

Project living: The rise and fall of public housing

by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

Social policy is inscribed on the landscape. And perhaps the most telling such inscription in U.S. cities is the public housing project, an inscription that is currently being erased. In the history of the building and unbuilding of these structures—particularly the most massive projects such as Columbia Point in Boston or the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago—one can read the story of the anemic American welfare state and the profound unease with which we have met the plight of the poor.

Two fine new books tell elements of this story. *From the Puritans to the Projects* is a compelling history of the treatment in Boston of “public neighbors”—needy people unable to provide fully for themselves—from the early 17th century to the present, focused on the construction and management of public housing in that city since the mid-1930s. *American Project* is a bold ethnographic account of “project living” in the Taylor Homes, which opened in 1962 and are currently under steady demolition. Although decidedly different in approach, both books are animated by the conviction that, as Sudhir Venkatesh puts it, the “public housing complex has become a contemporary mirror for American self-examination.”

One of the several virtues of Lawrence Vale’s history is its broad canvas. He argues persuasively that the fate of public neighbors who have found their way into Boston’s public housing projects in the last 70 years must be imbedded in the longer, wider story of the treatment of such neighbors since the city’s initial settlement by the Puritans. These neighbors, as he demonstrates in an adroit survey of the “prehistory” of Boston public housing, were always regarded with profound ambivalence.

The Puritans felt a keen sense of obligation to those members of their community unable to care for themselves, but this obligation did not extend beyond the boundaries of the town and was often grudging. Outsiders in need of help were

“warned out” of town, and support for needy fellow townspeople was often offered with a good deal of complaint about its costs. Nineteenth-century Bostonians sought to reform as well as aid the poor (an increasingly immigrant poor), and built substantial institutions such as the House of Industry and the House of Correction designed to isolate and uplift them. At the end of the century, tenement reformers and settlement workers led by Robert Woods attempted to remake impoverished, working-class, immigrant neighborhoods according to “the American standard” of propriety necessary to upward mobility.

All these efforts to assist and regulate the poor were governed by a crucial distinction between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, between those who could not be blamed for their dire straits and those who could, between those who were redeemable and those who were not, between public neighbors entitled to support and those subject to scorn. The most troubling of public neighbors were the able-bodied unemployed, and reformers endeavored to separate out those worthy poor who were the temporary victims of economic circumstances beyond their control and those unworthy poor immune to the appeal of the Protestant work ethic. The former were disciplined and rewarded, the latter disciplined and punished.

Whether the poor were transferred to almshouses and asylums or targeted in the tenements in which they lived, their housing stood in stark contrast to the American ideal: the detached, single-family home, preferably situated on a sizable plot of land. Vale nicely points out that insofar as the American state has sponsored an uncontested, well-funded program for housing the American public, it has resided in its extraordinary support of this ideal. From the Land Ordinance of 1785 to the Homestead Act of 1862 to the FHA mortgage insurance program begun in the 1930s, the national government has expended vast sums in support of this Jeffersonian norm.

Few of those who happily take the home mortgage deduction on their income taxes think of themselves as participating in a program of publicly subsidized housing, but they are. Many of the notable planners and architects who designed communities for low- and moderate-income residents in the early years of this century were wedded to this “retrograde ruralism,” and their influence would be visible in later public housing projects that featured streetless “superblocks” marked by substantial expanses of empty (and often hazardous) space.

The onset of the Great Depression, in which the ranks of the worthy poor expanded dramatically, occasioned widespread experiments in the construction of housing projects sponsored by the federal and state government. Nearly all of Boston's public housing projects were built between 1938 and 1954 under New Deal and Fair Deal auspices. As Vale demonstrates, these projects were designed and administered by the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) as "selective collectives" that aimed to serve the needs of the deserving poor, providing them with a way station on the path to eventual home ownership. Rents were set at a level beyond the reach of the city's poorest residents, including many of those displaced from their oft-times decent homes in the oft-times decent neighborhoods cleared to build the projects. This intra-class discrimination was only enhanced by the preferential housing of war workers in the projects during World War II and of veterans in its aftermath. The projects were also marked by rigid racial discrimination, with Boston's relatively small African-American population housed in separate and unequal projects in minority neighborhoods.

Although public housing met with bitter opposition in these years from private real estate interests who attacked it as the entering wedge of socialism, it was on the whole a popular program. Urban politicians worked hard to win projects for their neighborhoods, and incorporated the BHA and the tenant selection process into the sometimes corrupt practices of the Irish machine politics that governed the city. For some time, public housing well served the city and its tenants.

But, as Vale shows, this success and popularity rested on sustaining the projects as the home to a very narrow spectrum of the Boston poor, those deemed both deserving and respectable: two-parent, mostly white, single-earner, low-income, working-class families of good character in need of a temporary leg up—a stratum "below the bulk of blue-collar employees but above that of the unemployed, the irregularly employed, and the welfare-dependent." Once this narrow sector of the poor was, beginning in the late 1950s, largely supplanted in the projects by those perceived as the less worthy, even unworthy, poor, the projects began a steady slide to collapse. Dependent for both financial stability and public support on enrolling tenants able to afford rents at or near relatively high ceilings, the BHA found itself increasingly hard-pressed to attract and hold on to such residents. The prosperous postwar economy fostered the exodus of an upwardly mobile working class from the city in search of the more genuinely American housing to be found in the suburbs, and at the same time, the entry-level skilled and semiskilled manufacturing jobs

once held by project residents disappeared from the urban core. Applications for public housing from the deserving poor plummeted, and the BHA found it increasingly difficult not to grant space to the undeserving sort of families it had once been able to reject handily.

As early as the 1960s over half of the households in Boston projects received some sort of public income assistance. With the passage in 1968 of federal legislation mandating decidedly lowered rent ceilings, court rulings limiting discretion in tenant selection, and pressure from the civil rights movement to put an end to racial bias in tenant selection and assignments, this percentage increased. The BHA was thus further deprived of the capacity to make the discriminations necessary to ensure its solvency. Originating in a popular program in aid of a “submerged middle class,” Boston’s projects had become untenable warehouses for those public neighbors toward which proper Bostonians were most ambivalent.

Forced into a four-year receivership in 1980, the BHA reinvented itself in the ‘80s and ‘90s principally as an agent for joint private-public housing initiatives featuring mixed-income, partially subsidized units. The most notorious of Boston projects, Columbia Point, was torn down and rebuilt as Harbor Point, an attractive community of this sort. Columbia Point contained 1,502 apartments for low-income residents; Harbor Point featured 400 such apartments. As BHA receiver Harry Spence (the closest thing to a hero in this doleful book) remarked, this “mixed-income” approach has been less a solution to the problem of public housing than a turning of a blind eye to roughly three-quarters of those in need of help.

Superb though it is, Vale’s history affords a view mostly from the perspective of public housing architects, planners, urban reformers, and policymakers. One gets little sense from his book of what it was like to live in a Boston project, and the voices of tenants are almost entirely absent from his account. This is unfortunate, particularly since Boston’s tenants were, for much of the history he recounts, largely white. Americans need all the reminders they can get that poverty and its associated pathologies cross racial lines. In the 1970s, the projects in white South Boston were no less despairingly hellish—no less afflicted with alcoholism, drug abuse, gang warfare, domestic violence and teenage, unwed motherhood—than those in black Roxbury.

The tenant’s-eye view (in this case, strictly African-American) is precisely what Venkatesh affords. His focus is narrower and more intense than Vale’s. An heir to the

extraordinary ethnographic tradition of urban sociology at the University of Chicago, where he was a doctoral student of William Julius Wilson, Venkatesh bravely ventured into the dangerous territory of the gang-occupied Taylor Homes in the early 1990s and “hung out” with its residents for months at a time. Skillfully walking the line between empathy and detachment, Venkatesh offers an exceptional look at “project living” from the inside.

Located on Chicago’s South Side and comprised of 28 high-rise buildings holding 4,500 apartments and, by 1965, 27,000 residents, the scale of this project far outstripped any built in Boston. With outsized proportions came outsized difficulties, and by the 1980s the Taylor Homes had, along with another huge Chicago project, Cabrini-Green, become the unhappy paradigm of all that was awful about American public housing.

As in Boston, public housing in Chicago began as a program for the “worthy” working poor, but for the same reasons steadily found itself with quite another clientele. By 1992, 96 percent of the Taylor Homes residents reported themselves to be unemployed and 95 percent claimed no income other than public assistance. The typical resident was the exemplar of the “unworthy” poor: a single, young, African-American mother with several children, living on a welfare check.

Venkatesh does not dwell on the horrors of the project; indeed, if anything, he says too little about them. Rather he centers his attention on the manner in which the project residents, in the face of these horrors, nonetheless managed to make do, to “work with others, sometimes productively and at other times conflictually, to improve their living environment.” He provides keen insights into the necessary “hustling” that tenants undertook to supplement public assistance—illicit employment that ranged from selling cookies and baby clothes and car repair to small-time drug dealing and prostitution.

Much of his account focuses on the work of the representatives of the Local Advisory Council (LAC), a tenant organization that mediated between the residents and the Chicago Housing Authority, local police and other outside institutions. These representatives were crucial agents in the building of an internal network of services and support necessary in the face of their absence in the surrounding community and the neglect of the project by the police department, the CHA and other supposed caretakers. The LAC representatives, most of them older women, emerge from Venkatesh’s account as hard-pressed, skilled, semicorrupt infighters, who

wielded influence, brokered deals and accepted payoffs in a manner that any seasoned pol could respect.

The narrative drive to Venkatesh's story lies in the protracted effort of the tenants to come to terms with the gang that loomed increasingly large in the project's history. He charts the devastating consequences of the transformation of this gang and others into high-stakes, often violent corporate enterprises engaged in franchised dealing in crack cocaine—an entrepreneurial “black capitalism” that does not figure in conservative programs for urban renewal yet plays a significant role in the economic life of the inner city. Offering themselves as a soulful corporation with an interest in the well-being of their “community,” the gang and its leaders came to exert considerable influence in the project by virtue of their charitable largesse and their efforts to exact tribute from hustling tenants. Venkatesh describes in detail the debate that sharply divided tenant leaders over whether to accommodate or resist the gang—an account attentive to the terrible constraints imposed on both sides by circumstances beyond their control.

If Venkatesh gives a full hearing to the tenants that Vale neglects, his ethnography suffers from an inattentiveness to the wider context for project living that Vale so skillfully provides. Although he alludes to the importance of placing the life lived in the Taylor Homes in the expansive setting of local, national and even global politics and economics, Venkatesh does little of this, and hence his ethnography ironically replicates the insularity that afflicted the Taylor Homes. He affords little sense of the Chicago story in which the fate of the project rested, a story that Vale so richly narrates for Boston. Given their complementary strengths, one reads these two excellent books together wishing that Vale had turned his attentions to Chicago or that Venkatesh had hung out at a Boston project.

Vale believes that the large public housing project “seems headed the way of the old unclassified almshouse—increasingly marginalized and ultimately abandoned.” Like Spence he is skeptical that mixed-income projects will ever meet the needs of more than a tiny proportion of the poor, and he suggests that the best, though imperfect, policy might be a system of housing vouchers that disperses the poor by providing them with a subsidy with which to seek housing in the private market.

Venkatesh, admiring as he is of the resilient civil society that tenants built for themselves in the Taylor Homes, worries that such dispersal will deny them the setting in which to reproduce it elsewhere. Yet he offers no more hopeful solutions

than Vale.

The obstacles in the U.S. to housing the poor adequately are profound. And those obstacles are less a matter of means and money than of will and ideology. At a time of huge government surpluses, universal shelter like universal health care is on the agenda of few politicians, who argue instead about how many billions of dollars to return to wealthy taxpayers.

In his foreword to Venkatesh's book, Wilson speaks of the rights denied to American citizens to "basic economic welfare and security." Yet such rights, such a "social citizenship," have never been conceded in the U.S. More common is the view of a lawyer quoted by Vale: "The doctrine is a dangerous one that everyone is entitled to be well fed, well clothed, and well housed, and if one by reason of misfortune, incompetence or sloth cannot achieve that end by his own efforts the public will pay the bill. No permanent improvement to mankind can result from the attempt by government to remove the necessity of the struggle for existence." As long as this doctrine continues to be regarded as dangerous, Americans will continue to regard most of the poor among them not as neighbors in need of solidarity and support but as strangers in need of isolation and correction.