

MONEY MAKES IT EASIER:
TURNING AROUND LARGE TROUBLED HOUSING PROJECTS

by

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ABSTRACT

The housing authorities of Boston and Cambridge are currently spending over \$100 million to rehabilitate four of the cities' most distressed public housing developments. While each of the redevelopment projects includes plans for resident employment, improved social services and other non-physical improvements, the heart of these projects and by far the largest dollar component is the radical redesign and restructuring of buildings and sites. The model that the authorities are proposing for turning around distressed developments is based on their belief that substantial physical revitalization is not only the most effective means for rebuilding the physical fabric of these communities but provides an important impetus and support for social changes as well.

In each of these projects, there has been an attempt to approximate as closely as possible the image of a middle-class development and to provide many of the most desirable features of the single-family house. The physical changes proposed for these developments are based on theories about the role of housing in the life of the poor, as well as on practical and political considerations.

This paper first reviews the forces responsible for the current condition of public housing, in particular, the impact of the changing tenant population. It then examines the theoretical and political rationale for substantial rehabilitation as a means of turning around projects. In addition, the paper looks at how the authorities resolve the equity issues raised by investing so much money in so few developments, and examines whether or not these projects provide a useful model for other authorities faced with distressed developments.

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Preface

The best argument for public housing is its permanence. The poor have been driven away from almost everywhere except for the projects. The projects sustain themselves. It's a situation in which the pachyderm nature of government-- its greatest weakness-- becomes its greatest strength in at least sustaining a place where people who are poor can live. We built on that to say not only "Yes, you're staying," but, "Yes, we're going to reinvest."

H.L. Spence, Court-Appointed Receiver
for the Boston Housing Authority

And reinvest they have. Together, the housing authorities of Boston and the neighboring city of Cambridge are spending over \$100 million to rehabilitate four of the cities' most distressed housing projects. Their goal: nothing short of creating developments which will be virtually unrecognizable, in either their form or the life of their communities, as public housing.

At a time when the current administration in Washington is seeking ways to eliminate high-cost, distressed projects from the public housing inventory, the Boston and Cambridge authorities are making an important-- and costly-- statement that public housing is not only here to stay but can be made to work in the very places it has failed most conspicuously.

If these projects are successful, and there is good reason to think that they will be, the Boston and Cambridge authorities will have succeeded at one of the most difficult challenges in public housing today: turning around distressed developments.

Since the mid-1960s, housing authorities across the country have struggled with the question of what to do with severely distressed developments. Historically, plagued by a multitude of problems from deteriorating structures to violent crime, projects such as those undergoing renovation in Massachusetts have proved highly resistant to even the most well-intentioned attempts at intervention; a lack of adequate and predictable funding has undoubtedly made the task even more difficult. In the search for solutions, housing authorities have tried making management improvements, modernizing buildings, providing improved social services, even allowing over-income tenants to remain in the hope of providing some increased project stability. Most improvements, however, whether they are "bricks and mortar" or improved social services, cost money, and money comes through programs. Like most programs, those for public housing improvement go through cycles of popularity: one year there is money for crime prevention, the next year money for management. Given the traditional preference for visible

results, there has almost always been some money for modernization, but even that until recently could not be used for comprehensive redevelopment. Inevitably, this piecemeal and unpredictable approach to funding project improvements has presented the most critical problems for authorities with large distressed developments.

Because many of the problems of these projects are systemic and mutually reinforcing, trying to solve them one by one is a seemingly endless and discouraging task. Furthermore, many are not simply the problems of public housing but are the problems of poverty. What role, if any, housing has in creating or alleviating these problems has been the subject of debate among housing reformers since the late 19th century. Unfortunately, the answers are not always as clear as one would like, if only because housing as a structure is difficult to separate from housing as a symbol.

However, one thing that is clear, at least in the present situation, is that the Boston and Cambridge authorities believe that good housing can make an active difference in the lives of public housing tenants. Although it may not solve the problems of poverty, good housing can, at the very least, alleviate some of the symptoms.

The four redevelopment projects in Boston and Cambridge reflect the authorities' belief that the rebuilding and

restructuring of public housing projects is the most effective basis on which to orchestrate their complete revitalization. In addition, the striking similarities of the designs proposed for these projects speak to the authorities' as well as the tenants' belief that the physical form of communities plays an important role in both individual and community life.

These projects are undeniably expensive--some might say extravagant--efforts. There is, however, a strong belief on the part of almost all authority officials and tenants that without the funds for substantial rehabilitation, revitalizing these communities would have been impossible; if not impossible, then, at the very least, an extremely difficult and protracted process in which the risks of failure would have remained high.

Whether these projects can provide a useful model for other authorities with distressed developments is questionable; the costs may simply be too high. However, if only because the costs are so high, it is important to understand why the Boston and Cambridge authorities chose this model, and why they believe that it will be successful. What was the authorities' rationale for spending what is, to almost anyone's way of thinking, an enormous amount of money to rehabilitate only four projects?

This is not a case study of the four redevelopment projects; nor does it pretend to offer a comprehensive view of the policy implications of reinvesting in public housing. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the four projects as examples of a model for turning around large distressed developments. The model--substantial rehabilitation--is based on the authorities' belief that physical revitalization is the most effective cornerstone on which to rebuild not only projects but communities. Why the authorities believe this and why they made the choices they did is a function not only of theoretical notions about the role of housing in the lives of the poor, but a function of practical and political considerations as well.

Chapter 1: The Origins of Distress

All things grow old and housing developments are not exceptions. However, buildings as solid and as soundly beautiful as the Authority's can maintain this youth almost forever. The trick of this long life lies in one simple word: Care. Nothing so hastens the decay of materials constantly exposed to the vagaries of weather as does the lack of paint. With the advent of such decay, so departs beauty; so begins slums.¹

Boston Housing Authority
Annual Report 1950

The three Boston projects undergoing redevelopment, Commonwealth, Franklin Field and West Broadway, were all built within five years of one another as part of the state's veterans' housing program. Completed in 1949, West Broadway, or D Street as it is commonly known, is the oldest, largest and only all-white development undergoing renovation. Located in the Irish Catholic neighborhood of South Boston, the project's twenty-seven nearly identical three-story buildings originally housed 972 families. Commonwealth, or Fidelis Way, in Allston/Brighton was built just a year later.

¹Boston Housing Authority, Report on the Activities and Accomplishments of the Boston Housing Authority, January 1, 1950 to December 31, 1952 (Boston, Massachusetts, 1952), no page numbers included in the report.

Designed for 648 families, the project consists of thirteen low-and mid-rise brick buildings. The smallest and last of the three Boston developments to be built was Franklin Field, located just south of the Roxbury line in North Dorchester. Completed in 1954, the project's nineteen three-story buildings originally housed 504 families. The one project in Cambridge, Jefferson Park, was constructed in 1950 as part of the state's low-income housing program. The smallest of the developments undergoing renovation, Jefferson Park has only 200 units.

By the mid-1970s, each of these projects had suffered severe deterioration. Heating and plumbing systems were collapsing, vandalism and violent crime were on the rise, and vacancies--an indicator as well as a cause of decline--had climbed precipitously. At D Street, only 675 of the 972 units were occupied. Fidelis Way was over 50 percent vacant, and at Franklin Field, only 375 families remained. The developments had become "projects," the sort of places that made people say that public housing couldn't work-- decaying, dangerous, and marked by the despair of tenants who for the most part had nowhere else to go. Inadequate funding, inept and irresponsible management and the pressures of housing an increasingly impoverished tenant population had taken their toll--all in less than twenty years.

This last factor is critical. It is impossible to understand either the deterioration of these projects or the proposed plans for redevelopment without understanding the significant changes that have occurred, in most cases in less than twenty years, in the population of public housing tenants.

Both the system and the structures of public housing were developed for a stable, working-class population, which for the most part has long since abandoned them. Until 1949, housing authorities were virtually unrestricted in their tenant selection process. Only those who could pay the rent--the working poor and the retired elderly--were accepted. As one early Boston Housing Authority annual report explained, "Public housing developments are not charitable institutions for those who cannot or will not work. The rent must be paid. There are no charge accounts."² By and large, the authorities were able to maintain a highly homogeneous, stable, working-class population. Many of the tenants still had hopes for advancement and a share in the American dream. Public housing was a way station on the way up. As the Mobile, Alabama Housing Authority's motto so proudly proclaims, there was a belief that tenants could go, "From slums to private housing

²Ibid.

by way of public housing."

Managing and maintaining developments was relatively easy as long as tenants could be handpicked. Rents were adequate to cover operating costs and with relatively new buildings and almost no problems of vandalism, routine maintenance was almost all that was required. Furthermore, with managers able to choose tenants whose values and standards of behavior were similar to their own, there were few problems in enforcing rules and regulations. Tenants were expected to behave, and those who did not could be easily evicted. Developments that today seem unmanageable because of their high density, small unit sizes or poorly designed public spaces were once orderly, well-maintained, and relatively unstigmatized communities.

Ironically, the Housing Act of 1949, which provided for the public housing program's vast expansion, also spelled the end to its era of easy success. Through provisions, which gave priority to families displaced by the newly-created urban renewal program and which prohibited discrimination against those on public assistance, the Act ensured that public housing would come to serve an increasingly impoverished and dependent population. With the postwar economic boom and the northward migration of southern blacks, large urban projects were largely abandoned by the working-class poor to become little more than housing of the last resort--

housing for the poor, the black, and the welfare-dependent. Unlike the earlier tenants of public housing, many of the new tenants had little hope of ever leaving.

This dramatic shift in the tenant population, brought about by changes in the economy far beyond the control of housing authorities, set into motion a mutually reinforcing cycle of environmental and social decline that placed a severe and often crippling strain on both the facilities and management capabilities of many urban authorities. With rents no longer sufficient to cover operating expenses, routine maintenance procedures were often delayed indefinitely at a time when project wear and tear was dramatically increasing. The physical configuration of dense urban developments, which had been designed with an orderly and stable population in mind, only made the problems of management more difficult. As the project grounds, elevators and even hallways became increasingly dangerous, most tenants relinquished almost any sense of community responsibility and retreated behind closed doors; the outside world was only one more reminder of the lack of control they had over their lives. As many of the once-orderly projects became places of disorder and despair, the relationship between management and tenants became increasingly bitter. In Boston, the worst housing developments were virtually abandoned by the authority. In 1979, conditions

had deteriorated so severely that the Massachusetts Supreme Court placed the authority under its supervision and appointed H. Lewis Spence as Receiver/Administrator.

According to Spence, it was the breakdown in order, not the deteriorating buildings or inadequate social services that presented the greatest problem and the greatest challenge. The sixties and seventies were, "a time when there was a great deal of confusion about values. A lot of us had argued in the name of Progressivism that violence, loud noise and disorder were all part of a valid life style of the poor. I think that finally we're beginning to understand that what we thought were middle-class values are, in fact, human values. Out of our confusion, however, had come a tendency to say to tenants, 'You're not capable of living like the rest of us; you live differently.' The tenants came to believe that. I remember going to meetings at the beginning of the Franklin Field project where people were saying, 'Why are you doing this because we're just going to destroy it again.'"

Chapter 2: Modest housing, perhaps.
 Typical projects, hardly.

Faced with this tremendous despair, intolerably high vacancy rates and deteriorating facilities, the Boston and Cambridge housing authorities have responded with redevelopment projects, which they hope will be successful not only in salvaging buildings but in rebuilding these developments as communities. In each case, the redevelopment effort is based on the substantial and costly rehabilitation of the existing facilities, or, as Pam Goodman at the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) put it, "total redesign, total reworking and total redevelopment." While each of the projects includes plans for resident employment, improved social services and a number of other non-physical improvements, the heart of these projects, and by far the largest dollar component, is the radical redesign and restructuring of the buildings and sites.

It would be a mistake to imply that the authorities have simply applied identical solutions to the problems at each development. However, the striking similarities of the proposed projects are, in fact, far more important than the differences for understanding what the authorities are trying to accomplish.

In each project, one of the most significant changes will

be the reduction in the number of units. Reductions range from 12 percent at Jefferson Park, the smallest development, to over 40 percent at Fidelis Way, where units will drop from 648 to 392. Decreasing the number of apartments allows the authorities not only to increase unit sizes while still working within the existing building shell, but also to reduce overall project density. By essentially creating new apartments within the existing structures, the authorities are also able to readjust the mix of small-and large-family units. In this way, they are able to ensure that there are enough large apartments where needed, while also making certain that the number of children per adult remains within manageable bounds at each development.

Not only has the size of units been increased substantially, but many of the basic features have been changed as well. Originally designed to meet minimum standards, the redesigned units will feature far more so-called "amenities" than most public housing units. For example, ample storage spaces will be provided, some units will have entry ways, and all bathrooms will have showers instead of just tubs. However, David C. Gilmore, project director for Franklin Field was quick to add, "By amenities we're talking about closets and closet doors, and space that is more functional. We're talking about apartments that offer some privacy in a family

that may have five, six or seven kids. We're not talking about carpeting and dishwashers. It's modest housing."

Modest housing, perhaps. Typical projects, hardly. Once completed, these developments will bear little resemblance to most multi-family public housing. In each of these projects, there has been an attempt to approximate as closely as possible, given the original project format, the image of a middle-class development and to provide many of the most desirable features of the single-family house.

Originally, almost all the buildings in these projects were designed so that twelve or more families shared a single entrance. By redesigning the unit layouts and, in some cases, creating duplex and triplex apartments, the number of families sharing hallways in each of these developments will be significantly reduced. Many of the units will even have private entrances and their own backyards--something almost unheard of in public housing projects. At Jefferson Park, every family, even those without direct access to the outdoors, will have a private yard. It may not be immediately adjacent to the family's unit or even to the building, but it will be theirs.

The project sites, now largely barren and covered in asphalt, will be completely redesigned with grass, trees and the sort of facilities usually associated with middle-class developments such as: community centers; playgrounds; out-

door plazas, and parking areas conveniently located adjacent to the buildings.

Nondescript entrances will be replaced with attractive front stoops where neighbors can gather. Streets will be re-routed through the project sites so that each building will have a street address. Some of the brick facades will be covered with stucco. The list of changes is almost endless and not so interesting except as a way of understanding what the authorities are trying to accomplish. What is most interesting is not to chart the long and often difficult process by which the design decisions were arrived at--although it undoubtedly makes an interesting story--but to understand how these decisions reflect a set of theories about the effects of good housing on the poor, as well as both practical and political necessities. Are the authorities simply providing tenants with larger units, private entrances and private yards just because everybody knows that those are nice things to have, or because the money happened to be available? Or, do these changes reflect something more, some theoretical notion that changing people's physical environment can have a significant impact on their lives?

Chapter 3: More Than Shelter

This program gives the citizen and his growing children a new lease on life. It produces better citizens, happier families and enhances the pride of its men, women and children who enjoy its benefits, endowing them with a greater sense of responsibility to their government and fellow men.³

Boston Housing Authority
Annual Report 1950

By the mid-1960s, the failures of public housing, if not all the causes, had become painfully obvious. In many cities, public housing projects were no better and, in some cases, were even worse, than the slums they were supposed to have replaced. The only difference was now that the slums were under public management. For those who had never fully supported the program and had always had their doubts about assistance to the poor, the troubled projects were the only proof they needed that money spent on housing for the poor was money down the drain. "The poor create their own slums," they said. "Give them good housing and they just tear it apart." Even those who had traditionally supported the program began to doubt whether it would ever again be the hopeful program of social reform that had once been envisioned.

³Ibid.

Although by the mid-1960s, housing advocates had long since abandoned any simplistic notions about the ability of good housing to make good citizens, few abandoned the position that housing had some, though perhaps unclear, role to play in improving the lives of the poor.

While there had been a number of well-documented studies which showed a correlation, if not a causal effect, between extremely poor housing conditions and poor mental and physical health, it remained much less clear what the effects of housing were, once the problems of overcrowding, poor ventilation and inadequate plumbing were solved. While the failures of public housing seemed to indicate that the housing needs and requirements of the poor were different than those of the middle class, it was still not entirely clear how they were different and what to do about it.

There were a number of studies published during the sixties and seventies which argued that housing and community forms were not merely aesthetic and public health issues, but were, in fact, powerful forces in community life. They affected relationships between neighbors, influenced whether or not residents would be victimized by crime, and in multi-family housing, had a significant impact on project manageability. While form did not dictate behavior, it undoubtedly was able to influence it significantly.

Other studies examined the more symbolic aspects of housing form and condition and proposed that how people feel about their housing influences how they feel about themselves. People judge the quality of their housing not only according to absolute standards such as the number of rooms but according to relative standards, i.e., how it compares to their last house or that of their neighbors. Housing has always been a powerful symbol of a person's place in the world, and according to these studies, it is a particularly potent one for the poor. Substandard housing is a constant reminder of their poverty as well as their inability to change their lives.

Still others looked at housing as a process and proposed that people's involvement in building or improving housing was as (or more) important than the final product in changing their lives. It is a view which defines housing not only as a noun but also as a verb--an active and potentially powerful force in people's lives.

Obviously, these three perspectives on the meaning and effect of housing are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in looking at the redevelopment projects in Boston and Cambridge, it is clear that both the decisions and expectations of the authorities have been profoundly influenced by each of these views. What also becomes evident, though, is that the authorities' decisions are equally a function of available funds

and political concerns. Theory only goes so far on its own merits.

Chapter 4: The Form of Management

Oscar Newman's Defensible Space has probably had a greater impact on public housing design than any other single work. Based on his study of New York City housing projects, Newman argued that architecture is not just a matter of style, image and comfort, but is a critical element in encouraging and discouraging criminal victimization. Why some projects were safe and orderly when others were dangerous and seemingly impossible to control was very often, according to Newman's research, a function of their design. It was not that there were more problem tenants or that the management of these projects was more irresponsible, but simply that their design had a significant impact on the behavior of residents and non-residents alike. Crimes generally occur in places over which the tenants feel that they have little control such as shared hallways, elevators, stairways, open spaces between buildings, and any other areas which by their design or location are not thought to be anyone's responsibility. "Defensible spaces," on the other hand, can not only be controlled but, by their very appearance, give the message that somebody is keeping an eye on what happens there. The anonymity of many large projects makes them likely targets for both crime and neglect. The solution, Newman said, is

to create spaces over which tenants can reasonably take responsibility.

This is exactly what the Boston and Cambridge authorities have done. Many of the improvements--the private yards, private entrances, minimizing the number of families on a hallway, well-lighted and well-designed exterior spaces, to name just a few--were expressly designed to encourage and allow tenants to have more control over the project environment. The more spaces that could be designated for an individual family or for the families in a single building or group of buildings, the better. Of course, this emphasis on private property as a means of control and responsibility long precedes Newman. Americans have always believed that ownership, which is essentially control over property, has a stabilizing effect on society. People who own property rarely revolt and almost never burn down their own houses. Giving tenants a stake in these projects would appear to be as important as giving them spaces that are defensible. However, it is the concept of defensible space to which authority officials most often refer. "The more you can design to encourage the participation of tenants, the better off you are," said Bucky Putnam, Director of Planning and Redevelopment at the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA). "This generally means persuading tenants that they actually control not only their

own unit but the space immediately adjacent outside. The further you can push that boundary, the better off you are. Right now at Jefferson Park, you shut the door, because that's all you can protect."

And right now that's not much, at least according to the authorities who plan to increase unit sizes considerably. With the exception of one bedroom apartments, the units in these projects are small. In some cases, they are even below the standards set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, whose standards have always been well below those considered adequate in the private market. These projects were also built in the early 1950s when the standards for all housing were well below those most Americans have become accustomed to in the last thirty years, when housing standards increased dramatically.

However, the authorities have more than convenience in mind in increasing the unit sizes. There is a firm belief that the current size of the units places unnecessary pressures on family relationships, many of which are already strained by the pressures of poverty. Many of the units provide little privacy and are even too small to allow an entire family to sit down to eat together. "Architecturally," said Putnam at the CHA, "it's a system that begins to put a strain on family relationships. When the units are too small, the

kids drive the parents nuts and it's in everyone's best interest that the kids get out in the hallways." Increased security and maintenance problems inevitably result as relationships within the units are strained and as children and teenagers begin to extend their living space out into the hall. Community facilities, even if they are provided, are not considered an adequate substitute. As one of the tenants at Franklin Field said, "Community facilities are fine, daycare is fine, but where as I supposed to live after these places are closed? Give me a decent place to live and then we can talk about anything else."

The authorities believe that once the proposed physical changes are made, the projects will be easier to manage and maintain. By redesigning the projects so that responsibilities for the buildings and grounds are more clearly defined, and so that activities within the project can be better controlled, the tenants and the managers can each be held more accountable for their role in making the project work. As one authority official said, "The manager can't just say, 'There's nothing I can do.' It's using physical design to give the managers something that they can deal with successfully. But don't get me wrong; it doesn't guarantee success." It may not guarantee success, but they isn't anyone at the authorities who doesn't think that it will go a long way towards getting there.

Unfortunately, no amount of redesign or restructuring of space can solve the management problems confronting the authorities at these developments. "Management is the challenge. It's the key to success," said Spence at a recent conference. And, added Pam Goodman, "Building it is the easy part." So, why not spend more money on management and less on changing the design? There are two reasons. One is that management improvements are not as expensive as they are difficult. Both the authorities have, in fact, planned a number of management changes; new managers have been hired for some of the projects, and an innovative plan is being tried at Fidelis Way, which will be managed by a private firm. However, despite its importance, housing management has always suffered from a lack of attention: unlike architecture and planning, it has rarely been the subject of academic inquiry. "There's no doubt that management has always seemed less interesting, much less sexy than the bricks and mortar part," said Gilmore at the BHA. "You can see it by the kind of people who are in it." Unlike bricks and mortar, however, the old management structure can't just be torn down in order to start all over again. "It's the hardest part of public housing to make the management system work," said Bucky Putnam. "We've gotten better at it, but how can you teach a fifty-five year old man who has been working under another

system for thirty-five years. It takes a long time."

The other and more important reason that the authorities have invested so much money in physical improvements is that without the "defensible spaces" and the larger, better designed units, many of the management improvements would have been more difficult to make. "You could argue," said David Gilmore at the BHA, "that if the housing authority were willing or able to have strict rules and regulations, and if tenants could be evicted if they don't toe the line, then it would be easier to have large concentrations of large families in small units. To the degree, however, that you accept the individuality of tenants and their right to live their own lives with less oversight from the authority, you try to make the most of their tendency to maintain and control what they see as their own. That's part of the reason that you see private entrances and yards."

The authorities have made a choice about management style in the redesign of these projects. Had they been willing or even legally able to exert a more stringent--or as Spence would say, "authoritarian"--control over these developments, it would have been possible (although much more difficult and time consuming) to make them orderly communities with a much smaller investment. Physical redesign costs money, but as

Spence so correctly points out in discussing the redevelopment projects, "The money makes it easier; the money always makes it easier."

Chapter 5: The Rewards of the Middle-Class World

It will make people feel better about themselves. People don't think very much of themselves now because they're living in such bad conditions.

Janie Gibbs, President
Franklin Field Tenant Task Force

Whether or not a project can be adequately managed and maintained is a function not only of the development's form and the management's expertise, but also a function of how the tenants feel about living there. Although it would be difficult to prove a causal relationship, how people feel about their environment is clearly related to how they feel about themselves.

In America, good housing has always been an important symbol of an individual's hard work, thrift and achievement; to be poorly housed in America is somehow to have failed. Public housing tenants have an even greater sense of defeat than the poor who rent in private market. On the housing ladder of success, public housing tenants are undoubtedly standing on the bottom rung. "It's the stigma of living in the projects," said Mike Jacobs, Project Director for D Street. "Public housing tenants have a sense that they are different, branded in a sense. Even though there might be an apartment building next door with as many code violations as some of our developments, the tenants feel that the family

in private housing is somehow better, even if they have exactly the same income. We saw no reason to continue stereotyping and typecasting developments as public housing. One of the goals of the design was to reintegrate D Street with the rest of South Boston. We didn't see any reason that someone should have to go by the development and say, 'That's a project.'"

Both the image and the reality of large troubled housing projects are a constant reminder to tenants that they are different than other people, that they lack control over their lives and that unlike other people, they are not capable of making things better. According to sociologist Lee Rainwater,

Although lower-class people may not adhere in action to many middle-class values about neatness, cleanliness and proper decorum, it is apparent that they are often aware of their deviance, wishing that the world could be a nicer place, physically and socially. The physical world is telling them that they are inferior as effectively as do their human interactions.⁴

Without a significant improvement in how tenants feel about their environment, or, by extension, about themselves,

⁴Lee Rainwater, "Fear and House as Haven in the Lower Class," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, (January 1966), p. 29-30.

the Boston and Cambridge authorities realize that there is little hope of making these developments decent places to live. While the authorities could not be accused of naively believing that this will take place miraculously simply by virtue of changing the physical environment, they clearly believe that without such changes, the process would be far more difficult. It is a view which accords with that of George Sternlieb, who said, in his study of welfare recipients in New York, "Improving the physical amenities of welfare housing may not be sufficient to enhance the recipient's outlook and life style, [but] it probably is a prerequisite."⁵

"I suppose," said Spence, "that if we're going to say, 'We expect you to live in a manner which is consistent with the way the rest of the world lives,' then it is important that we also say, 'You get some of the rewards of that world.' It's not fair to say, 'We expect you to live the same as everyone else, only the shit we're going to give you is twice as bad.'"

Of course, no one knows how much physical improvement it takes to begin to change tenants' attitudes about their housing

⁵George Sternlieb and Bernard P. Indik, The Ecology of Welfare (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1973), p. 218.

or about themselves, or how important these improvements are in comparison with job training or improved social services. Although insufficient alone for turning around large troubled projects, physical improvements are clearly important. However, unless they are significant enough to change the image of public housing in the eyes of both tenants and the larger community, they will probably do no more than add a little extra comfort or convenience in the lives of the tenants. More may not always be better, but less is often not enough to make the needed change in the image, and hence, the attitude about public housing.

Chapter 6: "It's the process that sets everything
into motion."

While authority officials assume that the physical improvements will have a significant impact--both as facts and as symbols--they emphasize that it's the process and not the product of redevelopment that's most critical. According to John Turner in his book, Housing By People, the act or process of housing--the planning and decision making as well as the actual construction--has a much more profound impact on people's lives than the purely physical facts of new housing. "D Street is not going to work because people believe in front and back yards," said Mike Jacobs. "It's going to work because tenants believe in their ability to control their lives and their community. It's the process that sets everything into motion, not the design." Tenants come to believe in their ability to affect change, at least partially, through participating in the redevelopment process--making the decisions, struggling with the authority and with each other to come to some common notion of what these developments should be like.

In each of these projects, tenants have been involved or have been encouraged to be involved each step of the way. At D Street and Franklin Field, the tenant task forces have gone as far as hiring their own architect to help them understand

and participate more fully in the design process.

The authorities believe that the tenants who do participate begin to feel that they have some measure of control over their lives, and perhaps more important for the authorities, some stake in the project's success. The projects become not only the authorities' projects but the tenants' projects, and, in time, the communities' projects. "It's a process of community capacity building," said John Stainton at the BHA, "and it's just as important as any of the physical improvements."

Some people, however, have questioned whether some of the most important physical improvements, such as the private yards and private entrances, do not prevent a sense of community from developing. The concept of community, however, is extremely complex; communities can be based on a variety of factors: location, kinship, and common interests, to name just a few. One thing is clear, though, if only from the failure of these projects. Community spaces have little to do with creating community. While it may seem ironic, the physical changes will undoubtedly work with--instead of against--the process of community building. The sort of communities, which the authorities and tenants are working to develop, might best be compared to those in suburbia: communities which act less as social units than as decision-

making units. Suburban neighbors may isolate themselves behind acres of lawn, but they come together to make decisions that affect the entire community, for example, decisions about zoning that affect who and what will be part of that community. By having private yards and private entrances, the tenants in these projects have made a decision to lead more individual lives. However, these changes in no way prevent them from making decisions about the community as a whole. If anything, they work to remind tenants that they can in fact control more of their lives than had previously been possible. And control, perhaps more than anything, is what is missing in these developments.

Chapter 7: A Reasonable Investment of Limited Resources?

Despite all the enthusiasm surrounding these projects, they raise a number of difficult questions, not the least of which is whether they represent a reasonable investment of limited resources. With severe reductions in almost all housing subsidy programs, it is not only a matter of whether these projects make sense from a real estate investment point of view, but whether they represent a reasonable or equitable investment of limited resources.

Everyone agrees that these projects are expensive; together they represent an investment of over \$106 million to rehabilitate 1254 units of housing. Total redevelopment costs, which include the costs of construction as well as those of relocation, administration and financing, range from \$71,000 a unit at Jefferson Park to \$94,000 a unit at Franklin Field. "You're locked into enormous costs," said Bucky Putnam at the CHA. "If you want to do it other than cynically, a renovation is enormously expensive. There's no way around it. We could have simply fixed up doors and the landscape, but in my opinion that would have been irresponsible. It would give you short-term political benefits, but the poor design that contributed to the problems would remain."

Even if everyone believes Putnam's argument--and it is one repeated by most authority officials--that any lower level of rehabilitation wouldn't have worked or would have been cynical, it is necessary to ask whether this was the most cost effective way to rehouse the families in these projects. If not, then what other factors besides costs make them reasonable?

In the eyes of the authorities, there were few choices. The developments represent, despite their condition, a substantial investment. The authorities had to do something to protect their investment or they had to get rid of it. Selling the projects would have been difficult both legally and politically and would not have solved the problem of what to do about the more than 1200 families living in them. The authorities also believed that despite the Reagan Administration's proposals for a housing voucher program, there will always be a need for public housing. Said Harry Spence, "In truth, there are a lot of people in this society that nobody wants to house, and you would have to pay huge sums of money to get anyone to house them decently. There are so many easier ways to make money. Something like public housing always has to be there and there always has to be some sort of production program."

Assuming that there would continue to be a need for public housing, the authorities felt that it made sense to make a long-term investment; given the condition of these projects, such an investment was inevitably expensive. Fortunately, the state and federal funding agencies agreed that substantial rehabilitation made sense. However, it is interesting to note that three out of the four projects were funded primarily under programs which, due to cutbacks in Washington, no longer exist.

Like the authorities, the state and federal agencies were interested in making a long-term investment. As one HUD official explained, "Once the projects get into the sub-rehab program, they have to follow the rules. The rules in this case say that the project has to be built to last for at least thirty years, because that's how long the bonds are floated for. We're not going to have the money to come in and fix it up along the way. Even though a job is basically rehab, it should have the same useful life as new construction."

However, at least for Spence and his receivership, the large dollar investment is not only important because it buys improvements that will last for thirty years, but because it buys credibility. For the Boston Housing Authority, that goes a long way towards justifying the costs. "When we began the

receivership," Spence recounts, "the displacement terror was overwhelming. I got phone calls about every single development with the exception of the South Boston ones. In the city of Boston, there was enormous predatory intent with respect to public housing projects. The tenants knew it and it wasn't an irrational fear. You can't build a community out of people who expect to be moved out tomorrow. The reconstruction projects, then, had an enormous political impact for the residents, which is to say, 'Look, we care about your developments. You're going to be here.' Investment dollars are obviously the most meaningful statement that you can make. It's the test of whether you're serious about your statement of intent to sustain a community. In many ways, it was a symbolic statement to say, 'We're not going to let these communities go away.'"

The reconstruction projects are also a statement to the larger community that public housing can provide decent housing for the poor. Said Spence of Fidelis Way, "We're going to make this development work so well that no one can say that the institution of public housing per se is flawed. People will look at it and say, 'Public housing can work, so what's the matter with the ones that don't.'" Of course, public housing can be decent and is, in many if not most places.

As a system, however, its failures are far more visible than its successes; people don't notice the developments that are decent precisely because they are. It's much easier to change people's minds about the system by revitalizing several severely distressed developments than by trying to point out the projects that do work. Building things, or making highly visible changes in the physical environment, gets attention in a way that is difficult to do otherwise.

Whether the costs of these projects are justified as real estate investments or political investments, they inevitably raise questions of equity. How do the authorities justify spending so much money to rehabilitate so few units--indeed, to reduce the number of available units--at a time when the waiting lists for public housing in Boston and Cambridge are long and getting longer?

Almost everyone involved in administering these projects has thought about the equity issue. The way most of them resolve it is by saying, as David Gilmore did, "The choice isn't between the 504 units which were originally built at Franklin Field and 350 new units. The real choice is between 300 occupied units which are in substandard condition and 350 new, fully occupied units." It's a strategy of cutting losses and maximizing gains. Without redevelopment these projects would continue to deteriorate, and the rate of

vacancies would continue to increase. To do minimal modernization would only mean recreating many of the conditions which originally contributed to the projects' deterioration. Looking at it in this way, these projects are equitable because there were no other reasonable choices; it was save some units or lose them all.

However, for Harry Spence, there's another way of looking at it. The projects are equitable because they bought his receivership the time needed to take care of a number of other distressed developments in Boston. "If we didn't do a couple of grand, glittering showcases, the polity would have been yelling and screaming that we weren't getting anywhere, that we should just close down public housing. It was explicitly clear that we had to do these projects as a way of getting time and buying support." For Spence, spending a large amount of money to rehabilitate only a few projects is equitable because it has system-wide benefits.

Spence also makes it clear, however, that these may be the last projects of their kind in Boston and probably anywhere. "It's not realistic about what the future is going to be. We cannot continue to invest such a large sum of our national wealth in housing-- not in private or public housing. It doesn't make sense to argue that all public housing developments have to be gutted and redeveloped. If we did that,

it would provide units of such luxury as to be an outrage 15 years from now when the waiting lists are getting longer. Our housing standards as a nation are going to diminish. The Reagan Administration has not been willing to tell the truth about what's happening [to housing standards] except to the poor. Now, if we were to have said to tenants, 'We care enough about you to give you back your small homes,' before anyone had begun to tell the truth about what was happening in society, that would have been another demeaning statement. I think that, in a funny way, our reconstruction efforts mark a kind of statement of the integration of the poor into an era that has just ended. And that's an important symbolic statement because they were excluded from that."

Conclusion: Lessons for the Future?

Whether these projects are symbols or political statements in no way makes them any less declarations of the authorities' belief that good housing can make a difference in the lives of public housing tenants. While radically altering the project environment may not make good citizens or endow tenants with a greater sense of responsibility to the government, it can make their lives not just easier but better. The authorities may not be able to provide jobs or completely adequate social services, but they can, given adequate funds, provide more manageable, more spacious and more attractive housing--and that's what they're doing. Obviously, it's not enough to simply change the physical environment, even radically, but in the eyes of the authorities, it's the best place to start.

Unfortunately, it's also the most expensive. Even if these projects are successful, they will be costly successes and for that reason, not easy to reproduce. As a model for turning around distressed developments, substantial rehabilitation is a seductive one. Unfortunately, however, it provides few lessons for authorities who must attempt to achieve the same results of order, project manageability, and tenant satisfaction--with far less money. While it may not guarantee success, money undoubtedly makes it easier.