their race, which limited their housing options as a minority and contributed to their isolation. Specifically, Knight remembers that when her family moved to Chicago in 1979, they could only find housing in a predominantly Black area due to fears of white people lynching them and viewing them as "slaves" (Petty et al., 46). As a Black person living in Chicago, Knight understood the realities of segregation and the limitations placed on their family's housing options. This example effectively illustrates how Black people were denied access to equal opportunities and resources due to their race. Knight's perspective implies that there were unspoken rules and practices that reflected the systemic racism implemented in housing policies and societal norms at the time. Therefore, societal forces that are beyond the control of individual residents (or even building design) contributed to the challenges faced by public housing communities.

In conclusion, a variety of factors resulted in the struggles of high-rise public housing. Newman's argument that labels architectural design flaws as the sole factor of public housing challenges is insufficient. Design flaws played a role, but it was the mismanagement by PHAs and the broader context of poverty and racial inequality that ultimately led to the decline of public housing. Future affordable housing initiatives should prioritize adequate and sustained funding, involved residents, responsive management, and a commitment to abolishing the systemic inequalities that affect marginalized communities. Instead of simply destroying buildings, there should be solutions that address the underlying issues of poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity that contributed to the challenges faced by these communities. It is heart-

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breaking that these factors combined to shape the realities of public housing residents like Sabrina Nixon, who saw her former home torn down in front of her eyes (Petty et al., 121).

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