

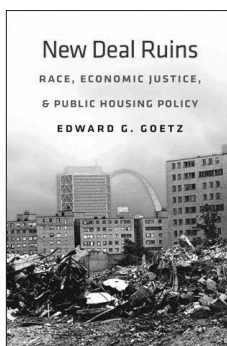
RECOMMENDED READING

New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice & Public Housing Policy

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REVIEWED BY PETER C. BURLEY, CRE, FRICS

“The fact is that public housing came to ruin in Chicago”
 ~Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice & Public Housing Policy*



EDWARD GOETZ AUTHORS a comprehensive history and review of the public housing domain in the United States. His account is, at times, quite penetrating in his analysis of the extent of failures of public housing efforts, at times pedantic in his presentation and, at times, illuminating in his discussions of the arguments that form both sides of the public

housing debate. It's a pretty good read, but like many academic studies that have been expanded into books, there were times I really wanted to go out and play instead. Despite that, it is an important topic, and Goetz handles it thoroughly and well, as one would expect of someone who has focused 15 years (according to Goetz) on the subject.

Goetz dives into his narrative with a discussion of the “dismantling of Public Housing” and the ongoing historical arguments both in favor of and opposed to the very notion of public housing. From the beginning, public housing has been “(h)ailed by progressive reformers and housing advocates, public housing was vociferously attacked by real estate interests and others who called it socialism...” And, now, he notes, “we are in a period when conflicts about public housing are resolving themselves in a nationwide effort to dismantle the program. “ And, while “dismantle” means, in fact, “demolish,” sometimes with redevelopment and sometimes not, it also means “conversion” to other uses.

We have moved from an approach that removes the slum and relocates it to public housing facilities, often becoming economically (and racially) concentrated high-rise war zones (in the image of St. Louis’ Pruitt-Igoue housing complex, which was literally blown up in 1972) to a newer policy prescription of mixed-use, mixed-income housing that spreads poverty out into the community (in ways, perhaps that make the economically and racially disadvantaged somewhat less visible).

Goetz reviews the political debates, the policy decisions and the shifts from New Deal to New Liberalism, from government initiative to public-private partnerships and

About the Reviewer



Peter C. Burley, CRE, FRICS, is director of the Richard J. Rosenthal Center for Real Estate Studies, REALTOR® University, in Chicago. A real estate market and economics research professional with extensive executive experience building and managing strategic investment research platforms in the real estate industry, Burley is recognized for his analyses

of national and regional economic, demographic, industry and property market trends and for his development of real estate portfolio investment strategies. Prior to becoming director of the Center, he was vice president of Research at Simpson Housing LLLP, a multi-family development and management firm, and director of Research at Amstar Group LLC, a private global investment firm. Burley holds graduate and undergraduate degrees from the University of California where he also taught urban economic geography, regional geography and quantitative methods. He is a Counselor of Real Estate (CRE), A Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS), A Fellow of the Hoyt Institute, and a member of the Advisory Board of the Real Estate Research Institute (RERI).

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LIHTC programs. He also points to the many successes of the public housing programs that actually dominate the public housing landscape, despite the negative media accounts of the obvious failures in such places as Chicago, St. Louis and Atlanta. Interestingly, hidden beneath the crime, drugs and desperation evident in West Side Chicago and St. Louis are stories of community, families and homes.

The idea of public housing wasn't really such a bad one, even for those who might be politically opposed to government interventions into economic matters. Herbert Hoover recognized that housing was an important entry point for economic stimulus, but simply could not bring himself to implement such an effort. Franklin Roosevelt was able to use the Depression to justify numerous public works projects, including initiatives that were aimed at clearing the nation's slums and, at the same time, creating much needed affordable housing in their place.

Unfortunately, in the post-war economic recovery, white residents were able to quickly recover from economic adversity, to make use of new homeownership assistance programs (FHA) and to remove themselves rather easily from the urban public housing system and out into the new and growing suburbs. The African American community began to view public housing as a decent alternative for affordable housing. And, as whites continued to move out into the suburbs, the public housing projects became ever more racially identified. As with most of the book, Goetz puts data to the discussion of post-war racial and class concentration: "Though African Americans make up less than 15 percent of the population, they constituted 48 percent of the residents of public housing nationwide in 2000." In larger cities, he notes, two-thirds of public housing residents were African American; and, in Washington and Detroit, virtually all public housing residents are African American.

With political support for public housing never secure, the shift from serving "the deserving poor" to "marginalized single-parent, welfare and minority families" has led to consistently underfunded public housing entities and a "steady disinvestment ... from the commitment to provide safe, decent and affordable housing through public ownership."

No spoilers here. There are times that reading through the specifics of Goetz' discourse tends to be mind-numbing. He is detailed and thorough in recounting the projects that were disastrous in St. Louis, Atlanta and, especially, in Chicago. There could have been a little more

discussion of some of the public housing successes which, he reminds us, have been the norm rather than the exception. A more comprehensive discussion of public housing would require that. But, that isn't his purpose in this book, which is to look at what has become of the public housing policy debate and the changes that have ensued in the public housing domain since the New Deal.

And, also, it is about where we might go from here. To that, Goetz offers some policy prescriptions that may be of use to city planners, and to those who have interest in participating in the public housing arena. Among those policy suggestions:

- **End the Demolition of Public Housing.** The worst projects have been "dealt with." The remaining projects can be "preserved."
- **Phase in Redevelopment.** This enables residents to remain in the community while portions of a project are redeveloped.
- **The "Right to Remain."** This includes tenant-driven requirements for moving into a new unit in a redeveloped site.
- **One-for-One Replacement.** All units that have been lost to demolition should be replaced.
- **Preserve Affordable Housing in Redevelopment Areas.** A greater mix of incomes can be achieved providing lower-income households the opportunity to benefit from upgrades in a neighborhood.
- **Build More.**
- **Monitor the Racial Impact of Public Housing Policies.**
- **Expand Voluntary Mobility Programs.** Some people may simply "wish to leave." The Moving to Opportunity program was designed to provide the means necessary for people to move out of public housing projects, and Goetz suggests it should be restored.

Goetz' studious review of the history and legacy of public housing offers a solid, in-depth perspective of the successes and failures of public housing in the U.S. At times pedantic, or perhaps wonkish, he does reveal perhaps the most important aspect of the long, often contentious, policy debate on public housing:

"Often lost in these dynamics are the struggles of the very low-income families living in public housing. Their experiences in the dismantling of public housing should have more bearing on events and on the course of policy than has been the case." ■