



# Issue Brief

## *Redevelopment/Neighborhood Renewal*

### PLANNING AND DESIGN

*Nothing symbolizes physical decay and social despair more than the most deteriorated of America's highrise public housing stock. Poorly built and inadequately maintained buildings and unsightly and unsanitary grounds make residents unsafe in these communities. Many public housing communities should be completely replanned, redesigned, and rebuilt at much lower densities. They should be safer, more secure, and more attractive. They also should be built so that individual families can have direct outdoor and indoor access space. Mixed-income and mixed-use environments that are connected to jobs and services are keys to long-term physical, social, and economic success.*

#### **The Challenge**

Too many public housing highrise structures have become terrible places to live because they are poorly designed and badly maintained. Many public housing developments, including very large lowrise developments, also exist in separate worlds cut off from the mainstream of urban life—devoid of services, jobs, businesses, or ties to wider community institutions.

During the past few decades, the enormous problems of public housing, especially the 86,000 severely distressed units, have taught several lessons about good and bad design. As early as the 1950s and 1960s, architectural and social critics such as Jane Jacobs and Catherine Bauer Wurster warned of coming disasters in public housing. In her classic book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs tied her critique directly

to crime prevention by advocating the positive value of lowrise, high-density, mixed-use housing and neighborhoods. In addition to being unsafe, highrise public housing for low-income single parents and children simply does not work.

Therefore, public housing authorities (PHAs) do not build this housing anymore. Indeed, since 1993, HUD has encouraged and funded PHAs to demolish 30,000 of these units in dilapidated highrise buildings. Many units are being replaced by lowrise, scattered-site townhouses.

To revitalize public housing, it must be redesigned. Architecture, planning, and landscape design make a profound difference in people's lives. They are absolutely crucial to improving the general quality of life and lifting the human spirit. Much of the work of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) today still begins with Jane Jacobs's basic insights. PHAs must eliminate dangerous highrises, tear down buildings to reduce densities, improve efficiency and attractiveness of buildings and public spaces, create a human scale environment, and increase safety. Some redesigning and rebuilding must be intended specifically to fight crime and strengthen security for residents and visitors. A major tenet in design is to encourage increased surveillance of public areas by residents from their homes, creating what Jacobs called "eyes on the street." Large well-placed windows, bright lights, front porches, focused visibility, and outdoor activity centers are the basic physical elements of a safe environment. These elements are important in

crime prevention, which is of paramount concern to the people who live in these communities.

Jacobs' work led to Oscar Newman's ground-breaking book, *Defensible Space*, as well as the collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the National Institute of Justice that led to Richard Gardiner's landmark study, *Design for Safe Neighborhoods*. Oscar Newman, assisted by Dr. George Rand, played a pivotal role in popularizing the concept that design for security can be effective only when it is combined with active resident participation in preventing crime, creating a "sense of community" as Newman called it. The challenge is to implement such concepts so that public housing communities will become far safer and more liveable.

## A Vision for Change

Redesigning public housing communities means reducing densities by tearing down deteriorated buildings. Obsolete highrises will be replaced by new housing built for a more mixed-income population and better integrated into the community. Rebuilding public housing neighborhoods with hundreds of new townhouses presents an exciting opportunity to create better and more livable communities.

In recent years, architects, planners, and developers have experimented with principles of a New Urbanism, combining features of traditional community planning with new ways of organizing daily life in a rapidly changing world. The fundamental idea is to view the neighborhood as a coherent unit, where adults and children can walk to nearby shopping, services, schools, and recreation. In these neighborhoods, civic centers can serve as focal points for community activity. Houses, with their own individual front and back porches and yards, are built closer together, grouped around tree-shaded squares, small parks, and narrow streets with planting strips. Streets and blocks are connected with pedestrian

walkways and bicycle paths. Public transit is readily available to connect with other neighborhoods and communities throughout the metropolitan region, and automobiles are convenient to use but do not dominate the most visible aspects of the urban landscape with traffic congestion and massive parking lots.

This "pedestrian-friendly" environment helps create a positive community spirit that emphasizes neighborhood safety and security. The goal is to promote a diverse and livable community with a variety of housing types, land uses, and building densities. This "melting pot" of neighborhood homes serves a wide range of household and family sizes, ages, cultures, and incomes.

In the individual homes, public housing redesign should create more amenities, including larger rooms, air conditioning, carpeting, better closets, and other storage spaces. Most importantly, public housing authorities should provide residents with much greater flexibility to personalize their homes. With regulatory changes, redesign could engender innovations such as multigenerational housing, live-work spaces, and educational facilities and equipment to turn public housing into "Campuses of Learners." The redesign also could include better recreation centers, and other community facilities.

Replanning public housing means creating safer environments: private entries replacing large open hallways and corridors, private yards and fences or hedges protecting ground floor townhouses and apartments, and brighter lights creating greater nighttime visibility. New streets cut through superblocks will reconnect public housing with the surrounding neighborhood, and establish more street activity and visibility for public safety. All of these changes give residents a greater sense of community life viewed from their homes. It also enables them to keep an eye on their parked cars.

Design alone, no matter how brilliant, cannot solve every human problem. Planning and design

can and should be part of the solution, but only a part. Physical transformation must be accompanied by economic and social changes, a combination that President Clinton calls "community empowerment." Public housing policies can be changed to offer families greater opportunities for private homeownership or vouchers to live in private rental housing in a much greater range of metropolitan environments. Public housing should attract and retain working families to encourage role models, stable families, and economically and socially diverse communities.

## Tools for Change

In the past, only about 1,600 units of public housing were torn down each year because of legislative impediments and preservation of the status quo. In 4 years, the Clinton administration will tear down an unprecedented 30,000 units of poorly designed and outdated public housing, compared with a total of 20,000 units demolished over the previous 10 years combined.

HUD has pursued two tracks to physically redesign public housing. First, HUD has aggressively implemented HOPE VI, a large-scale initiative to provide localities with maximum funds and flexibility to reshape public housing neighborhoods. HOPE VI funds also help build lives through education and skills training, job placement and development, and other supportive services. It supplies up to \$50 million for each PHA to remake an entire development. By the fall of 1996, HUD is expected to have granted \$2 billion for the demolition, redesign, and rebuilding of nearly 60 obsolete and severely distressed urban public housing developments nationwide.

Second, HUD has relaxed existing program and funding rules to speed the reconstruction of public housing. With HUD's support, Congress repealed the one-for-one replacement law, which forced PHAs to replace each demolished unit with a new one. For the first time, under the public housing

modernization program, HUD can allow PHAs to use modernization funds for demolition and new construction, as well as for rehabilitation. HUD has also invested substantial time and effort to break the gridlock in court over major demolitions, such as the redevelopment plans for Chicago's Henry Horner Homes and Cabrini Green.

## Implementing Change: The Nation's Best Practices

**Diggs Town—Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority.** Before-and-after photos of Diggs Town in Norfolk, Virginia, show a dramatic transformation, all the more striking because no demolition was involved. The total change in the look and feel of Diggs Town clearly demonstrates that it is possible to turn barren, isolated, and dangerous public housing into safe, attractive, and livable communities.

At Diggs Town, a large superblock of two-story "barracks" buildings was humanized and personalized for families by turning the apartments into townhouses with new large front porches, picket fences for individualized front yards, taller fences to provide safe back yards, and dignified details such as classical porch columns and white roofs with new trim. Several streets were cut through the superblocks to create a more accessible grid pattern, though all existing large trees were carefully saved. Carefully defined yards, flower beds, and children's play areas have replaced a "no-man's land" of gang warfare. Now "eyes on the streets" from the houses, porches, and yards make residents feel secure enough to come out of their homes and get to know each other, which further increases security in public spaces.

Before redevelopment, residents heard gun shots 3 or 4 times a night; now, once every 3 or 4 months. Before, police received 30 calls a day; now, they receive only 2 or 3 a week. Residents are working

together to stop gang violence and find opportunities for education and jobs. Area churches, whose members were once afraid to enter Diggs Town, are working actively in the public housing community.

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**Harbor Point—Boston Housing Authority and Corcoran Jennison.** Once the site of the notorious Columbia Point, Boston's most dangerous and deteriorated public housing development, Harbor Point represents a remarkable revival. An innovative public-private partnership created a model mixed-income, racially integrated community in its place. By the 1970s, only 350 of Columbia Point's 1,500 units were occupied. Even people with the lowest incomes who needed public housing refused to live there. Yet the residents who remained on the site wanted a private developer, Corcoran Jennison, to help them start over. The old housing was demolished and replaced with newly remodeled mixed-income apartment buildings and newly built townhouses, all designed to take advantage of the spectacular views across Boston Harbor, the close proximity to the University of Massachusetts' Boston campus and the world-renowned John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, and to available public transit.

All 350 existing public housing residents were rehoused in the new Harbor Point development, which contains market-rate units (70 percent) and subsidized units for low-income residents (30 percent). Residents paying subsidized rents receive the same high-quality apartments as those paying the market rate. Harbor Point includes an

apartment building for elderly residents and a community recreation and meeting center with social services and a health club. Social services are extensive, with a medical clinic, education, child care, drug treatment, and youth activities. The grounds are attractively landscaped and well maintained with a broad green mall leading to a linear waterfront park that is very popular with pedestrians, joggers, and cyclists. To reduce the park's isolation and increase security, a roadway was built parallel to the waterfront park.

Harbor Point, with an occupancy rate of more than 90 percent, has become a secure and stable community. The local middle school is now highly rated, and drug dealing and criminal activity have declined substantially. Some formerly low-income residents obtained jobs that increased their family incomes, so they now pay market rents for their new homes.

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**Earle Village—Charlotte Housing Authority and NationsBank Community Development Corporation.** Demolishing and rebuilding Earle Village is part of a larger, comprehensive First Ward revitalization strategy strongly supported by NationsBank Community Development Corporation and other private-sector leaders in partnership with the city of Charlotte. Earle Village is near downtown Charlotte (North Carolina), and the First Ward is an underutilized area—once thriving, then declining—immediately

adjacent to Charlotte's central business district and NationsBank's corporate headquarters.

Awarded a HOPE VI grant in August 1994, the Earle Village Neighborhood Revitalization involves demolishing 300 deteriorated public housing units and replacing them with 340 new onsite and offsite units, to serve a wider range of family incomes. Some existing rental housing will be transformed from barracks-like units to attractive, townhouse-style duplexes. Some new units will be for homeownership rather than rental. One innovative feature of the plan is a Home Ownership Institute to educate and counsel public housing residents motivated to make the transition from renter to homeowner.

Earle Village has been redesigned with streets that reconnect it to the surrounding neighborhood and to a mix of uses that includes retail stores and an office building to provide jobs, services, and business opportunities for residents. Also located on the development are apartments for senior citizens, a law enforcement center, a day care center, a community service center, recreation facilities, and park and play space. The development is knit together by a "village green," a central plaza connecting the streets and five key uses: family self-sufficiency housing, homeownership housing, elderly housing, day care and community services, and retail/commercial space. The design is innovative and attractive.

In addition, Earle Village includes a community of housing for adults enrolled in HUD's Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, designed to enable these public housing residents to make the transition from welfare to work with the help of supportive services such as education, job training, family counseling, day care, afterschool programs, entrepreneurship training, and homeownership counseling. Residents in the program sign contracts with performance goals

and a commitment to achieve self-sufficiency and move out of public housing within 5 years.

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#### **Conclusion**

The charter of the Congress of New Urbanism states, "We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework." Public housing planning and design can make a powerful difference in building better communities. Whether through demolition and new construction or through modernization and reconstruction, changing the form, style, and layout of buildings and grounds can successfully lead to social and economic revitalization of public housing developments and their surrounding neighborhoods. In the case of all three "best practices" examples—Diggs Town, Harbor Point, and Earle Village—active resident participation and involvement at every stage of planning and design were essential for these ambitious redevelopment initiatives to succeed. People are the most important ingredient. The active involvement and commitment of adults and children makes all the difference in the long-term effectiveness of physical strategies to create livable and thriving communities for families in public housing.